

January 2016

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Laura Apol

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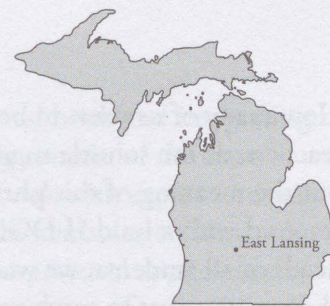
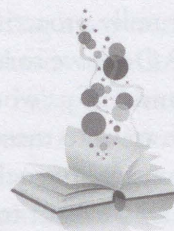
Apol, Laura (2016) "For the Love of Literature: Current Non-Fiction," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 48: Iss. 2, Article 11.

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For the Love of Literature: Current Non-Fiction

by Laura Apol,
Michigan State University



I'll confess here that I'm old enough to remember the days when informational ("non-fiction") texts were—often rightfully—relegated to the margins of the curriculum, whether that curriculum was in elementary, secondary, or even university teacher education courses. Uninspired and uninspiring, informational texts did little to capture a reader's attention or to get a young person "turned on" to the creative possibilities between the pages of a book.

Thankfully, those days are gone! Current non-fiction / informational texts are creative, vibrant, captivating, challenging, educative and aesthetically pleasing. And that's good news, given that current research and standards stress the importance of engaging students of all ages with informational text. In fact, in the International Literacy Association's poll "What's Hot/What's Not," literacy experts ranked informational texts as "very hot" or as "should be hot" (at least 75% of respondents were in agreement). And the most recent issue of *The Michigan Reading Journal* (2015) included "What's Hot and What's Not in Michigan: Improving Literacy across the State," in which 88% of respondents ranked informational texts as "hot" (#4) or "should be hot" (#5 on the list).

This kind of attention given to informational texts by educators and scholars meant we, as a children's and YA literature team, wanted to focus our attention on these books as well. As we discussed what to include in a column devoted to non-fiction/informational text, it became clear we had opened the door onto a field of endless possibilities. So, we agreed to find a single topic that we could explore across levels, through a range of books, genres, and media. Eventually we settled on ecology (the relationship between living things and their environment). The column got longer and longer; there were so many good books to showcase and explore that we finally needed to stop for the sake of space.

The lists of interesting and high-quality books and the ways those books can be used across levels and subjects areas can go on and on, and this introduction to them could as well. But we want the books to speak for themselves.

Here, then, are some beginnings to stimulate thinking. For additional titles of highly-regarded informational and non-fiction books for young readers, we encourage readers to investigate some of the awards that are given for these books: the Sibert Informational Book Medal and the YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults (both given by the American Library Association), and the Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Non-fiction for Children (given by the National Council of Teachers of English).

Informational texts have come a long way in a short amount of time. If you've not been looking into them lately, you are likely to be pleasantly surprised.

Citations

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Lisa Domke, Ashley Johnson, Laura Apol, Jeanne Loh, Tracy Weippert

This column is created by Dr. Laura Apol of Michigan State University, in collaboration with a team of faculty and graduate students who teach children's and adolescent literature in the teacher preparation program, who research issues relevant to the area of children's and adolescent literature, and who have been or are themselves teachers in preK-12 settings.

Children's Literature: The Ecology of Content and Genre

—Lisa Domke and Tracy Weippert

Elementary classrooms have traditionally focused on narrative texts with minimal time spent on informational texts (Duke, 2000). However, both current research and the Common Core standards have identified and tried to address this disparity. As a result, literacy practices have been evolving to include more informational texts.

As classroom teachers, we found our students continually gravitating toward informational texts at the library, checking out books about dinosaurs, sharks, dogs, the supernatural, cooking, magic, and much more. Even as adults, we both find ourselves selecting children's informational texts when we want to learn about people, places, and ideas. Not only are these texts written so that we can grasp the information quickly, but they also introduce us to new people and concepts. Another reason we find children's informational texts so enjoyable is that

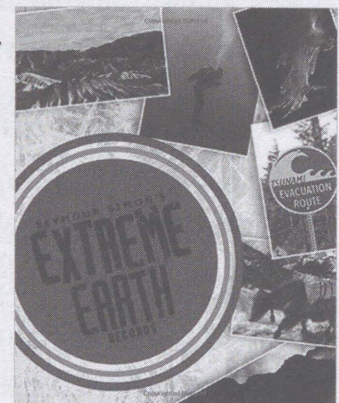
authors use multiple formats and genres to relate information about a wide variety of topics.

To illustrate the breadth of genres available about informational topics, we selected a theme taught in many elementary classrooms—ecology—and compiled a small sample of texts in a range of genres that allow students to learn about ecology and help teachers meet objectives in the Common Core.

General Informational Books

Seymour Simon's Extreme Earth Records

(2012) can be used to study author's craft. Each section highlights Earth's extremes—including the most destructive tsunami, largest volcanic eruption, and the coldest, deepest, highest, driest,

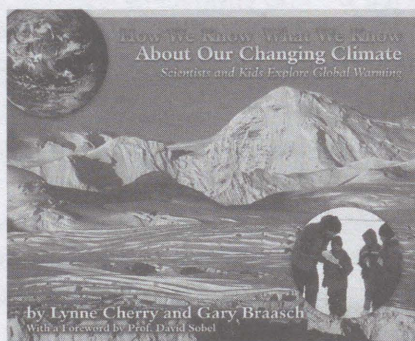


and snowiest places. Simon begins each section with a descriptive passage effectively bringing readers into the context. For example,

Do you ever feel like you want to get away from everything—school, siblings, and parents? Then Tristan da Cunha is the place to go! Tristan da Cunha is the most remote place in the world—no one will be able to find you, probably because it is so difficult to get here. (p. 15)

Then Simon continues with facts about the place or phenomenon, numerous large photographs, and related anecdotes. This is a great text to explore text structures and how the author uses reasons to support main ideas.

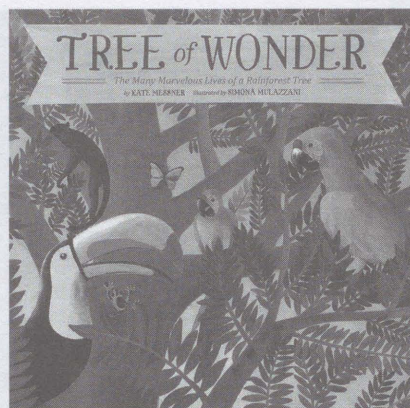
How We Know What We Know about our Changing Climate: Scientists and Kids Explore Global Warming by Lynne Cherry



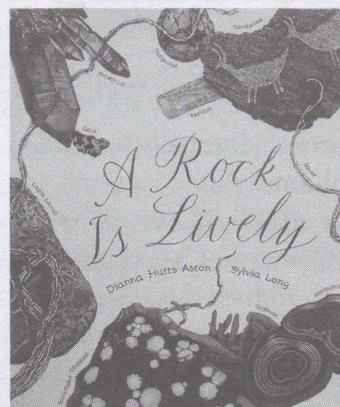
and Gary Braasch (2008) shows students the methods scientists use to gather evidence about a phenomenon—in this case, global warming. The text describes conclusions scientists have drawn by studying microbiology, migration patterns, and plant life cycle patterns. Through complex text and numerous photographs and charts, children can learn how to recognize clues that indicate that flowers, animals, and biomes have adapted to the new conditions created by the greenhouse effect.

Texts about Specific Topics

Tree of Wonder: The Many Marvelous Lives of a Rainforest Tree by Kate Messner (2015) explores how one almendro tree sustains the lives of a variety of animals. Each page doubles the number of animals living around the tree—from one almendro tree to two macaws to four toucans

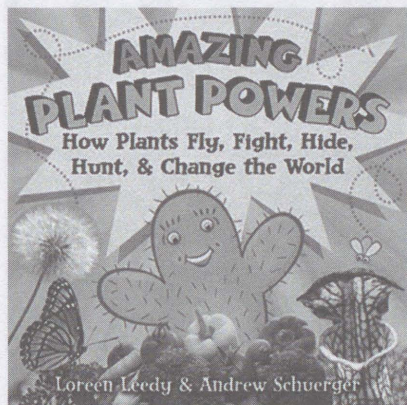


and so on up to 1,024 leafcutter ants. As the numbers of animals double, sometimes those numbers correspond to facts (for example, Messner shows four keel-billed toucans because they travel in flocks of at least four); however, at other times the number of animals seems arbitrary (as in the case of 256 poison dart frogs). Regardless, the book drives home the point about biodiversity and the interconnectedness of plants and animals. Each spread has an italicized paragraph giving facts about the highlighted species and its relation to the almendro tree. In addition, the book pictorially represents the stated numbers of animals so that children can grasp the size of those numbers.



Another book that makes interesting use of visual features is ***A Rock Is Lively*** by Dianna Hutts Aston (2012). Each page introduces an idea about rocks (such as how they are mixed up, galactic, old, helpful, surprising, and inventive). Then the text provides supporting examples. For instance, the pages about how rocks are helpful show how some birds swallow stones to help them digest food, how crocodiles swallow rocks for ballast, how sea otters use rocks to crack open shells, and how chimpanzees use rocks to crack open nuts. There are also captions throughout, naming the types of rocks presented in the illustrations. Sylvia Long's watercolor paintings illustrate and extend the concepts of the text; she uses watercolors to simultaneously blend the rocks'

colors while showing intricate detail. As a result, this book provides an excellent opportunity to discuss how visuals enhance meaning and engage the reader.



Amazing Plant Powers: How Plants Fly, Fight, Hide, Hunt, and Change the World by Loreen Leedy and Andrew Schuerger (2015) offers

younger readers a charming introduction to the world of plants through photographs and illustrations. The story begins with an illustrated cactus named Spike E. Prickles, who is the host of a fictional television show. Spike shows his viewers (potted plants at home) how light is used to make food for plants and how plants release oxygen in the process of photosynthesis. He then shows photographs of the ways that real plants use water, grow roots, create shade, cope with a lack of water, acclimate to extreme heat or cold, and survive dangers such as fire and storms. Throughout the text, important vocabulary is highlighted to draw young readers' attention. Arrows and diagrams illustrate vocabulary terms on photographs. For example, when Spike describes how new plants are made, he tells his viewers that "dust-sized spores will become new ferns" (p. 18) with an enlarged photograph of a fern and a labeled arrow pointing to the spore cases. As an introduction to informational texts, *Amazing Plant Powers* has useful features for children, including an easy-to-use glossary and suggestions for hands-on projects they can try on their own.

For younger children, Linda Glaser's *Garbage Helps our Garden Grow: A Compost Story* (2010) describes the process of composting and explains that by collecting items to compost, less

garbage ends up in landfills, making for a healthier planet. Photographs of young children collecting vegetation for compost highlights items that children

might typically be familiar with: jack-o'-lanterns, peanut shells, lettuce, and broccoli. As the book progresses, children are shown watering compost bins, watching as adults churn the compost, and spreading compost onto gardens. Glaser uses simple terminology to explain that garbage turns from identifiable items (such as pumpkins and peanut shells) into rich, brown soil. At the end of the book, she provides advice for adults wanting to teach children to compost.

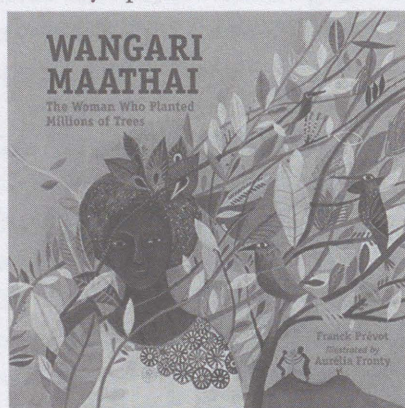


Other great sources for texts on specific ecological topics include books by **Gail Gibbons**, **Steve Jenkins**, and **Sneed B. Collard III**. There are also magazines such as *Zoobooks*, *Ranger Rick*, and *National Geographic for Kids*. Additionally, *National Geographic for Kids* has published a series of books at levels 1, 2, and 3 with beautiful photographs, fun facts, and clear content. These cover a range of topics and include many books on animals and the Earth. For Spanish-speaking students, Scholastic has published a series of **bilingual readers by Melvin and Gilda Berger** about a range of plants, animals, and natural phenomena.

Biography Text Set: Integrating Knowledge and Ideas

Common Core Reading Informational Text Standard 9 describes how K-5 students will compare and contrast two texts on the same topic and eventually integrate information from multiple sources about a topic. Presenting students with several biographies about a person is a great way to approach this. For example, Wangari Maathai,

winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize, grew up in Kenya, studied biology, and witnessed how a once green and vibrant Kenya turned brown as trees were cut down for British plantations and buildings erected by the Kenyan government. She witnessed how rivers filled with silt because no tree roots held the dirt and how women had to travel increasing distances in order to find firewood for their families. Therefore, she gradually convinced people throughout the country to plant trees. To do this, she often she had to stand up to the government, but she succeeded in helping people in Kenya plant over 30 million trees. **Wangari**



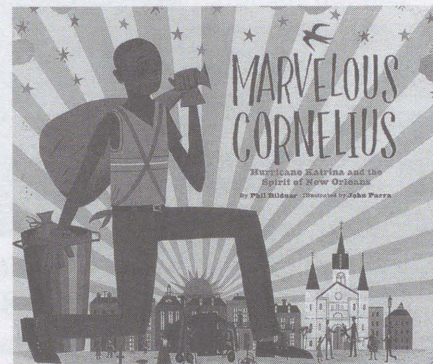
Maathai: The Woman Who Planted Millions of Trees by Franck Prévot (2015) is one of the most recent picture books published about her life. At the end of

Prévot's book, he included photographs of Maathai, a timeline of her life, descriptions of Kenya today, information about Kenya's forests, and quotations from Maathai's Nobel lecture and her memoir written for adults titled *Unbowed* (2008). Other texts for children have focused on Maathai's life such as *Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai* by Claire Nivola (2008), *Wangari's Trees of Peace: A True Story of Africa* by Jeanette Winter (2008), *Seeds of Change: Planting a Path to Peace* by Jen Cullerton Johnson (2010), and *Mama Miti: Wangari Maathai and the Trees of Kenya* by Donna Jo Napoli and illustrated by Kadir Nelson (2010). While all of these texts focus on Maathai's tree-planting efforts, they each highlight different aspects of her life. Comparing and contrasting these texts and questioning why authors chose to tell certain parts of a person's life while leaving out other parts would lead to fruitful discussion about author's craft and how it affects readers' learning and understanding.

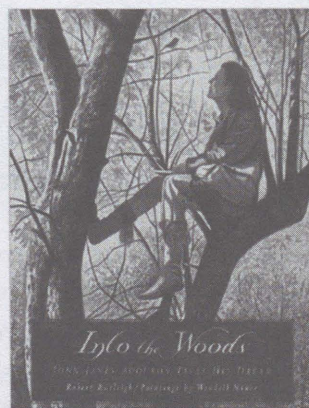
Other Biographies

Another great example of author's craft is *Marvelous Cornelius: Hurricane Katrina and the Spirit of New Orleans* by Phil Bildner (2015).

To describe the perseverance and positive attitude of Cornelius Washington, a New Orleans sanitation worker, the text uses



vivid verbs and alliteration. In the author's note, Bildner explains how he encountered the story of Washington, his conversations with Washington's mother, and the ways in which his descriptions and depictions might not be 100% accurate (such as how the garbage bags Washington threw into the hopper likely did not land in perfect pyramids), but how Bildner stayed true to the essence of Washington and his spirit. Not only are the text engaging and the message important, but also the author's note provides opportunities for insight and discussion into how biographies are crafted.

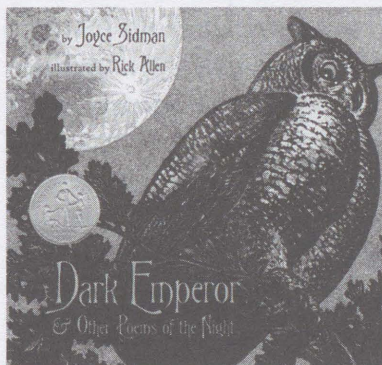


Into the Woods: John James Audubon Lives his Dream by Robert Burleigh (2014) tells the story of Audubon both through excerpts from fictionalized journals based on his life and through poetic narration. The author separates the two storylines

on the page by the use of space and font, selecting a handwritten cursive text for Audubon's journals and a more formal block print for the narrator. Audubon was an American naturalist who traveled the country on foot, drawing and painting scenery and wildlife, with an ambition to paint every American bird

species. By his death in 1851, he was one of the most beloved American artists of the time, in part because of his dedication to the preservation of plant and animal life in the United States. *Into the Woods* uses some of Audubon's own artwork within the illustrations along with paintings by Wendell Minor to depict Audubon's travels and his work.

Informational Poetry



Poetry not only evokes emotion, but it can also communicate information. A wonderful example of informational poetry is *Dark Emperor and Other Poems*

of the Night, a 2011 Newbery Honor book by Joyce Sidman (2010). This book is a collection of poems about animals that live in the forest and their nocturnal activities. For this text, Sidman wrote many different types of poems such as rhyming couplets and concrete/shape poetry. The poems provide evocative descriptions, and accompanying each poem is a short prose paragraph with facts about the animal and/or the forest.

Two other sources of ecological poems are *Other Goose: Recycled Rhymes for Our Fragile Times* by Barbara Wyn Klunder (2007) that creates environmentally-focused parodies of Mother Goose's rhymes such as "Jack be nimble / Jack be quick / Jack watch out for that oil slick;" and *All the Wild Wonders: Poems of Our Earth* by Wendy Cooling (2010), a collection of nature poems by various poets.

Digital Texts

Finally, adults and children alike are accessing more and more information through digital means. There are two great websites with news articles: *Time for Kids* (<http://www.timeforkids.com/>) and Tween Tribune (<http://tweentribune.com/>) run by the Smithsonian. *Tween Tribune* has articles in English and Spanish with specific sections for grades K-4, 5-6, 7-8, and 9-12. Videos are also great ways to help students access content. There are subscription sites such as **Discovery Education Streaming Plus** (formerly United Streaming) and BrainPOP (<https://www.brainpop.com/>). Television shows like *Magic School Bus*, *Bill Nye the Science Guy*, *Peep and the Big Wide World*, and *Reading Rainbow* continue to be students' favorites. Many of these are available on DVD, through Discovery Education Streaming Plus, and on Amazon Prime (as is the case for *Reading Rainbow*).

Common Core Reading Informational Text standards ask students to know and use electronic menus, icons, and hyperlinks in order to locate information in a text, and they ask students to integrate information from print and digital texts. Therefore, while the aforementioned digital resources are important ways to engage students in content, we also need to teach students how to navigate their specific text features to facilitate comprehension.

Classroom Ecology: Bringing Together Children and Genres

This is only a small sample of informational texts and genres that might help spark discussion and exploration of the topic of ecology in elementary classrooms. As teachers, we found that when we presented content information through a variety of formats and genres, our students were more engaged and made meaningful, deep, lasting connections. Hopefully, these texts will inspire other teachers and students to do the same.

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Reading the World through the Words of Non-fiction: Informational Texts in the Secondary ELA Classroom

—Dr. Jeanne Loh, Ashley Johnson and
Jacqueline Kerr

I still believe non-fiction is the most important literature to come out of the second half of the twentieth century. Non-fiction is never going to die. Tom Wolfe

Have you ever thought about how much information the average person contends with daily? According to Social Times, an average social network user processes 285 pieces of content daily, and of that content, 63% is text and 37% is media. That translates to 54,000 words and 443 minutes of video, together requiring a total of 12 hours. Talk about information overload! Obviously, the world is an increasingly complex place that we need to be able to read and interpret. In secondary classrooms, content area teachers consistently ask and expect students to read to learn, and the bulk of that reading falls into the genre of non-fiction. Likewise, the kinds of reading materials and reading tasks high-stakes standardized tests present make it imperative for adolescent readers to be able to access and make sense of non-fiction. For these and other reasons, the Common Core also foregrounds close reading of informational texts. Because reading for information is necessary to navigate the world in which we live, teachers play an integral role in preparing young people for those challenges.

What does that mean for English teachers? As teachers of language arts and literature, we often come to the classroom excited about the fiction we will use to show students the possibilities in our world. Yet, we struggle to make room for informational texts in our already overloaded curriculum. In this column, we consider why including non-fiction in the English curriculum is more than just a requirement; it is also an opportunity to open up the world to our students in new ways while reinforcing English literature curricular concepts. After all, in this era of information overload, don't our students need to be able to make sense of non-fiction texts, particularly narratives of history, the environment, and social issues? Whether it's an online news site or their Twitter feed, students constantly consume informational texts. As teachers, however, we can use high quality non-fiction with students to prompt inquiry, stimulate discussion, and foster critical thinking. In much the same way as we might use fiction, we can use non-fiction to

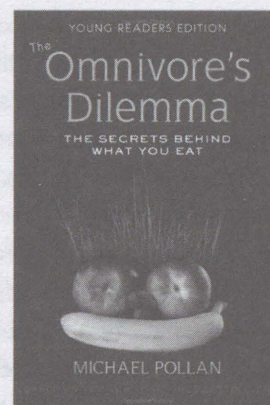
help students engage with the world and the issues we face. If we take the time to carefully select informational texts to bring into our classrooms, we will also provide students with valuable mentor texts, which they can use to understand the power of argumentation, the importance of perspective, and the varying voices and styles authors use.

According to Hintz and Tribunella, “When we think about non-fiction for young people, we often conceive of it as a purely didactic—or teaching—genre” (p. 272). Although non-fiction is often reminiscent of the textbooks students encounter in classrooms, it is a literary genre, recognized by the American Library Association’s Ronald F. Sibert Informational Book Medal and by the National Council of Teachers of English Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Non-fiction for Children. According to Barbara Moss (1995), “Literary artistry is essential in non-fiction. The author’s use of literary devices used in narrative, such as metaphors, similes, and visual imagery make information come alive. This artistry, along with the author’s approach to the material, move such books beyond lists of facts to carefully crafted works of literature” (p. 123). These experts reinforce the idea that non-fiction is a recognized genre of literature, and we should engage with it in that way with students; this approach will help them read for information more effectively across subject areas and for a variety of purposes as well as foster an appreciation for the non-fiction literary form. This literary approach can also inspire and motivate English teachers to enthusiastically incorporate more non-fiction texts into their curriculum and to use literary criteria for selecting non-fiction texts for and with students. Children’s author Jon Scieszka says, “My platform has been to reach reluctant readers. And one of the best ways to motivate them is to connect them with reading that interests them, to expand the definition of reading to include humor, science fiction/fantasy, non-fiction, graphic novels, wordless books, audio books, and comic books.” Non-fiction makes his list, and ours.

For our book choices, we focus on the broad theme of ecology to consider how we might use non-fiction to help students think about their role in and relationship to the natural world. In the following examples, students from cities, suburbs, and rural communities will likely find their beliefs challenged and supported as they think about their relationship to food, the land, and animals.

Note: The author of *Folks, This Ain’t Normal* is profiled in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. This overlap is entirely coincidental, and although they share a similar message, their stories are different.

Young Readers Edition:
The Omnivore’s Dilemma:
The Secrets Behind What
You Eat by Michael Pollan
 (adapted by Richie Chevat)



Do you know where your food comes from? When it is cooked and ready to eat at mealtime, do you know about its journey from the farm to the table? Michael Pollan seeks to uncover how food is produced and trekked across land and sea in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, an investigative report about the various systems that make up our food chain.

For many of us, the word “farm” evokes nostalgic images from Margaret Wise Brown’s *The Big Red Barn* or E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*. We envision a barn full of sheep, chickens, and pigs and large, lush meadows spotted with grazing cows and horses. These are not the farms of modern-day America, where agribusinesses have drastically altered the relationship among the land, animals, and humans. Farms no longer house various livestock but raise “King Corn,”—the title Pollan gives to our country’s dominant crop, where pesticides and fertilizers laden with nitrogen are poured into the ground and where farmers plant hybrid corn seeds that resist disease and cold. Most modern

farms have given up their livestock to grow corn, half of which is shipped to feedlots to fatten cows, chickens, and even fish. Farmers are hampered by their relationship with agribusinesses and their reliance on government subsidies. This is the industrial food system, where corn enters one end of the factory and commodities (such as high fructose corn syrup, slabs of beef, and cereal) emerge from the other end.

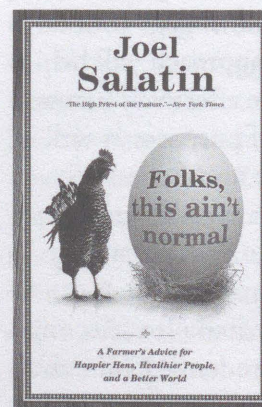
Pollan also explores the industrial organic system, which has found ways to mass-produce organic crops without devastating the soil with chemicals and pesticides. Although organic farmers are conscious about the health and quality of their soil, their process of mass production mirrors that of the industrial food system, especially because it requires enormous amounts of fossil fuels in its transportation of commodities and still perpetuates monocultural farms, which works against the land's natural inclination towards biodiversity. Buying organic is a safer for our bodies, but how organic is defined and how food is labeled have largely been influenced by lobbyists representing agribusinesses. Pollan shows that the industrial organic food system is not a simple solution but has its own set of limitations.

Pollan continually asks if there are ways to eat responsibly that don't lead to ecological ruin, and whether we can be wise about our own health as well as the health of our natural environment. In Part 3, Pollan visits with self-described grass farmer Joel Salatin, who guides him through his local "beyond-organic" farm. Salatin raises a range of crops and animals, all of which rely on one another for fertilization, decomposition, and growth. Pollan describes Salatin as a conductor who directs an orchestra of livestock, rotating them through different parts of his land at different times. These animals fulfill a crucial role in the maintenance of the soil and crops. With this beyond-organic system, the fertility of the land increases over time and Salatin is able to make a living in a way that allows for some biodiversity, requires little fossil

fuel, produces healthy and happy grass-fed cows and chickens, and avoids the use of chemicals.

In the last part of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan attempts to create a meal from hunting and gathering. This food chain directly links him to the food on his table and depends on Pollan's shooting and foraging abilities. Although he notes that the chances of humans' returning to hunting and gathering is highly unlikely, he takes this opportunity to discuss the ethical and philosophical issues that shape our views about food.

The Omnivore's Dilemma is a fascinating read. It helps us as readers to think about the impact that humans have on Earth, as well as our relationship with food, and, by extension, our relationship with our natural environment. Pollan also incorporates aspects of chemistry, biology, ecology and ecosystems, nutrition, and ethics concerning the treatment and consumption of animals. He encourages us to question our own eating habits and speaks to many audiences. This book is bound to transform the values and beliefs of readers of any age, and it opens up a world about food that we all take for granted.



Folks, This Ain't Normal: A Farmer's Advice for Happier Hens, Healthier People, and a Better World by Joel Salatin

"What we spend our time discovering and learning is a direct reflection or result of what we believe to be important" (Salatin, p. 35).

In *Folks, This Ain't Normal: A Farmer's Advice for Happier Hens, Healthier People, and a Better World*, Joel Salatin hopes to awaken in Americans an interest in basic food and farming knowledge. Salatin, one of the country's most successful non-industrial farmers, calls on us to rethink

our relationship to the land and food. Using the tagline “Folks, this ain’t normal,” Salatin offers his unique perspective on everything from childhood chores to nutrition to food packaging to modern industrial agriculture. Using a homespun conversational style, Salatin blends personal stories, farming expertise, and harsh critiques of environmentalists, government regulators and others who do not understand the need for careful stewardship of the land and its resources.

For Salatin, who has been a working farmer in the Shenandoah Valley for more than thirty years, this book is about reshaping “taken-for-granted” ways of doing things to improve the future. For example, he urges us to take responsibility for our food and to think beyond supermarkets and weekly trips to the farmers’ market for food security. To do this, he suggests we might learn to preserve produce for out-of-season eating, buy whole animals and store the meat, or use any land that we have to grow something edible. Yet, it’s not just about the past. Salatin recognizes, “There’s a fine line between nostalgic and archaic,” (p. 64) and he wants us to think about how to resolve the tension between scientific advancement and our ecological values. In Salatin’s opinion, however, our ever-further movement away from our responsibility to feed ourselves is not normal and should be stopped.

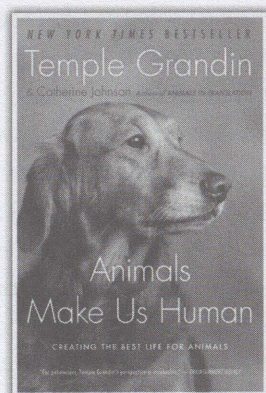
While environmentally-minded students are likely to think deeply about Salatin’s argument for stewardship, all teenagers could relate to the chapter, “Children, Chores, and Humility”. In this chapter, Salatin takes on the common complaint that we need something for our young people to do. Suggesting that young people today have too much leisure time, Salatin considers historical ways of being a farm child. While he doesn’t advocate for child labor, he details chores ranging from chopping firewood to picking up cow dung to gardening as means of helping young people develop self-worth. Critical of time children “waste” watching television or playing video games, Salatin

recommends that young people grow things, participate in working ranch or farm vacations, and develop entrepreneurial age-appropriate businesses. Whether they agree with his ideas or not, this chapter is sure to generate opportunities for discussion and argumentation in a high school classroom.

While Salatin makes connections to science throughout the text, in “A Cat is a Cow is a Chicken is my Aunt” Salatin explores “grass” and the importance of herbivores to our ecological balance. As the first profitable “pasture poultry” producer in the United States, Salatin draws on his understanding of pasture as dense, nature grasslands rather than as high-maintenance lawns as he explains the critical role cows play in photosynthetic activity. In what could be a controversial move, Salatin takes on animal rights activists who would seek to convince farmers to stop raising livestock. Doing this, he says, “doesn’t work ecologically” (p. 21). Instead, he says, animal rights activists should value livestock’s role in the sustainable nourishment of the land and feeding of people. This chapter would not only prompt consideration of the different ways people think about being ecologically-minded, but it would also offer students a new way of thinking about the food chain and its significance in their lives.

Because Salatin is clear that both farming and education are his calling, the book (whether in stand-alone chapters or as a whole) offers an interesting opportunity for students to consider author’s stance and purpose. In today’s sharply-polarized political climate, Salatin is difficult to fit into a box. While he critiques the environmental movement, he clearly supports the need to be in a different kind of relationship with the land. He advocates for sustainable agricultural practices and minimal waste while critiquing government regulation. He takes on food giants like Monsanto and Tyson along with animal rights activists who would equate animals and people. Through it all, he calls on us to be stewards and to reconnect with

both the land and the food that comes from it. Finally, in a practical move, he recommends activities at the end of each chapter for students to consider. Students will likely have strong reactions to many of Salatin's ideas, and his "To Do Lists" will likely generate additional conversation as students think about which ones they might take on.



***Animals Make Us Human: Creating the Best Life for Animals* by Temple Grandin**

Animals Make Us Human: Creating the Best Life for Animals by Temple Grandin with Catherine Johnson is the follow-up to Grandin's previous

book *Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior*. Both are non-fiction books that are best described as part textbook, part practical how-to manual, and part personal commentary. These intersecting purposes for writing about the ever-popular subject of animals make both of Grandin's books worth the extra effort it might take to read the complex non-fiction content.

An animal science researcher, professor, and practitioner, Grandin mobilizes her extensive thirty years' worth of expertise to help readers understand the core emotional needs of numerous animal species in order to best care for and connect with them. Her collaborator, Catherine Johnson, specializes in neuropsychiatry. *Animals Make Us Human* uses an objective and practical voice to make complex scientific information relevant and accessible. Readers are provided new ways to think about pets (cats and dogs), horses, domestic farm animals (poultry, pigs, cattle), and wildlife and zoo animals. Engaging with this unique non-fiction book will challenge perspectives, provoke paradigm shifts, and provide catalysts for change.

As a practicing teacher, I have often had success using books about animals to persuade reluctant readers to open up to the possibilities to be found in books. This somewhat complex book (it details scientific information, animal abuse and inhumane conditions, and methods of caring for animals) would not be a starter book for struggling or disconnected readers, but it would definitely be a book to recommend to more accomplished and interested student readers, to scaffold for less competent readers, or to use in parts in class with a variety of reading levels. The book begins with an introductory chapter to provide a theoretical overview, but each successive chapter deals with a specific animal or group of animals, making it possible to select chapters rather than read the entire book. The relatively simple sentence structure used throughout the narrative offsets the complexity of the information, which makes the book accessible, and the author's careful research and references to current science and knowledge gives the book the credibility and relevance we expect from excellent non-fiction titles.

It bears mentioning that the book will evoke a gamut of emotions, from heartwarming compassion to practical and pithy common sense to heartbreaking dismay and disgust. Be forewarned: Some sections of this book are not for sensitive or squeamish readers! Because of her vast experience and direct knowledge of the treatment of farm animals, the author feels compelled to share what she knows in graphic, realistic detail. Some of these descriptions are nauseating, while others might bring some readers to tears. I found the insider knowledge about chickens to be particularly compelling, and I was grateful that throughout the book Grandin provides recommendations for change and intervention that will help us to effectively advocate for the animals we should steward. This proactive component does much to mitigate the negative and disturbing sections and offers a sense of hope that if we pay attention and step up to act responsibly, we *can* do better. The

book also challenges readers to think about where the food we eat comes from in order to prompt us to consider the whole picture and act accordingly. The author never preaches or castigates; instead, she uses matter-of-fact language to give readers food for thought (pardon the pun!) so they can make educated and hopefully responsible decisions going forward. In Grandin's own words, "I want to continue working with people on practical guidelines that will result in improvements."

Animals Make Us Human challenges readers to think about animals differently, inspiring young people to seriously consider the ways our connections with animals can humanize us and improve the quality of life on the planet.

All three of these titles—*The Omnivore's Dilemma*, *Folks, This Ain't Normal*, and *Animals Make Us Human*—are provocative as the authors attempt to convince readers that the food and animals that are

ever-present in our lives, but that are often taken for granted, must be carefully considered and protected. The books' strong persuasive stances offer opportunities for students to analyze how authors make claims and support them with evidence, and can lead to rich discussion, debate, and written response. The relevance of these books' topics to adolescents' daily lives and the characteristics of the books' content and form make them (and other non-fiction texts) an important consideration for inclusion in the ELA curriculum.

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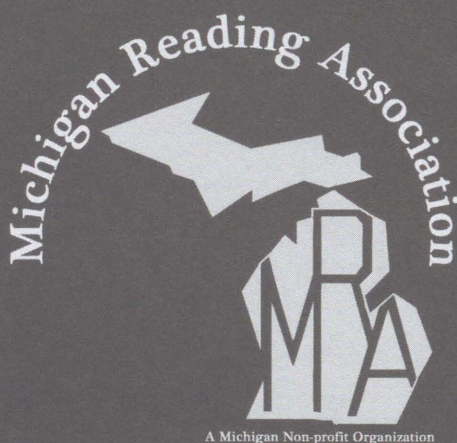
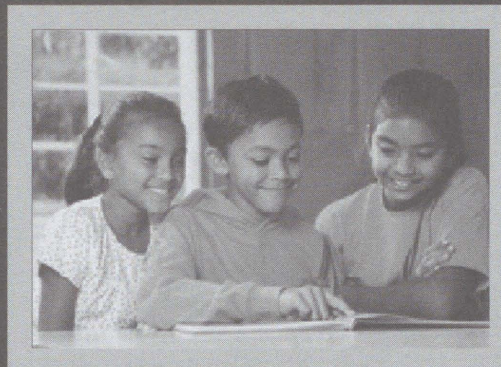
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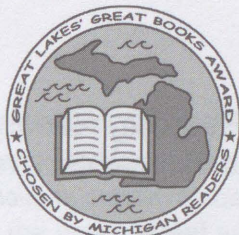
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The Michigan Reading Association (MRA) is an organization of people who believe that literacy is the key to transforming people's lives. Chartered in 1956 by the International Reading Association, MRA has grown to be a leader in providing literacy resources to teachers, parents, and universities.

The mission of MRA is to promote literacy across the state of Michigan. Our association works toward this goal in several ways:

- We offer high quality professional development conferences for teachers, adult educators, administrators, and all those involved in literacy education. We also invite homeschoolers and parents to access the best in literacy professional development.
- MRA's Michigan Reading Journal is one of the top research journals in the country and is available in both print and electronic formats.
- MRA works with local reading councils around the state to provide support and professional development to members in every region of the state.
- The organization supports international literacy efforts, such as TEACH: Teachers Educating and Creating Hope. This group is comprised of many Chaldean and some non-Chaldean teachers in the Detroit area interested in helping those displaced families with necessities and schooling needs.
- MRA puts on two conferences a year. Our Annual Conference in March brings in 1600 conferees, 150 speakers, and 100 exhibitors from across the state and country. With over 30 breakout sessions every session slot, there is always something for everyone. Our Summer Literature Conference in July offers a chance to interact with authors and illustrators more closely in a beautiful summer venue.

As a Michigan non-profit 501(c)3, we are governed by a board of volunteers who work tirelessly to promote the cause of literacy throughout the state of Michigan.



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