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Non-Fiction Books and Related Web Sites for Elementary and Middle School Classrooms

Mary Ellen Van Camp

Non-fiction books fulfill important roles in elementary and middle school classrooms. They can be used to extend study beyond traditional textbooks, and they often are the link to encouraging children's interest in reading about the world at large. For elementary teachers and students who are looking for high quality non-fiction or informational books for classroom use, there are many outstanding titles from which to choose. In the content areas of science, social studies, and language arts, the wide-ranging field of books for children offers many appealing titles that will extend study beyond the traditional classroom textbook and appeal to many young readers. The following titles are merely a sampling of those available for teachers and students who wish to extend their reading and learn more about the world at large. For classrooms that have internet access, the reader also will find a listing of web sites that are related to each of the book's topics, content, and creators.

Orphan Train Rider: One Boy's True Story by Andrea Warren

In this well-researched non-fiction book, Warren recounts the true story of Alton Lou Clement, who traveled from an orphanage in Watertown, New York in 1926 to become Lee Clement Nailling, the adopted son of Ben and Ollie Nailling in Manchester, Texas. Lee Nailling's story is especially

moving because he reveals his feelings of loss when he is separated in childhood from his sister and several brothers. The reader also will see Lee's joy at finding and being reunited with some of his brothers again in 1984. In addition to the information about Lee Nailling, the author also presents brief stories of the lives of several other orphan train riders. Warren's book is notable because, in addition to the evocative personal stories, it provides an overview of the problem of homeless children in New York City and elsewhere over a period of nearly eighty years. Warren presents historical information about the Children's Aid Society, directed by Charles Loring Brace in New York City, and explains how he began the "placing-out" program that led to the American orphan trains. The orphan trains and their riders make for interesting, multifaceted research. This book won several awards, including the 1996 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for Non-Fiction.

Ellis Island: Gateway to the New World by Leonard Everett Fisher

In *Ellis Island*, prolific author and illustrator Leonard Everett Fisher provides an historical account of the most famous immigration center in the world. From the 1890s to the 1950s, 15 million immigrants to America passed through the gates of Ellis Island in search of a better life for themselves

and their families. Fisher recounts their journey and reveals their fears as they were examined to determine who was fit to enter the country. Millions of living Americans can trace their family lines to ancestors who arrived in this country via Ellis Island. Fisher tells the island's story with actual photographs from the National Park Service historical collection and with his own inimitable scratch boards.

The Buck Stops Here: The Presidents of the United States by Alice Provensen

The Buck Stops Here is a clever and marvelously detailed book about the terms of office of all of the U.S Presidents. While the original hardcover edition of this title, published in 1990, ended with the election of George Bush, there have been two updated versions published in paperback, one in 1997 and another in 1999, to include the Clinton years. Written and illustrated by Caldecott medalist Alice Provensen, the book provides a wealth of historical information about each president's accomplishments. Through the information, the reader sees the development of the presidency, the westward expansion of the United States, and the wars and political battles that have plagued our country, along with the great American achievements of our history. Provensen used interesting artistic motifs to capture the spirit of each leader's life, as well as the historical events that shaped the terms of office. For example, Franklin Roosevelt was an avid philatelist, and his presidency is portrayed through a postal stamp motif. Jimmy Carter's pages include peaches and peanuts, and Ronald Reagan's terms are revealed via a movie marquee motif. With the publication of the two recent editions, Provensen's intention to keep the book current is evident, and perhaps we can anticipate another update once the presidential election of 2000 is decided.

Catastrophe! Great Engineering Failure—and Success by Fred Bortz

This well-researched informational book provides readable explanations of some famous engineering failures and successes. The failures, of

course, have made news around the world—for example, failures during the Johnstown Flood, failures during the 1989 Los Angeles earthquake, and the Challenger explosion—but the successes are seldom acknowledged. Bortz describes several tragic events which have made news and explains what went wrong in each case. He then points to similar cases, such as the more than 60 year history of the Golden Gate Bridge, in which the engineering has proved successful. He identifies how the failures have increased concern for public safety and led to engineering design improvements. The illustrations by Gary Tong are very helpful in understanding the basic engineering concepts discussed in each chapter. The book is useful for upper elementary and middle school students in the study of both scientific concepts and historical events.

The Solar System by Seymour Simon

This outstanding informational book for middle and upper elementary grades contains charts, drawings, and text by Seymour Simon, along with photographs from NASA to introduce the Solar System to young readers. The text focuses on important conceptual information to help students understand relative distances between planets and the sun, specific characteristics of each planet, and some of the elements of space exploration. The end pages provide charts with information about each of the planets, including such items as the average distance from the sun, number of known satellites, equatorial diameter, and surface gravity in comparison to Earth. The book would be an excellent supplementary text or source of reference for a science unit on the solar system.

Flight: The Journey of Charles Lindbergh by Robert Burleigh, illustrated by Mike Wimmer.

Charles Lindbergh made his historic solo flight across the Atlantic in 1927, and it has been the subject of many books and an outstanding Jimmy Stewart film. But Burleigh and Wimmer's book is a remarkable visual portrayal which, though intended for young readers, will capture the fancy of older readers as well. In *Flight*, Mike Wimmer

reveals the superb illustration style that has led him to the creation of other award-winning books. Wimmer's variety in the use of perspective shows the reader the relative size of Lindbergh's plane in comparison to the man who flew it, and the oppressive darkness that made it so difficult for Lindbergh to stay awake at times during his 39-hour flight. Burleigh's text is simple and direct, and uses repetition to emphasize the distance and significance of the flight for its time. The flight made Lindbergh an international hero and, more than seventy years later, his vision and daring inspire hope for others.

Ruth Law Thrills A Nation by Don Brown

The flight described in this wonderful non-fiction book is not as well-known as Lindbergh's trip across the Atlantic, but readers will delight in reading about the pilot, who established an important record of her own, more than ten years before Lindbergh's famous flight. Ruth Law tried to fly from Chicago to New York in one day. It was quite an undertaking in 1916 for any pilot. Unfortunately, she had to use a well-worn and heavily modified stunt plane because the owner of Curtis Manufacturing, the leading producer of airplanes at the time, refused to sell a new plane to a woman. Ruth Law failed in her flight attempt, but still managed to set a record for the longest flight achieved in one day at that time by any pilot. She was just one of many female pilots who would set significant flight records during the early history of aviation.

Links to Web Sites for Further Study

Orphan Train Riders

<http://www.cc.ukans.edu/carrie/kancoll/articles/orphans/>

This web site provides specific, detailed historical information and newspaper articles about many orphan train riders. It includes their experiences before, during, and after their trips from New York to their new locations. While the web site focuses on Kansas, it also includes information for other locales as well. The web pages were developed by

Connie DiPasquale and Susan Stafford at the University of Kansas.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/amex/orphan/index.html>

This web page relates to the PBS Orphan Train documentary from the American Experience series. The page describes the TV presentation and provides links to a bibliography, a program script, and a teacher's guide so that the program may be studied in greater detail, possibly as part of an historical thematic unit.

Ellis Island Home Page

<http://www.ellisland.org/>

The Ellis Island and Statue of Liberty Home Pages are developed and maintained by the National Parks Service. They provide useful information about the history and significance of these icons.

Facts About The United States Presidents:

George Washington to Zachary Taylor:

<http://www.historybuff.com/presidents/facts1.html>

Millard Fillmore to Theodore Roosevelt:

<http://www.historybuff.com/presidents/facts2.html>

William Howard Taft to William Jefferson Clinton:

<http://www.historybuff.com/presidents/facts3.html>

There are many web pages devoted to collections of information about the U. S. Presidents, as well as pages with information about each president individually. A basic web search is recommended for any teacher or student who is researching a particular president.

The Nine Planets: A Multi-Media Tour of the Solar System

<http://seds.lpl.arizona.edu/nineplanets/nineplanets/nineplanets.html>

This award-winning web site by Bill Arnett offers a wealth of scientific information which would enhance any instructional unit related to its topics.

Charles Lindbergh: The Flights

<http://aa.stanford.edu/~Lind/overview/flights.html>

A basic web search will identify many web sites devoted to Charles Lindbergh and his wife, author and aviator Anne Morrow Lindbergh, the famous Lindbergh kidnapping case, and the career of their daughter, author Reeve Lindbergh.

Ruth Law

http://www.mcet.edu/nasa/redesign/nof_notable/
<http://totalbaseball.com/player/lore/stengel.html>

Ruth Law is not so famous as Lindbergh, and a search for information about her will require resourcefulness. The first site listed here identifies her as a pioneer aviator. The second site focuses on Casey Stengel, but mentions Ruth Law and indicates that some of the famed Brooklyn Dodgers, including Stengel, flew with Law on various occasions.

Web Sites for Author and Illustrator Information

In searching for author and illustrator information on the web, it is important to remember that web sites are in a constant state of change, development, and editing to keep them current. Some of the authors and illustrators identified in this article did not have available web sites at the time of the writing of this article. However, they may have web sites or pages provided by their publishers in the future. Thus, if there is an author or illustrator you would like to know more about, a basic web search is advisable.

Each of the web sites listed below provides information about the lives, careers, and books created by these authors and illustrators. Each of the links was operational at the time of the writing of

this article, but author and illustrator web sites tend to change quickly as authors change publishers and as new books are marketed. Thus, if you find links that no longer work, try a basic web search for current information.

Dr. Fred Bortz

<http://www.cherryvalleybooks.com/DrFred/>

Leonard Everett Fisher

<http://www.lib.uconn.edu/DoddCenter/ASC/children/lfisher/fisherep.htm>

Alice Provensen

http://www.sos.state.il.us/depts/library/programs/kids/ia_prove.html

Seymour Simon

<http://www.users.nyc.pipeline.com:80/~simonsi/about.html>

Mike Wimmer

<http://www.plcmc.lib.nc.us/find/bios/wimmer.htm>

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About the Author

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