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21st Century Children's Nonfiction: A Conference Recap

By Krystyna Poray Goddu | Jun 20, 2013

The Common Core State Standards and the digital revolution were the dominant themes of the inaugural 21st Century Children's Nonfiction Conference held June 14–16 at the SUNY New Paltz campus in upstate New York. Seventy-five attendees and 20 faculty members, made up of publishing professionals representing a variety of companies as well as professional writers, illustrators, and educators, met for workshops, intensives, panel discussions, and critique sessions.

Organized by Lionel Bender, cofounder of the U.K. packager Bender Richardson White, and author Sally Isaacs, the conference focused on opportunities for writers in children's nonfiction publishing. Bender, who had the original vision for the event, explained his two-fold mission to *PW*: "There are plenty of conferences that focus on the nuts and bolts of creating your work. That is not the purpose of this conference," he said. "I want to open people's eyes to the opportunities nonfiction can provide, and I want attendees to understand the various publishing models that exist." He said he had been dreaming of creating such an event for the past five years, and in June 2012, at an SCBWI conference in Princeton, N.J., he approached Isaacs, with whom he was teaching a workshop on publishing nonfiction.

In his opening remarks, Bender pointed out that the conference was occurring at the moment of a new force in publishing: "the digital revolution – a potential threat. Many of us are starting to feel like aliens. But I see the digital revolution as an opportunity to reinvent kids' illustrated nonfiction. And the icing on the cake is the Common Core standards, which are making nonfiction important, and making nonfiction writers finally feel like fiction's equals."

The conference's focus attracted a core audience of professionals already working in the field rather than aspiring writers hoping to break in. A major draw, too, was the caliber of the faculty, which included high-ranking staff from Lerner, Pearson, Cobblestone, Highlights, National Geographic Children's Books, and Time Home Entertainment, as well as highly regarded authors and illustrators. Faculty member Roxie Munro, author-illustrator of more than 35 books who now works across multiple platforms, said, "There are other conferences that have a lot to offer beginners, but this one was much better for midlist writers; it was more meaty, more sophisticated." New York state resident Alicia Klepeis, who



Photo: Nir Zicherman

Participants relaxed between sessions in SUNY's distinctive glass Student Union building.

described herself as “three years in” with dozens of articles under her belt and her first book coming in the fall from ABDO, said she came “to take my career to the next level. There are so many different models of how to be a nonfiction writer.”

Photo: Bryan Denis

John Bemelmans Marciano was among the faculty offering illustration critiques.

Three-hour team-taught intensives were held on Friday afternoon, followed by a welcome dinner and brief presentations by four faculty. Kent L. Brown, executive director of the Highlights Foundation, confessed that “I am still trying to figure out 20th century publishing!” while John Bemelmans Marciano, author-illustrator

of successors to his grandfather Ludwig Bemelmans’s Madeline books, as well as of a children’s biography of Bemelmans and two other nonfiction books: *Toponymity: An Atlas of Words* and *Anonymity: The Forgotten People Behind Everyday Words*, noted that “this is an exciting moment because we are creating a super-group of readers intent on getting information.” Patricia Stockland, editor-in-chief of the Lerner Publishing Group, said that at her company, “We’re not thinking about a book as just a print product. For us it can be three other things, too: e-book, iBook and e-source material – free, downloadable resources, such as teaching guides.” Science writer Melissa Stewart delivered a PowerPoint presentation about a new initiative by the Uncommon Corps, a privately funded group of teachers and librarians devoted to bringing attention to nonfiction. “There is a revolution going on in nonfiction right now,” Stewart said. “In this climate, the role of nonfiction is to delight as well as to inform.”

Keynote speaker Vicki Cobb, a science writer and the founder of Ink Think

Tank, an organization of award-winning nonfiction authors who work with schools, got Saturday off to a rousing start with her presentation on *Winning the Nonfiction War*. Cobb traced the history of nonfiction for children since the 1960s, when she took her first job writing instructional materials, through the early 1970s, when she published *Science Experiments You Can Eat*, to today’s books. “It has been a long struggle for nonfiction writers to get a seat at the table,” she said. She praised the Common Core for “bringing thinking into learning,” while assailing the high-stakes testing associated with it and criticizing the “homogenous, committee-generated texts” that are used in tests. Cobb’s speech prompted an animated discussion about testing and education. (She also suggested that nonfiction authors take some of the assessment tests children are subject to, and after her presentation her challenge was taken up by several writers, who pronounced themselves eager to try their hands at the tests.)

Remote Access

Cobb also presented a workshop called *There’s a Sea-Change Coming to Education: How Nonfiction Books Can Bring the Joy of Learning Back to the Classroom*, in which she introduced, via video conference, four participants in the Class ACTS program (Authors Collaborating with Teachers and Students), part of the Ink Think Tank. Authors Andrea Warren of Kansas and Dorothy Patent of Montana spoke about their experiences teaching middle-grade students remotely, and educators Sarah Svarda of Tennessee and Sue Sheffer of Pennsylvania described how the process benefitted their students. The multiple remote visits allow authors and students to connect over a period of time, rather than relying on a traditional single school visit. “This is a better way for authors to be a resource for the educational community,” Cobb said.

While Cobb’s workshop pulled together the themes of the Common Core and new technology, several other workshops focused on these themes individually. Joyceanne Wlodarczyk, an educator with Ulster County (N.Y.) BOCES, presented *The Common Core: Using the Close Reading Protocol for Nonfiction Texts*, a program geared toward educators that nevertheless drew a large mixed group. Wlodarczyk showed a video of a fifth-grade teacher in Buffalo, N.Y., leading a class in a close reading of a text in accordance with Common Core standards, then led her group in analyzing the video as a way of simulating the close-reading lesson. The experience sparked a wide-ranging discussion on teaching reading and research.

Lerner’s Stockland and Lou Waryncia, editorial director of

Cobblestone Publishing, co-taught a workshop called *Nonfiction and Common Core Standards*, in which they explored how publishers are responding to the standards, and how writers can be part of the process. Waryncia noted that

2 Cobblestone's magazines, which include the nonfiction *Cobblestone*, *Calliope*, *Applesseeds*, and *Faces*, among others, are already aligned with many of the standards, in particular when it comes to paired reading, since Cobblestone publishes themed issues.

Workshops focusing on the digital side of publishing included author Mary Kay Carson's presentation on making her app *Bats: Furry Fliers of the Night*, and a panel discussion on *Creating eBooks and Apps* with Carson and fellow authors Karen Robertson and Roxie Munro. Munro also presented an in-depth look at *The Business Side of Apps: Costs and Contracts*, in which she shared guidelines for marketing, pricing, and getting reviewed, and explained the new Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, which takes effect July 1 and affects anyone selling apps to children under 13.

Looking Ahead

One of the weekend's highlights was Saturday afternoon's publishers panel, in which seven faculty members discussed *The Future of Children's Nonfiction*. Responding in turn to questions posed by Bender in advance, each panelist offered insight into their company's approach to the challenges of modern publishing today. Andy Boyles, science editor at *Highlights* magazine, said that he foresees *Highlights* remaining "ink on paper for the foreseeable future." But, he added, "Ink and digital can play nicely in the same sandbox. The big question is: How can you make digital pay the bills?" Participants echoed this question throughout the weekend.

Robin Terry Brown, senior editor at National Geographic Children's Books, described her company's "sneak-attack approach to learning – draw them in with high-interest topics, vibrant photography, and design" – and shared its formula: "photos, facts, and fun—and all things animal." When it comes to digital material, National Geographic focuses on titles that have done well on paper; Brown noted that a big success has been their *Weird But True* series.

Joy Butts, executive publishing director at Time Home Entertainment, discussed the company's past difficulties in publishing books for children, which she said turned around once they went into classrooms and asked children what they like. The result was a successful *Big Book* series – *Big Book of Why*, followed by *Big Book of How*, and others – which is now being used for titles in the *Sports Illustrated for Kids* brand, too.

Pearson was represented on the panel by Rebecca Graziano, v-p of instructional solutions for the company, a position in which she oversees the development of innovative content and services that do not fit traditional literacy or math models. "Common Core is a much bigger deal for Pearson than for other publishers," she explained. "Because we create a full curriculum, t we have to meet every standard." She also noted that many schools are buying iPads for every student, and that means more content is needed: "We need nonfiction that is worth reading."

But how is that content created? Publishers are not eager to increase editorial staff these days, Stockland said, so they are looking more than ever to freelancers who can supply high-quality writing on tight deadlines. Cobblestone's Lou Waryncia said that his company is in the process of transitioning from being a traditional publisher to a media company, even though the heart of it is still its 15 magazines, soon to increase to 18. Now under the ownership of ePals Media, an educational technology company, Cobblestone makes all of its magazines available digitally as well as in print. "Print versus digital is now a choice and we provide that choice," he said. "We decided to be a leader in the digital category and are aggressively pursuing this without abandoning print. We believe that digital will strengthen our print business."

The final speaker was Alyssa Mito Pusey, senior editor at Charlesbridge, who noted that "nonfiction has always been our core." The company makes half of its sales to schools and libraries and is thus well positioned to help teachers implement the Common Core standards, she continued. As far as the publisher's digital strategy, Pusey said the goal is to its books onto as many platforms as possible. "Intellectual property will become king as publishers seek to engage their audience through transmedia storytelling," she said in conclusion.

3 of 4 Print will become a single star in this constellation. Digital is fun, but print is not dead."

Plans for next year were confirmed before weekend's end: SUNY New Paltz will once again host the conference, to be held June 20–22, 2014.

This article has been edited to reflect the correct dates for the 2014 conference.