



Home > Children's > Industry News

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Second Annual 21st Century Children's Nonfiction Conference Builds Momentum

By Krystyna Poray Goddu | Jun 26, 2014

Writers, illustrators, publishers and others involved with children's nonfiction marked the summer solstice on the SUNY New Paltz campus in upstate New York at the second annual 21st Century Children's Nonfiction Conference, held June 20–22. The success of last year's inaugural conference was evidenced by the larger number of attendees and a fuller schedule of workshops, programs, panel presentations, open-table discussions and one-on-one critiques. Faculty members representing a wider range of media than last year explored the wave of new opportunities in children's nonfiction, and several new conference elements were offered.

Greeting the 130 attendees (as compared to 95 in 2013) Friday evening, conference co-chair Lionel Bender of children's book packager Bender Richardson White stressed that the conference is "about the business of publishing," and expressed his dream of replicating the "hothouse of creative information exchange" that he experienced as a young publishing professional in London in the 1970s. Returning attendees like Alicia Kleipis, who had sold several projects as a direct result of contacts made at last year's event, found the conference "close to a creative hothouse, as Lionel described it – certainly a supportive yet fun environment." Faculty member and longtime children's nonfiction editor Carolyn Yoder of Boyds Mills/Calkins Creek attended for the first time and noted, "I learned so much about the book industry from conferees and other people on the faculty, especially the trends of today and of the future."



Nir Zicherman

Between sessions, attendees mingled in the sun-filled glass Student Union building.

While faculty members frequently mentioned Common Core, there was less focus on the topic than at last year's conference, when it dominated the conversation; publishing professionals also seemed to have found their stride in coping with the challenges of digital publishing, the other strong theme in 2013. (Yoder noted

in a presentation, for example, that as of autumn 2014, all novels published by Calkins Creek as well as most longer nonfiction would be published both in print and as e-books.)

Conference co-chair Sally Isaacs explained to *PW* that this year “the conference curriculum took shape with input from the faculty and past attendees. We chose to focus on the latest developments in both continuing educational initiatives such as Common Core and Next Generation Science, and in leading-edge trends, such as gamification, teen nonfiction, museum education, and on-line newspapers.” Other themes that emerged over the course of the weekend included the importance of marketing, promoting, and branding, as well as the growing prominence of graphic novels, which were discussed by several faculty members, including Amie Wright of the New York Public Library and Michelle Bisson at Capstone.

The wider breadth of the conference was reflected in new faculty who reached beyond editors and writers to include publicity professionals, booksellers, and gaming designers. Attendees, too, represented a wide variety of professions. Isaacs reported the following breakdown: 47% writers, 15% publishing professionals; 15% educators and librarians, 10% digital developers, 8% illustrators and 5% book packagers and agents. With writers (approximately two-thirds of them published) making up nearly half of the group, there was a constant hum of informal exchange about the nitty-gritty details of the writing life: markets, pay rates, deadlines. Many commented on the openness and generosity of faculty. “The conference was a great place to network with other nonfiction writers and exchange ideas and contacts,” said first-timer Barbara Gowan, author of several books published by Sleeping Bear Press, who traveled from Arizona to attend. “Everyone was very willing to share how they broke into the marketplace, and also the creative ways that they promote themselves and their brand.”

Down to Business

Like last year, the conference started with a trio of three-hour team-taught intensive workshops (on Common Core, the Publishing Process and Digital Nonfiction) on Friday afternoon, followed by a new element: Core Publisher presentations, in which representatives from Pearson and Highlights each presented an hour-long comprehensive picture of their company and their nonfiction products. Rebecca Graziano, v-p of instructional solutions for math and literacy at Pearson, described the shift from the massive “super kits” of textbooks, teachers’ guides, and ancillary materials the company used to produce, to today’s online materials. Debra Hess, senior editor at Highlights, discussed the interaction between the magazine’s print and online versions.

On Saturday morning, keynote speaker Bob Der, former publisher of *Sports Illustrated for Kids* and *Time for Kids*, now with 10Ten Media, kicked off the day with a speech tracing the changes he has experienced in children’s nonfiction publishing over the past 25 years and the impact of the genre, remembering how, as a child, “the world opened up to you because of what you read.” Delivering an impassioned cautionary note about the marginalization of media content creation and emphasizing the problem of “a lower level of quality in what we consume,” he said: “We are facing a treacherous future if we compromise on quality by being prudent in cost. We’ll be producing junk food for our brains, which will have negative effects, just like junk food has on the body.” And children’s brains, he reminded the audience, are in a constant state of development. “When writing for kids,” he continued, “whatever the format, commit to quality of content.”

A number of the 24 workshops looked at the increasingly important role that promotion in its many guises has taken on. Dixie Laite, senior editorial director of Nickelodeon's Teen Nick and a personal branding consultant, offered this advice in her program on "Building Your Brand and Letting People Know About It": "You are not Coke. Think more deeply about who specifically wants your product." She reminded attendees that they are "not speaking to the direct consumers of their work, but to those who buy for them," which can get complicated.

Writer Julie Hedlund, in her workshop on "Connecting with Your Audience: Blogging, Social Media and Websites," advised writers who are resistant to social media to look at them "as part of your creative life"; writer Steve Swinburne, in a workshop co-presented with Jason Wells, executive director of marketing and publicity at Abrams, showed trailers and videos he had made to promote his books. He recommended that authors include in promotional materials images of themselves doing research: "Kids love to see you in videos after they've read your book."

Another new feature this year was Open Table Conversations, hour-long casual conversations with individual faculty. Book packager Susan Knopf of Scout Books and Media was surprised to find more than 30 people at her table; the strong attendance reflected presenters' repeated references to working heavily with book packagers. Other table discussions focused on school visits, critique groups, and historical and photo research.

Presentations about significant scientific and technological developments punctuated each day's schedule. On Saturday, Daniel Freedman, SUNY New Paltz's dean of the School of Science & Engineering, introduced the university's 3D printer; demonstrations were conducted throughout Saturday afternoon, among them the creation of a 3D portrait of faculty member Roxie Munro, an author/illustrator and apps creator.

On Sunday morning, David Aguilar, director of science information at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, gave a talk explaining last spring's "Breaking News About the Big Bang." "We had a unique opportunity to offer attendees state-of-the-art information from David Aguilar and SUNY's 3-D Printing Innovation Lab – the latest developments, from people who are directly involved," noted conference co-chair Isaacs. "These topics are relevant to children's nonfiction science writers, illustrators, and publishers in particular, and we felt fortunate to be able to present information from the real world to the people who may pass it along to children."

Optimism about the state of children's nonfiction was strong throughout the weekend. Writer Jim Whiting told the gathering: "At the banquet of kids' lit, nonfiction has been Oliver Twist, holding out his bowl and asking, 'May I please have a little more gruel?' There is enough talent here that we can now sit side-by-side with fiction writers at the table." Next year's conference will be held June 12–14, again on the SUNY New Paltz campus.