



WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

PASSIONATE NONFICTION CHALLENGES TEENS TO THINK

I am always amazed when people ask me how to get teens interested in nonfiction. In my experience, you don't have to get them interested in reading about what's real; you simply need to hand it to them. It's what they seek, what they crave—the truth. Tell teenagers your truth, and even if they disagree, they will respect you for trusting them with it. It is the same with certain kinds of books.

Passionate nonfiction paints as conscientious a picture of a topic as possible, yet it brings a clear and strong author point of view to the work and often a willingness to have that point of view challenged. It is the embodiment of an author sharing his or her personal truths.

THE BIG IDEA

One reason teens read is to better understand the world—and their place in it. That's why I write—to learn more about what I don't know, to put things into context and draw connections. I write to add my voice to the chorus of conversation and to engage in further exploration. I want my readers to see as clearly as I do. But I stay true to my charge to remain a responsible source of information while expressing my point of view.

This responsibility to readers is reflected in the education buzz phrases, “big idea” and “essential questions.” These terms speak to the importance of framing information in a larger context to help readers make critical connections between what they are learning and the greater world in which they live. Many authors take this responsibility to heart, and the result is a collection of rich, exciting nonfiction books that often read as dramatically as novels. Some of these include Albert Marrin's *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of Modern America*, Elizabeth Partridge's *John Lennon*, James Cross Giblin's *The Many Rides of Paul Revere*, Russell Freedman's *Who Was First?*, Susan Campbell Bartoletti's *Hitler Youth*, and Candace Fleming's *The Lincolns*.

Marc Aronson's body of work reflects his love of the teen reader's mind. He believes that “books are well suited to classroom use when they challenge students to think. In the old days, teachers and librarians wanted the assurance that a book was ‘accurate’—which is to say not controversial, or at least ‘balanced.’ But today, [when] we are preparing to send students out into the wild world of the Internet, books are suited to class use when the author shows his or her passion but uses [it] as a basic standard ‘falsifiability.’ That is, no matter where the author begins a study, she is willing to be proven wrong by sources, studies, or the opinions of experts.”

For me, the “big ideas” and the “essential questions” are found in the aspects of humanity that move me—whether to sorrow or joy. I choose topics that infuriate me, such as gender inequality, or people who inspire me, such as Alexander Calder, Ella Fitzgerald, or Jerrie Cobb. I expose teens to people who live their lives with vigor, who reach for their dreams, who fight against injustice. And I keep excellent company in my motivation to do so.

M. L. K.: *Journey of a King* author Tonya Bolden says, “With **M. L. K.**, as with many of my books, I'm essentially telling my readers, ‘This is the kind of person I want you to be like.’ Often when I speak to young people I tell them that in the not-too-distant future, they will be making decisions that will have an impact on

my life, from the quality of food they serve in their restaurants to the kind of legislation they draft or support as politicians. I tell them, ‘You will be taking care of me and my generation.’ And I ask them, ‘Will you take good care of us?’”

Asking the “essential questions” is ingrained in passionate nonfiction. At every step in the writing process, we learn more about our subjects and stories, which presents opportunities to make choices. Consider Partridge's experience while writing her forthcoming novel, *Marching for Freedom*, about the 1965 civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery. Partridge's research led her to several people who were in that march as children. Their stories influenced Partridge's overall point of view and completely changed the focus of her book.

About one of her interviewees, Partridge said, “His words set the tone of that whole experience in a way that I couldn't use my own words. Going to Selma to interview him gave me a personal point of view, as opposed to being 3,000 feet up and reporting the information. I rewrote the whole thing after collecting these cool points of view [that] I wanted to weave into the story.” Prior to her trip to Alabama, Partridge noted, “I used to say my main character was the march itself, but then I had the stories of four kids. I had a lot more details to make it vivid and give the reader something [with which] to identify. What was that fear like? It was a real experience.”

Being able to bring people and events to life for readers is an honor and a privilege, and those real experiences we discover through our research allow us to do just that. It is thrilling when you hit upon something that sheds light on your larger picture, something you know will make readers really connect with what you're saying and “get” it.

Like Partridge, I had such an “a-hah!” moment while writing *Almost Astronauts*, which is about thirteen women who underwent the Mercury astronaut testing in 1961, excelled at it, but were kept out of the space program. By May 2007, I had already written much of the book when I came face to face with my heroine, Jerrie Cobb. It was unexpected, as she spends most of her time in the Amazon and is an extremely private person. I was in Wisconsin for a weekend-long event honoring the “Mercury 13” women and was ecstatic to find out Cobb had made a last-minute decision to fly in from South America. I resisted the urge to pounce on this quiet woman and waited for her to get comfortable with me. But there was a piece of the story that had bugged me since the beginning. I knew Cobb had met with then Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson to have him plead the women's case with NASA and allow them into the space program. And I knew that meeting had not been fruitful. But what had LBJ said to her that day in the privacy of his office? Was there something the world didn't know at the root of this story?

On my third day with the “Mercury 13,” the right moment presented itself. I was sitting next to Cobb on a couch in the hotel lobby with a few quiet minutes alone. I took a deep breath and asked my question. I was not expecting the answer I got. After forty years of keeping LBJ's words to herself, Cobb was ready to talk. And what she told me illuminated the dark prejudices of our society that festered



under the surface of the history I was working so hard to reveal. My choice was clear. It was time for a rewrite to make sure the new perspective I had just gained could be shared with my readers, even though it meant exposing the bad behavior of an important American. I couldn't shy away. Not when my responsibility to my readers is to help them make sense of a complex world—warts and all.

WARTS AND ALL

When we write for a teen audience, it is our charge as reliable sources of information to incorporate everything we learn about a person in the story we are telling. We can't gloss over or leave out details that might make us uncomfortable or may even poke holes in our own previous views. And we can certainly trust our readers to know that people—no matter how good—are flawed. If we want to shine the light on dynamic personalities who have challenged ideas and changed the world and stimulate youth to mirror those ideals, we have to be honest about the persons we are holding up.

In my **Up Close: Ella Fitzgerald**, I could not leave out what I learned about that great lady's childhood and the hardships she had been through, even though they had been omitted or cleaned up in previous works. I felt compelled to show that people generally do not have one unfettered, smooth rise to greatness. There are bumps along the way. Big ones. And character foibles. Big ones. It takes a bit of the pressure off the rest of us.

Bolden isn't afraid of tackling this idea. In her *Up Close* biography **W. E. B. Du Bois**, she takes on the truth, even though it isn't always pretty. With bold personalities like Du Bois often come unpleasant qualities that should not be hidden from view. Bolden says, "Du Bois was arrogant, and I wasn't going to hold that back. Besides," she added, "I would have shed the shame earlier if I had just seen people like me represented as accomplished people who also experience the pleasure of anger."

ROUNDING THINGS OUT

The books I often find the most enriching usually include two components that welcome the reader to learn more about the author as well as the topic—a note to the reader and a generous supply of back matter that documents exhaustive research and makes suggestions for further investigation.

My favorite author notes are the ones that speak directly to the reader and lay the intention right out in the open. If you tell me where you are coming from, I am more than willing to take the ride to get there. One excellent example is in Aronson's **Race**. He explains some of the choices he made in his approach, encourages readers to pay close attention to the complexities within, and invites people to continue their thought process after reading his book.

Books with impressive back matter include Jim Murphy's **An American Plague**, which has an extensive annotated bibliography, and Bolden's **M. L. K.**, with a time line so packed with detail it spans eight pages. In **Almost Astronauts**, I include a letter to the reader, several pages detailing my sources, an appendix, chapter notes, a further reading list, and a Webliography—a listing of Internet sources readers can investigate for themselves. The back matter in each of these books gives readers multiple opportunities to connect further to the material and deepen their own perspectives.

Passionate nonfiction offers readers the tools that allow them to make sense of the world, to put the pieces of the puzzle together, form opinions, learn what has happened in the past, and ponder the future—their future and ours. They are beginnings to conversations and not endings. They challenge our teens to explore, to question, to think. To quote Gershwin, "Who could ask for anything more?" ■

TANYA LEE STONE'S BOOKS FOR TEENS

Almost Astronauts: 13 Women Who Dared to Dream. Candlewick, 2009. 144p. \$24.99. 978-0-7636-3611-1. \$17.99 Trade pb. 978-0-7636-4502-1. Index. Photos. Biblio. Source Notes. Further Reading. Appendix. **VOYA** February 2009. **4Q 4P M JS**

Amelia Earhart: A Photographic Story of a Life. DK, 2007. 128p. \$14.99. 978-0-7566-2553-5. PLB \$13.99. 978-1-4352-0049-4. Index. Illus. Photos. Maps.

A Bad Boy Can Be Good for a Girl. Wendy Lamb Books/Random House, 2006. 240p. \$14.95. 978-0-385-74702-8. \$16.99. 978-0-385-90946-4. \$7.99 Trade pb. 978-0-553-49509-6. **VOYA** April 2006. **4Q 4P J S**

Barbie: For Better, For Worse. Forthcoming, 2010.

Up Close: Ella Fitzgerald. Viking, 2008. 203 p. \$16.99. 978-0-670-06149-5. Illus. Photos. Biblio. Source Notes. **VOYA** June 2008. **5Q 3P M JS**

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Bartoletti, Susan Campbell. **Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Hitler's Shadow.** Scholastic, 2005. 176p. \$19.95. 978-0-439-35379-3. Index. Photos. Maps. Biblio. Source Notes. Chronology. Appendix. **VOYA** August 2005. **4Q 3P M JS**

Bolden, Tonya. **M. L. K.: Journey of a King.** Harry N. Abrams, 2007. 118p. \$19.95. 978-0-8109-5476-2. Index. Photos. Biblio. Source Notes. Chronology. **VOYA** April 2007. **5Q 2P M J**

Bolden, Tonya. **Up Close: W. E. B. DuBois.** Viking, 2008. 224p. \$16.99. 978-0-670-06302-4. Illus. Photos. Biblio. Source Notes.

Fleming, Candace. **The Lincolns: A Scrapbook Look at Abraham and Mary.** Schwartz & Wade Books/Random House, 2008. 200p. \$24.99. 978-0-375-83618-3. PLB \$28.99. 978-0-375-93618-0. Illus. Biblio. Maps.

Freedman, Russell. **Who Was First? Discovering the Americas.** Clarion, 2007. 88p. \$19. 978-0-618-66391-0. Index. Photos. Maps. Biblio. Source Notes. **VOYA** December 2007. **5Q 2P M J**

Giblin, James Cross. **The Many Rides of Paul Revere.** Scholastic, 2007. 96p. \$17.99. 978-0-439-57290-3. Index. Illus. Photos. Maps. Biblio. Source Notes. Chronology. **VOYA** October 2007. **4Q 3P M**

Marrin, Albert. **The Great Adventure: Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of Modern America.** Dutton, 2007. 256p. \$30. 978-0-525-47659-7. Index. Illus. Photos. Biblio. **VOYA** February 2008. **4Q 4P J S**

Murphy, Jim. **An American Plague: The True and Terrifying Story of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793.** Clarion, 2003. 165p. \$17. 978-0-395-77608-7. Index. Illus. Biblio. Source Notes. **VOYA** December 2003. **5Q 2P M J**

Partridge, Elizabeth. **John Lennon: All I Want Is the Truth.** Viking, 2005. 256p. \$24.99. 978-0-670-05954-6. Index. Photos. Biblio. Source Notes. **VOYA** October 2005. **3Q 3P S**

Partridge, Elizabeth. **Marching for Freedom.** Forthcoming.

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