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# Nonfiction Conference Continues to Grow

By Krystyna Poray Goddu | Jun 18, 2015

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Substantially greater attendance, a wider variety of participants, and an added focus on educators cemented the growing importance of the third annual 21st Century Children's Nonfiction Conference, which took place June 12-14 in a new location: Manhattan College in New York City. Geographical convenience wasn't the only reason for the increased attendance; conference co-chairs Lionel Bender and Sally Isaacs noted that they organized this year's event with an eye to addressing feedback they had received from the nonfiction community. "We tried to respond to requests that staff at different publishing companies could learn from one another," said Isaacs, "as well as to the interest in learning how nonfiction trade books can be creatively and successfully used in the classroom. We also encouraged a dialogue between educators, authors, and publishers."

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Science writer and Ink Think Tank founder Vicki Cobb led an Open Table session on Finding Your Voice on Saturday afternoon. Photo: Bo Zaunders.

Founded in 2013 to explore opportunities in the field of children's nonfiction, the CNC continues to expand its reach to include a variety of media. "We're not just for writers but for everybody involved in children's nonfiction in every way," Bender told *PW*. In greeting the 160 (up from 130 last year, and 95 the first year) participants on Friday evening, he talked about the importance of the genre. "Some children read fiction. All children read nonfiction. We have a responsibility to create and provide great nonfiction in print and digital formats to kids."

Faculty members and attendees alike remarked on the noteworthy range of professionals represented at the conference. First-time presenter Domenica Di Piazza, editorial director of the Twenty-First Century Books imprint at Lerner (whose workshop with Zest founder Hallie Warshaw on Young Adult Nonfiction—The Trendy New Niche drew a standing-room only audience), commented, "The conference was a marvelous opportunity for connecting and networking with a wide range of people with differing roles, responsibilities and missions within the world of juvenile nonfiction."

Isaacs confirmed the wide breadth of professions represented, reporting that attendees, who traveled from as far away as Paris and western Canada, broke down into 40 authors, 38 educators, 35 publishing professionals, 15 librarians, 12 illustrators and designers, 10 digital developers and 10 social media experts. The growing prominence of the conference influenced some first-timers to select it over others that they traditionally attend. Gail Yerbic, head of youth services for the Mesa County Libraries in Colorado, chose to attend CNC instead of the ALA conference this year so she could learn how to better evaluate books for her collection. Established writer Andrea Warren of Kansas City, who led an Open Table session on writing nonfiction history for young readers and young adults, came to the CNC instead of her usual American Society of Journalists and Authors conference, and found it "absolutely worthwhile for established writers. Many of us write in isolation and this event is a great reality check on what's happening in the industry." Elizabeth Raum of Fargo, N.D., author of 110 books in the library/educational market, came looking for help in breaking into the trade, as did several other authors.

Faculty members were impressed by the caliber of authors in attendance. "This year, many of the authors I spoke with were seasoned professionals with well-considered ideas to add to the conversation," commented Shelby Alinsky, editor at the National Geographic Society, who presented for a second year. First-time faculty Emily Easton, executive editor at Crown Books for Young Readers, concurred. "Many authors were seasoned veterans looking for fresh perspectives on a favorite genre," she said. "Others were there doing research, an essential hallmark of great nonfiction, that would allow them to have more successful interactions with editors when they are ready to submit their first projects."

More than 40 faculty members presented 25 workshops and participated in 10 Open Table sessions and three panel discussions, as well as intensive workshops and one-on-one critiques with attendees who had pre-registered for the personal sessions. Because of the favorable response to last year's Open Tables (informal sessions with experienced professionals), the number of sessions was doubled to 10, and included topics like Privacy—Playing by the Rules of Your Website, App, & E-Book with Linnette Attai, founder of PlayWell; Writing for Magazines with Elizabeth Huyck of *Ask* magazine; and Great Tips for Writing Science Books with author Jennifer Swanson.

Friday night's opening panel discussion on New Trends in Publishing introduced some of the themes that would emerge throughout the weekend. For one, print and digital are no longer involved in an either/or contest. As Betsy Bird, youth materials specialist at the New York Public Library said, "Kids today are like otters; they flip between print and digital with great ease and know just what to expect from each." Ted Levine, president and CEO of Kids Discover, discussed the "seismic changes" all forms of media are undergoing, which means that business opportunities are multiplying, as well as the influence of gamification on the publishing industry. Daniel Nayeri, director of children's books at Workman, expressed his passion for the new trend of interactive design and confirmed the growth of the notion of play in children's books, evident in upcoming titles like *The Complete Book of Chalk Lettering* by Valerie McKeehan, which includes foldout chalkboards.

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What Bird called “the melding of fact and fiction” is another major trend in children’s publishing. While causing headaches for librarians, who debate where to shelve such books, nonfiction books with fictional elements, such as *Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl’s Courage Changed Music* by Margarita Engle (HMH) and Christoph Nieman’s *The Potato King* (OwlKids) are increasingly being published. Graphic novels have become an important category of nonfiction, with graphic biographies growing in popularity. Jason Wells, executive director of publicity and marketing at Abrams Books for Young Readers and Amulet Books, noted that he is especially excited about graphic novels about history that don’t read like traditional history, pointing out Nathan Hale’s *The Underground Abductor*, a graphic biography of Harriet Tubman “like you’ve never seen her,” Wells said.

#### Saturday morning’s panel on How I Use Social Media

Marketing highlighted the importance of this now-established promotion tool, which also came up in almost every presentation. Kelly Leonard of KLO Associates, a digital marketing boutique, advised attendees to create a three-month timeline when beginning a social media marketing campaign, and to “begin with the end in mind.” Author/illustrator Roxie Munro stressed the importance of the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act, while Amazon’s manager of author and publishing relations Neil Thompson advocated for the importance of being active on Goodreads (which Amazon purchased in 2013). Thompson and co-panelist Amanda Barbara, CEO of Pubslush, later presented a workshop on self-publishing and crowd-funding, outlining the various scenarios these can take.

At a panel called Responding to Our Questions, moderated by Susannah Richardson of Eastern Connecticut State University, seven publishers discussed what they are looking for and what they are excited about in children’s nonfiction. Emily Easton explained that she had been brought into Crown Books to revive the newly resurrected Crown Books for Young Readers imprint and to “spice up the nonfiction list.” She is particularly interested in publishing science books for young children “in a playful way.” Lerner’s Di Piazza is also looking for good science books, especially by female science writers. She is particularly passionate, she said about “finding and publishing diverse voices and content that expresses the diverse experiences of Americans,” – a sentiment echoed by many presenters throughout the weekend.

National Geographic Society’s Alinsky keeps her eye out for what is innovative in children’s nonfiction, while Samantha Schutz, associate publisher for nonfiction and licensing at Scholastic, is interested in unique takes on familiar topics, such as the company’s new series, aimed at an elementary-school audience #PREHISTORIC, which introduces dinosaurs and prehistoric animals by giving them hashtags and using social networking language.

Panelists agreed that Common Core is part of most conversations about children’s nonfiction these days, but it is no longer a major issue of discussion. Whitney Leader-Picone, senior designer at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, noted that Common Core’s emphasis on back matter has created a new challenge for making back matter not only more legible, but beautiful and enticing.

Justin Chanda, publisher of Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, as well as McElderry Books and Atheneum Books for Young Readers, pointed out the challenge of drawing children’s attention to nonfiction books. “Kids can learn anything online. Why do we even need nonfiction books?” he asked. His answer: “Because we can trick kids into learning things they didn’t know they wanted to know.” He pointed out recently published teen transgender memoirs *Some Assembly Required* by Arin Andrews and *Rethinking Normal* by Katie Rain Hill as evidence of diverse narrative nonfiction.

Sunday opened with a presentation by Juliana Texley, immediate past president of the National Science Teachers Association, in which she provided detailed insight as to how the NSTA chooses books for its online database of books called NSTA Recommends, as well as its Best of the Best. The association chooses not to publish negative reviews, instead working with publishers to help them improve and clarify books that do not make the list. Texley stressed that the NSTA’s approximately 50 reviewers are instructed to reflect on how they would use a given book in a classroom, and consider: “If you had a limited budget, would this be the book you would purchase?”

For the first time, professional development credit was available for educators through Shippensburg University in Pennsylvania. Two Educational Literacy Workshops on teaching science using nonfiction trade books, open to all attendees, were held on Sunday. One was led by Myra Zarnowski and Susan Turkel of Queens College and included demonstrations by kindergarten teacher Terri Bard and Portia Agati, who teaches visually impaired second graders, both at P.S. 201 in Queens, while the second was offered by Christine Royce of Shippensburg University. The workshops, along with Texley's presentation, corroborated the strong emphasis on science books that pervaded the conference.

While appreciation for the increasingly varied perspectives at the event was often expressed, the importance of being united by a common passion remains the backbone of the CNC. "It's most inspiring that the conference is devoted exclusively to juvenile nonfiction," said Lerner's Di Piazza. "Everyone there had a common interest, and came away with a shared sense of the value of the work we do."

Co-chairs Sally Isaacs and Lionel Bender continue to pursue their goal of driving the industry forward. "We are already at work developing new learning and networking opportunities for next year," noted Isaacs, "which is planned for June 10-12, 2016, again at Manhattan College."

9 comments ▼

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**Linda Booth Sweeney**

The conference felt intimate, and the combination of seasoned writers with generous and passionate presenters was galvanizing. I'm still floating!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [3](#) · June 19 at 4:14am



**Whitney Stewart**

It was a fabulous conference. So important for stimulating new creative work and connecting with others with a passion for children's nonfiction. I will be back.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [2](#) · June 18 at 3:44pm



**Imogene Drummond** · Artist/Writer/Filmmaker and Founder of Divine Sparks Media at Self

An excellent article on the tremendously worthwhile CNC conference. I deeply appreciated the fascinating and informative presentations by high caliber publishers, authors, educators, and social media experts, among others. This was a highly organized, well thought-out, most helpful, and enjoyable conference. I look forward to attending next year!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [1](#) · June 19 at 2:26pm



**Whitney Stewart**

p.s. I am already putting together proposals for new projects.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [1](#) · June 18 at 3:46pm



**Suzanne Mulcahy** · Psychologist at Jefferson School District

I have written a nonfiction children's picture book for developing social/emotional skills, which can prevent bullying behavior. Would this fit into this conference? I wish that I had known about the conference. I would have attended.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · June 19 at 2:40pm



**Tracy Bryan** · Works at Tracy Bryan

Any suggestions as to how a non-represented self-published author of non-fiction for kids aged 2-11 would contact any of these industry professionals to promote themselves?

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · June 19 at 7:57am



**Judy Cooper** · Suny fredonia

Tracy Bryan - One of the items stressed at the conference was, "Do your homework". Research the different publishers' websites to see what they are looking for. Also, to see if they are accepting unsolicited manuscripts, and if they are, follow their submission guidelines.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · June 19 at 8:46am



**Tracy Bryan** · Works at Tracy Bryan

Judy Cooper Thanks! Yes, this I know...I just keep hoping that somehow miraculously the rules will change and writers don't have to continue to jump through hoops...why doesn't the publishing world conduct business like the rest of the world? You like my work, yes I like your work, let's shake hands and do some business...thought maybe someone might have some inside contact tips...you know? Gotta go through the muckety muck I guess;) just like everyone else!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · June 19 at 9:03am



**Alicia Zaks Klepeis**

Had a great time at the conference for the third year in a row!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · June 19 at 10:59am

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