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From the Stacks

Peter Butts

Finding Great "Fictions" in Non-Fiction

Librarians, like teachers, are creatures of habit. For better or worse, the defining characteristic of our profession is classification of resources. Generally our goal is to improve the user's ability to access the appropriate source of information. But occasionally our classification schemes conspire against our best intentions and draw arbitrary lines that keep the user from valuable resources.

Such is the arbitrary distinction between what we call "fiction" and the rest of the collection we teach students to call "non-fiction." With these terms comes an arbitrary separation of materials read to study the aesthetic qualities of literature and materials used for research and information. Both terms oversimplify the nature of what good writers of both categories do. We all know that there are a number of novelists—the Colliers, Ann Rinaldi, or the current Newbery Medalist Karen Cushman, for example—whose research is good enough to make their tales worth studying for their insights into history. And if we look back beyond the 19th century novelists, the western literary canon is full of what we would now classify as "non-fiction."

Therefore, why not skim the shelves for non-fiction narratives that deserve literary appreciation? I've chosen an eclectic assortment of titles that, while far from definitive, should do two things:

- 1) provide resources as you prepare for the challenges of the reading and writing MEAP tests;
- 2) get the creative juices flowing with ideas for integrating non-fiction into the study of literature.

Spy novels by and large require a healthy suspension of disbelief. But what happens when the story is true? In *The Cuckoo's Egg: Tracking a Spy Through the Maze of Computer Espionage*,

astronomer and computer programmer Cliff Stoll draws from his voluminous logs and diaries to construct a gripping account of his quest to solve what is initially a 75 cent accounting error in his Berkeley research lab's computer. A quirky '60s throwback, Stoll applies the scientific method to the task of tracking down a German hacker who lurked unchallenged in dozens of research and military computers for over a year, snooping around for military secrets. With only trace evidence, Stoll began logging the hackers sessions day and night in order to convince the FBI, the CIA, the NSA, and other federal agencies of the threat. Like any good mystery we have oddball and endearing characters, lots of red herrings, the sub-plot of whether Cliff's live-in girlfriend will dump him after one too many nights awakened by the beeper summoning Cliff to the lab and the printer recording the hacker's activity, and a plodding and methodical spy skimming information on SDI for the Soviet Union.

Viruses used to be the source of medical rather than technological tragedy.

While not great writing, *The Hot Zone* by Richard Preston is nonetheless a compelling drama with suspense comparable to *Cuckoo's Egg* as Preston tracks down the deadly and repulsive ebola virus from the jungles of Africa to labs in the United States.

For writing more admirable than the mercurial Stoll or rough-hewn Preston, look for the

latest package from James Cross Giblin, *When Plague Strikes: The Black Death, Smallpox, AIDS*. Giblin has a gift for making unusual connections. His earlier books have explored the less well-traveled paths of history: the evolution of silverware, chimney sweeps, and chairs. *When Plague Strikes* presents the human drama that unfolds when epidemic disease brings out the best and the worst in the people involved.

I occasionally get requests for model character sketches. The teen self-help books are the best source I've found. Check out the works of Janet Bode and Susan Kuklin. Both have mastered the fine art of letting young people speak for themselves. With subtle editing and artful presentation, excellent and poignant portraits emerge. Janet Bode's most recent book, *Trust and Betrayal: Real Life Stories of Friends and Enemies*, began as a book about peer pressure. But as she began interviewing teenagers for the book, they made it clear to her that "peer pressure" was an adult notion; what distinguished good and bad peer relations was the amount of trust involved. What makes Susan Kuklin's books stand out is her photographic eye. Most read like photo essays with her intimate photos and the words of her young subjects complementing each other perfectly. In *Speaking Out: Teenagers Take On Race, Sex, and Identity*, she interviews the diverse student population at Humanities High School in New York. Try using just the photos to launch a writing assignment.

While I find them difficult to recommend, this list would be incomplete without mentioning the books of therapist Torey Hayden. What distinguishes *One Child*, *Murphy's Boy*, and *Ghost Girl* from the crowd of popular bizarre-behavior books is the way she inserts herself as a character in her subject's personal drama. Even in *Ghost Girl* where the ritual satanic abuse is so extreme, Hayden manages to construct a narrative that is more dramatic than gratuitously sensationalistic.

For a similar tale, don't miss *The Silent Twins* by Marjorie Wallace. Based on interviews, diaries, and psychiatric reports, Wallace pieces together the bizarre love/hate relationship of identical twins June and Jennifer Gibbons. Trapped in

their own elaborate world of secret language, unspoken, ESP-like signs, dolls, and volumes of their own stories, poems, and pictures, June and Jennifer appear to be unintelligent mutes to the outside world. With adolescence they try to escape through sex, drugs, and petty crimes, but still can't escape the curse of being twins. Wallace successfully tells a tale based on her appreciation of their creative talent and the tragic implications of twin-ness rather than merely chronicling their bizarre deeds. While violent and disturbing, she's touched an emotional chord that kids will respond to.

I regularly get requests for a book "just like *Go Ask Alice*." My suggestions have been less than satisfactory—Beatrice Sparks, the somewhat controversial compiler or "creator" of *Alice*, released *It Happened to Nancy*. Like *Alice*, controversy surrounds the authenticity of *Nancy*, but the kids won't care and the information about AIDS is accurate. Nancy's diary reveals her first love, how his attention turns to date rape, and the horror of going to the doctor and finding out she has HIV. Punctuated with plenty of teenaged exclamation points and dripping with goo, the diary entries have been edited to create a well-paced drama equal to classic teen tragedy biographies like Doris Lund's *Eric*. Like Ryan White, Nancy does progress to full-blown AIDS, faces prejudice and fear at school, and dies at the end.

To a long tradition of fine science writers, let me add a couple contemporary authors worth noting. Much to our dismay, regular award-winner Bruce Brooks turned his attention from fiction to non-fiction a few years ago. The first, *On the Wing*, was written to accompany a segment of PBS' *Nature* series. In this and subsequent books, Brooks does a fine job of creating scenes that illustrate key points and oddities of each species' behavior. *Predator*, for example, contains this observation on snakes:

Snake venom comes in two flavors. One attacks the blood...

one attacks the nerves...

Originally, snake venom was merely a terrific digestive juice that allowed the small-mouthed, armless reptile to soften its meat before eating (61).

Size and format can be deceiving. Look beyond the long, skinny format common to children's science books, and you'll find a complex web of sub-themes in each of photographer Jim Brandenburg's stunning books. *To the Top of the World: Adventures with Arctic Wolves*, *Sand and Fog: Adventures in Southern Africa*, and *An American Safari: Adventures on the North American Prairie* all feature Brandenburg in his role as *National Geographic* photographer in search of the "perfect picture." Along the way, Brandenburg offers slices of life as a professional photographer, brief reflections on the delicate balance between man and nature, and insight into the unique character of each region. Stunning photography is matched by simple and evocative writing.

The comic book fiends: every school has a few. Rarely do they endear themselves to teachers and librarians because while they may be excellent readers, they often resist the "officially sanctioned" reading choices. For them I've included *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud. Look beyond the comic book format and you'll find a sophisticated discussion of the aesthetics and technical dynamics of what McCloud calls "sequential art." I actually Fry-ed this once: the reading level falls somewhere between eighth and ninth grade. *Understanding Comics* presents accessible introductions to art history and perception. But it also presents some interesting narrative techniques with the artist/author's comic book alter-ego as both storyteller and visual metaphor for some of the book's key concepts.

For your budding rappers, a number of recent books have tried to put rap music and hip hop culture in a critical light. For a book that goes beyond the worship of personalities, try Maurice K. Jones' *Say It Loud! The Story of Rap Music*. Jones spins a daring and literate narrative that places the music's history and controversies within the context of a social movement.

Maybe it's a "guy thing," but when he's good, I can't think of anyone who writes better than Gary Paulsen. For the "real" Gary Paulsen, you need to check out the tail end of the 700s for his essays on the wilderness: *Father Water*, *Mother Woods* and *Woodsong*. The former tends toward light-hearted reminiscence of youth; fishing and

camping adventures, mixed with Garrison Keillor-esque accounts of small town life. *Woodsong* combines an account of his first Iditarod with stunning and brutal meditations on what "wilderness" really means. He begins *Woodsong* with a paradox:

I understood almost nothing about the woods until it was nearly too late. And that is strange because my ignorance was based on knowledge (1).

He writes of many strange chance encounters on the trail, but none is as chilling as intercepting a doe followed by seven wolves about to make the kill. There's no stopping it. No understanding it. Even when confronted by a blood-soaked wolf facing him on two hind legs, he can't look away.

And with that thought, with that small understanding, came the desire to learn, to know more not just about wolves but about all things in the woods. All the animals, all the dances....

And it started with blood (8).

We take it for granted that Gary Paulsen's work reflects his own experiences, but with Lois Duncan's *Who Killed My Daughter?* the truth is stranger than her fiction. On the night of July 16, 1989, Duncan received a call every parent dreads: her youngest daughter Kaitlyn had been shot in an apparent drive-by shooting and was dying in the emergency room. As far as the police were concerned, the case was closed, but for Duncan and her family, it was just beginning. Bizarre coincidences piled up: from visions to suspicious stories about Kaitlyn's mysterious boyfriend (who later appeared to commit suicide). Kaitlyn's impetuosity had been Duncan's model for the heroine of her last novel, *Don't Look Behind You*. One of the suspects identified through psychic investigation resembled the fictional hitman on the cover of the British publication of *Don't Look Behind You*. One of the detectives on the case had uncanny similarities to the detective in another Duncan novel, *The Third Eye*, a book whose heroine finds she can use her own psychic ability to help the police find missing children. At the time, Duncan remembers, she was more than a little bit skeptical about such extrasensory gifts.

For this book there is no ending to give away; the book was published in part as a plea for information to solve a case that, even today, remains a mystery.

For other insights into the roots of favorite books, try Beverly Cleary's *A Girl From Yamhill* and *My Own Two Feet*. And don't miss Paul Zindel's *The Pigman and Me*. This one pivotal year in Zindel's life produced enough zaniness for a lifetime of YA novels. It was the year he met his Pigman, Nonno Frankie Vivona, whose off-beat wisdom included:

"Don't be discouraged by fat books...In every fat book, there's a little thin book trying to get out! And don't put grease on your hair the night before you're going to have a big test...."

Everything might slip out of your mind!" (90-91)

In the end, Nonno Frankie shows Paul how to see his "ragazzo," a kind of guardian angel, and interprets Paul's vision of the "ragazzo" holding a pen as a sign that he will become a writer.

For another favorite YA author, the lines between fact and fiction are a tad fuzzy; you're as likely to find William Sleator's collection of childhood antics, *Oddballs*, in fiction as you are in non-fiction. Reminiscent of *The Great Brain* books, *Oddballs* makes a great read-aloud.

From September 10, 1990 to June 26, 1991, 12-year-old Latoya Hunter kept a diary she named "Janice" filled with the ups and downs of her first year at a Bronx junior high school. *The Diary of Latoya Hunter* was not, as student writing for class is not, totally spontaneous. The diary was set up as a book project. But through that artifice emerges genuine and insightful reflections on the pangs of first love, the stress of starting a new school, and the terror of witnessing a shooting in her neighborhood.

In recent years Henry Holt has become the leading publisher in producing mature and respectful multicultural books for young adults. One of their first titles was the surprising memoir of Australian Aborigine Glenyse Ward. Reading *Wandering Girl*, the reader wants to pretend this is a quaint tale of 19th Century colonialism. But the year is 1965, and Glenyse has been "adopted" by a plantation couple essentially to become their

slave; working from sunrise to sundown, spraying disinfectant on whatever she touches, sleeping at night on a shabby cot above the garage because she is "black." While horrifying, there are moments of innocent rebellions that are quite droll: sneaking moments upstairs at the madame's dressing table, stolen morsels of bacon at breakfast.

With beautiful simplicity, World War II survivor Tomiko Higa describes her experiences as a seven-year-old during the Battle of Okinawa in *The Girl with the White Flag*. Immortalized in a news photo proudly "surrendering" to US troops, Higa was separated from her family and spent the entire campaign in a series of cavern hideouts and on the run from the bombs and troops.

Of course any list of recent must-reads would include the timely *Zlata's Diary*. Full of everyday teen thoughts and situations under the most un-everyday conditions, kids have responded to *Zlata* as warmly as they do to Anne Frank. To stay in touch with *Zlata*, visit Penguin's world wide web site (<http://www.penguin.com/>).

Non-fiction writing as an art form of course began with the Greek historians Thucydides and Herodotus, and even today the three masters that complete my list work most often in history. One of the most prolific writers of non-fiction for young adults, Milton Meltzer is often obsessed by unusual themes. For a good example of this, try his recent offering, *The Amazing Potato*, in which he traces the epic saga of the humble but noble tuber from its early cultivation high in the Andes to its introduction at the French court as a tasty treat, to its use and abuse as a dietary staple in tragic, British dominated Ireland, to its final destiny as the salty, golden favorite of fast food chains everywhere.

Less well known than Meltzer or Russell Freedman, Albert Marrin can be counted on to bring life to even the driest of subjects. His talents shine in *1812: The War Nobody Won* where he brings the diverse strands of the period into an adventure tale of how the new nation established its credibility on several fronts without actually winning the war.

A frequent Newbery medalist, Russell Freedman brings together a talent for writing with a

passion for photography to create fresh biographies of even the best documented personalities in American history. What marks his *Eleanor Roosevelt* for greatness is how he not only communicates such touchy subjects as Franklin's infidelity and Eleanor's struggle to overcome her own fears and the social pressure on women, but works them into his theme of what made this woman's life so outstanding.

Good non-fiction involves more than the ability to convey facts. The best writers find the story, they set up the drama, they draw unforgettable characters, and thereby tell a tale of greater truth than the facts alone.

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