A Fine, Fine Line: Truth in Nonfiction

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I love chocolate. I love fruit. But I prefer to enjoy them separately. If, on the off chance, I do bite into a clever combination of the two, it is generally after I've been given some kind of heads-up — perhaps one as simple as the label on the inside cover of a box of assorted chocolates.

When it comes to nonfiction, I feel the same way. Give me facts, or give me fiction. Please don't blend them together without any explanation or preparation for the reader. Call me a purist, but there are lines to be drawn.

For the past few days, I have been struggling to nail down a scene in my next book. I know exactly what I want to convey in this moment — the juxtaposition of extreme injustice and utter hypocrisy; the slap-in-your-face feeling of unfairness that was the reality of the racial discrimination the heroes in my book experienced during World War II. I have two extraordinary real-life anecdotes from which to choose. One fits my timeline perfectly and is fairly upsetting. The other captures the outrage of the moment in a way so visceral it makes me want to scream.

So what's the problem? The latter choice seems clear, doesn't it? It would be, if I were writing historical fiction. But I am writing nonfiction, and the man in the second anecdote doesn't figure into the story until later. If I place him in this scene to set the emotional stage, I create a chronology issue that could compromise accuracy.

What should I do? I have a few options and am still puzzling through them. But I can tell you what I *won't* be doing. I won't be borrowing pieces of one and some of the other. I won't be blurring the boundaries of the two anecdotes together to make them fit my account. I won't be taking liberties with the facts. It isn't right and it isn't fair — not to my readers and not to the people I am writing about, whether they are alive to read my words or not.

This seemingly hard line may surprise some people, especially those who felt I did take liberties by interjecting a passionate point of view into the telling of *Almost Astronauts*. I disagree. Narrative nonfiction can have a point of view and remain unadulterated. But as Kate Monster says in *Avenue Q*, "There's a fine, fine line between reality and pretend."

That fine, fine line is something writers of narrative nonfiction (or nonfiction with a point of view, or whatever we finally end up calling it) tread every day. We balance the role of historian and storyteller by making sure we don't interject tension or emotion or events without thorough knowledge. We do it by employing fiction techniques without ever making a single thing up. If I write that Jerrie Cobb's smile was tinged with

sadness, the reader needs to know I do so with authority. That I have seen that smile or have some other documented knowing of it. So many nonfiction writers do this with impressive skill. Barbara Kerley deftly weaves words that Alice and Theodore Roosevelt spoke into her effervescent picture book *What to Do About Alice?* Jennifer Armstrong makes us feel the anxiety of the explorers stranded in the Antarctic in *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World*. Deborah Heiligman sweeps us up in the love story between Charles and Emma Darwin. Susan Campbell Bartoletti chills us to the bone in *They Called Themselves the K.K.K*. Elizabeth Partridge has our feet and hearts aching on the road from Selma in *Marching for Freedom*. Marina Budhos and Marc Aronson infuse *Sugar Changed the World* with extremely personal journeys while connecting historical dots. In each of these examples, every word is grounded in impeccable research.

There was a time when invented dialogue, embellished anecdotes, and other such devices were accepted in the name of making nonfiction more exciting and engaging. These fell out of favor long ago. But of late, in what seems to be a newfound effort to make nonfiction sexier — a whole other topic — some books that are intended, marketed, and/or shelved as nonfiction are slipping such devices back in, presumably in order to appeal to young readers. Fictional narrators interacting with real-life characters? Words a famous person *might* have said? I wouldn't want anyone putting words in my mouth — would you? If there is dialogue in nonfiction, I want to be able to trust that it was actually spoken. If there are thoughts attributed to a character or snippets of a diary that are undocumented, I want to know why. At the very least, if the author and publisher have chosen to make creative decisions that blur these lines, I hope to find that clearly and prominently elaborated upon in the book.

Why does this "truthiness" in nonfiction rile me so? History is interesting enough without bending the truth. We don't need to manipulate the facts to be effective storytellers. We don't need to invent to be inventive. The facts, in the right hands, are as entertaining as any fiction. There are unending creative ways to tell a true story, as evidenced by the plethora of mesmerizing nonfiction books available for kids and teens.

Another reason it bothers me is that the answer to the question — what is the truth? — is such a tricky one. I am continually stressing to students how important it is to remember that every single thing they read and hear, from books to newspaper articles to the evening news, is colored by the perspective of the human being who wrote it. Every person sees the world through his or her own unique set of eyes. It is not possible to be completely detached from the words we write, nor would we want to be. So my job, as I see it, is to tell the truth in the most accurate way I humanly can while still telling a compelling story. The job is difficult enough without mucking up the waters with half-truths.

And frankly, I find messing with the truth without being upfront about it deceptive. It has consequences. I offer my own young reading experience as an example. I grew up voraciously reading those orange-covered Childhood of Famous Americans biographies. When I discovered, years later, that they were fictionalized (now stated on the back covers, quite rightly), I was furious. I felt duped. Do you know how many facts are

embedded in my knowledge base that are not, in truth, facts? I don't. This may contribute to my zealous fact-checking and research habits. But before someone comments that I should see that as a gift, I have already considered that angle. It was not a gift. I was misled. Worse, those books didn't need truthiness to be engaging. I loved them. But ultimately, they let me down. I can't rely on what I learned from them.

Don't get me wrong. I'm all for innovative ideas and interesting packaging and cool concepts that will engage and entice young readers. All I'm asking for is a little truth in advertising. If a book is being categorized, labeled, marketed, shelved, or in any other way identified as nonfiction — either keep it untarnished or be sure the reader is made aware of what the author is doing. Keep the line between historical fiction and nonfiction crystal clear.

Consider Tod Olson's How to Get Rich series. It is shelved in the 970s. It is not pure nonfiction. It employs techniques of historical fiction. And yet it does so without betraying the trust of the reader. This is accomplished in both the front- and back matter with an editor's note *and* afterword from the editor (Marc Aronson), an annotated further reading list, a list of illustrations that discusses historical accuracy, and an encyclopedia of terms used and people mentioned. It takes on that fine, fine, line and walks it well. Kate Monster would be proud.

So remember how much you appreciate those little identifying labels inside the box of chocolates. Indicate intention. Let the reader in on your secret. Trust them with it, in fact. Confide in them, and invite them along for the ride.

Tanya Lee Stone is the author of nonfiction for young readers, including Almost Astronauts *(Candlewick) and* The Good, the Bad, and the Barbie *(Viking). Forthcoming books include a book about the first black paratroopers in WWII,* Courage Has No Color *(Candlewick).*