



Article

Children's Nonfiction, Biography, and Their Responsibilities to Children

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Abstract: A debate over whether children's nonfiction should "speculate" was launched in 2011. Understood within the context of changing demands on children's nonfiction, it reveals a contested construction of childhood and suggests that the rules of critical engagement might be different in different genres of children's nonfiction.

Keywords: children's literature; children's nonfiction; Russell Freedman; Marc Aronson; critical engagement; speculation; historical writing; biography; innocence; vulnerability

In this special issue, we are taking as our focus the construction of childhood, that potent concoction of mis/readings and mis/remembrings that join creatively, influentially, and often disingenuously to define who children are and how they should be treated. For the next several pages, I want to look for the mechanisms and consequences of that construction in a brief but feisty debate between authors of children's nonfiction at an especially potent moment in the history of both childhood and children's nonfiction. This debate illuminates how those authors constructed an imagined reader.

The two main characters in this debate were Marc Aronson, who in 2011 penned an article championing what he saw as a new kind of nonfiction,¹ and Russell Freedman, whom he characterized as one of the chief practitioners of an increasingly stodgy nonfiction. To illustrate the difference between the two kinds of nonfiction that he alleged, Aronson focused on a word that Freedman had once used to describe an approach that he said should be avoided in children's nonfiction: "speculation". For Freedman, that word signaled a violation of the truth that he felt writers for children were trusted to respect; for Aronson, an aversion to speculation betrayed a lack of willingness to share with young readers the newest information and the excitement of exploring newly discovered information while it was taking shape. He called on the field to embrace speculation, with all the rights, responsibilities, and dangers that come with being someone who "explores" new discoveries rather than simply "translating" them for young readers. As the debate unfolded in the following months, even as the positions became muddy and participants became defensive, the distinction that emerged became a conflict over the definition of childhood and the responsibilities that an adult writer of children's nonfiction owed to the child they imagined.

1. The Historical and Ideological Context

The "speculation" debate took place within and drew importance from a larger conversation about the role of nonfiction within the ecosphere of children's reading.

The definition of *nonfiction* was itself deeply embedded in that larger conversation. Although *nonfiction* might reasonably be taken by someone outside the children's literature industry to mean any text primarily intended to convey information, in the critical and professional discourse, it came to refer to a kind of book that had a specific profile in the marketplace. In the years leading up to and following Aronson's 2011 article, *nonfiction* came to mean a book about information that originated in the trade market, not the education market. Some writers use the word *trade* as part of the longer phrase *trade nonfiction*,² but most take for granted that readers will understand that the origins of such books



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are trade publishers rather than textbook publishers.³ Indeed, it is commonplace to talk about the “integration” of nonfiction into curricula that already use textbooks,⁴ implying that nonfiction is something beyond the routine, school-board-approved informational materials. *Nonfiction*, when used in the context of children’s literature, has therefore come to mean trade books about information, especially as contrasted with textbooks.

In 2011, debates about American children’s nonfiction were especially significant. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which had only recently come into effect, suggested a list of goals for compulsory education across the nation, including a section on “Informational Text” under the standards for English Language Arts.⁵ As Kathy G. Short wrote in “Building Our Capacity to Teach with Nonfiction”, the CCSS suggested “a 50/50 split between informational and literary texts starting in kindergarten, gradually increasing to a 70/30 split in high school”.⁶ Although the CCSS were never unanimously embraced in American classrooms, they sparked educational attention to nonfiction.⁷ With this increased attention came higher stakes for authors of children’s nonfiction, who faced a dramatically increased need for their work.

Alongside these uncommonly high stakes for nonfiction, the conversation around nonfiction in 2011 often implied a new set of demands for the genre. Although the grownups most invested in children’s nonfiction still emphasized the importance of presenting reliable facts, nonfiction at this time was asked to give something more than pure information. As Short wrote about nonfiction being written to meet the needs fostered by the CCSS, she argued that “These books are not just a source of facts for children’s research but a place to critically consider and discuss different perspectives and broader societal issues. This view is a significant shift in thinking about the use of nonfiction in classrooms and puts a focus on inquiry and conceptual understanding, rather than fact-finding”.⁸ Two of the terms that were key to Short’s assertion, *critical* and *inquiry*, became ubiquitous across educational theory about children’s nonfiction from at least the 1990s,⁹ and they remain so up to today.¹⁰ No one would ever argue that factuality was unimportant in children’s nonfiction, but by the time of Aronson’s essay, the ability to foster a way of thinking, a habit of supporting children as they practiced inquiry, was emerging as an increasingly important component of the genre.

2. Speculation and the Destabilization of Knowledge

Aronson’s article, titled “New Knowledge”, leveraged that shift in expectations to make a point about what information the authors of children’s nonfiction ought to provide and how they ought to source it. “Once upon a time”, wrote Aronson, “the facts, ideas, and insights” in nonfiction for young people “were securely based on existing adult research”. The task of professionals writing informational texts for children had been to act as what Aronson (not *exactly* disparagingly) called “translators”, “whose job was to take the work of adult writers—who had the training and time to pore over primary sources or conduct field and lab experiments—and make this settled knowledge engaging and accessible to younger readers”. In contrast with this older role, Aronson called himself and other authors of a newer style of writing “explorers”. Such authors “set out to discover new knowledge, even as it is taking shape”, bypassing what Aronson labeled the “filters” of writers of nonfiction for adults. “We believe young people will enjoy being with us where knowledge takes shape”, he explained, “however parlous and fraught with possible error that may be”.¹¹

This first brush with what Aronson dubbed a newer model of nonfiction introduced key elements of the two styles of nonfiction that would resonate throughout the debate. First and most obviously, nonfiction by “explorers” claimed to share facts not securely based on research previously published in adult nonfiction.¹² Aronson went on to praise Phillip Hoose’s *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice* as an example: Hoose tracked down Colvin herself for insights and details unavailable elsewhere.¹³ Aronson also offered his own *If Stones Could Speak* as an example. That book included a new consensus “chronology for Stonehenge” produced by competing teams of researchers. Aronson actually witnessed the chronology being “hammered out” by leading, competing researchers in person, and he

published it first himself. In other words, Aronson wrote, “for the next year or so, the only place (and I mean *only*—no academic paper, no textbook, no adult book) where a person can find a printed, vetted source with up-to-date information on the sequence of building at Stonehenge is in a book written for young readers”.¹⁴

This willingness to include original research became the aspect of “new” nonfiction around which much of the subsequent debate revolved, but, at least in this inciting essay, it was only one part of Aronson’s larger vision. It would be more accurate to say that “speculation”, as he came to characterize the work of “explorers”, involved destabilizing the information shared with young people, a broader concept to which Aronson alluded in his comment about inviting children to the places “where knowledge takes shape”, even when the information that develops in such places may be “parlous and fraught with possible error”.

This idea of destabilized information had already been implicit in the wider discourse about nonfiction that supports critical engagement. In a subsequent article examining how teachers might use Aronson’s adaptation for children of an adult work of nonfiction about the search for a historical source for John Henry,¹⁵ Kristy A. Bruger praised the book as an ideal “mentor text” to show young readers how to engage with information in a process of inquiry. For example, she praised how the book explains the art of “using what one learns to ask the next question”, which she argued “models ways in which students may plan their inquiries as more in-depth and organic than simply asking and answering a static questions with a definitive answer”.¹⁶ She also celebrated the author’s first-person presence in the narrative of discovery disclosed by the text. She pointed to how as that author goes about “gathering and reading these data, he describes his consistent vetting and evaluating of what he knows and understands”.¹⁷ In his 2011 article, Aronson encouraged writers of this brand of nonfiction to “invite our readers to think with us”,¹⁸ and he praised the *Scientists in the Field* series for exactly this kind of invitation: “The point of the books is not just, or even mainly, to give you well-stamped-out results”, he explained. “Rather it is to engage the reader in how those results are obtained—with the knowledge that new discoveries and ideas are sure to follow”. For Aronson, the series prioritized what he called “process”, or, as he put it elsewhere on the same page, “showing readers how they swam through a sea of stuff and found a way to dry land”.¹⁹

Aronson’s speculation argument, therefore, matched up well with a growing sense in children’s nonfiction that the genre had a remarkable potential and perhaps even obligation to, as I put it in a 2018 monograph on children’s nonfiction, “invite” critical engagement.²⁰ The research presented in such nonfiction would often be original, as adult writers for children modeled the practice of seeking out new information to supplement or even overturn the old. The questions asked would not be teleological; they would, at each stage, set up another query. The presentation of information would include a sense of narrative in which inquisitive minds encountered uncertainty and experimented creatively with paths through that information to find conclusions that were held with a mixture of confidence and the expectation that new information would require new conclusions. To the extent that Aronson’s “speculation” model of nonfiction treated information as something in flux and treated the presentation of that information as transparent and thoughtfully reflective rather than highly polished and closed, he had his finger on the pulse of the larger conversation about how nonfiction could be used in the age of Common Core.

3. The Backlash to “New Knowledge”

Aronson’s position was, therefore, not especially controversial; however, he had long established a reputation as something of a firebrand, and the children’s literature professionals reading his 2011 essay would have been familiar with that reputation, likely anticipating more of the same. In 1996, for example, he published a complaint in *School Library Journal* about his disappointment over the lack of an award for literature written specifically for teens. Although the American Library Association had launched awards for books for the youngest readers generations previously, no such award had yet been

established for the young adults who formed the upper range of children's literature. Aronson declined a more measured reaction, talking about the ALA's continuing decision not to create an award for teen literature as "devastating", reminding him, he wrote, "for the thousandth time that we systematically ignore teenagers and the literature written for them".²¹ The title of his essay decried "The Betrayal of Teenagers", and he concluded with a call to arms: "Wake up America, before our consistent marginalizing of teenagers marginalizes us".²² This 1996 essay is just one example of many: for those who enjoy a powerful argument punctuated by provocative language, an article by Aronson published in a trade journal for children's literature was a sure thing.²³

His 2011 article lived up to his reputation. As Myra Zarnowski and Susan Turkel explained in a summary and reaction to the speculation debate, this piece was "a lightning rod of an essay".²⁴ Zarnowski and Turkel observed that the article "caused quite a stir among nonfiction authors", with the "immediate response" that other writers in the field were "hostile, hurt, and somewhat angry. Authors whose books did not explicitly detail their processes of seeking out information, shaping it, and speculating on it resisted the implication that their work was 'old' style nonfiction".²⁵ "In short", they concluded, "no authors wanted their work to be seen", as one writer involved in the debate put it, "as 'old hat.'"²⁶ Aronson had characterized writers of nonfiction for children in what he saw as the older model as providing partially digested knowledge for children rather than navigating new knowledge, and, perhaps with a sense that the general tide in educational theory had turned against purely informative nonfiction, many writers resented the implication that they belonged to that classification. Aronson wrote two follow-up blog posts to clarify his position, deal with the backlash, and occasionally fan the flames.²⁷

One of the main critiques of Aronson's article had to do with how he singled out Russell Freedman, an icon of children's nonfiction, as an example of what Aronson dubbed the older, less adventurous style. Barbara Bader—a foundational historian of children's literature, editor of children's nonfiction, and Editor-in-Chief of the influential *Kirkus Reviews*—defended Freedman at length in a *Horn Book* article later that year,²⁸ and Jim Murphy—a renowned author of children's nonfiction who, only the previous year, had won a career achievement award from the American Library Association for his nonfiction—complained in a blog post on the website *Interesting Nonfiction for Kids* that Aronson had been unfair to Freedman.²⁹ Freedman himself replied to Aronson's article with a letter protesting he had long been writing children's nonfiction in the "explorer" vein and that Aronson had misrepresented Freedman's use of the term "speculation".³⁰ This reaction, too, may have been part of Aronson's point in choosing Freedman as the face of the nonfiction that he was condemning: Freedman, by 2011, was a deeply beloved author of children's nonfiction, and extended criticism of his work was very likely to provoke a loud defense. Freedman also demonstrated in 1999 that he paid attention to the content of *Horn Book* with another angry letter protesting another criticism. That 1999 criticism led to the 2002 interview in which he used the term "speculation", so there is every chance that Aronson knew of that letter and, therefore, knew that Freedman would not suffer a public criticism in silence.³¹ Finally, I have credited Freedman's 1987 biography of Lincoln, the first work of nonfiction to win the prestigious Caldecott award in more than forty years, with touching off a renaissance of American children's nonfiction that predates even the CCSS.³² A critique of Freedman was a critique of the person who had deeply influenced the state of children's nonfiction in which Bader, Murphy, and Aronson all operated, and it was a critique virtually guaranteed to provoke an angry response.

Aronson's choice of Freedman was, therefore, in part in keeping with his reputation as a firebrand within the children's literature community, but it was also in keeping with the larger debate about children's nonfiction, inquiry, and critical engagement. Although children's nonfiction is a large field that includes books about science, mathematics, anthropology, and virtually every other field of research, Freedman built his career almost exclusively on historical nonfiction. Many subgenres of children's nonfiction have been called upon to foster inquiry, but the various disciplines that fall under what compulsory

education sometimes refers to as “social studies” had by 2011 become the disciplines in which critical engagement was most often championed. That trend probably began in the early 1990s when Samuel S. Wineburg published multiple essays popularizing the idea of “thinking like a historian”.³³ Over the years, other fields would adopt the idea of detailing how a professional in their field approached information, and the term “disciplinary thinking” broadened the point that Wineburg made, but *thinking like a historian* remained a cornerstone of the effort to foster critical thinking by children. In 2001, Wineburg solidified his point and his position as the leader in this area with his monograph *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*,³⁴ and in 2011, the same year as Aronson’s essay and the subsequent outrage, Wineburg co-authored a teaching supplement named *Reading Like a Historian*.³⁵ In that 2011 text, Wineburg wrote about his fascination with “the specific challenges that historical texts posed to young people, and what prevented them from reading these texts more critically”.³⁶ He identified himself “as a researcher into historical cognition” who was “most interested” in “the way stations of skilled historical practice”, those engagements with evidence in which information is less stable, “the false starts, the half-baked ideas, the wild goose chases”.³⁷ Aronson’s critique of Freedman was, therefore, more potent, more threatening, because it accused Freedman, a professional who provided historical nonfiction to children, of writing about history in a way that was out of touch with a growing call for such books to engage in what Aronson called speculation.

4. Freedman’s Response

There is an argument to be made about to what extent and in what situations Freedman invites young readers to the project of critical engagement,³⁸ but our topic here is the construction of identities in the speculation debate, so I want to turn now to a close reading not of Freedman’s books but of his response to Aronson and the comments he made about speculation in the years leading up to 2011. In Aronson’s essay, he reached back to an interview with Russell Freedman, who used the word “speculate” to describe what nonfiction for children should *not* do. Aronson recalled,

In a 2002 interview in the *Horn Book* with Roger Sutton, Russell Freedman—one of the field’s most skillful and generous translators—spoke of his reluctance to “speculate” in his books: “Digging up new information and speculating on it isn’t your primary purpose when you’re writing a biography intended for young readers. . . . Your responsibility is to stick as closely as possible to the documented record”. He left the entire game of guesswork and conjecture to experts and adult books. That is the line of difference [between explorers and translators].³⁹

Here, Aronson focuses on one aspect of speculation through his focus on Freedman as the prototypical translator. The quotation from that 2002 interview does state very plainly that “the documented record”, which Aronson takes to mean the record established by adult authors writing for adult audiences, retains an authority with which the author of children’s nonfiction should never conflict. Whatever polemics might be at work in Aronson’s essay, and whatever protests Freedman mounted in the months following that essay, this quotation from Freedman’s earlier interview does seem to be unambiguous evidence, indicating that for Freedman, searching for new information and then meditating on it without the filter of previously vetted perspectives oriented within the discourse of adult nonfiction is anathema to the work of nonfiction for young readers.

In a closer analysis of Freedman’s published opinions on speculation, however, the coherence of Freedman’s position becomes more complicated. Those opinions can be found, as Aronson notes, in that quotation from his 2002 interview, but they can also be found elsewhere in that interview, in other writings from across his illustrious career, and, in one case, even after the publication of Aronson’s essay. In a letter replying to Aronson’s article, Freedman rejected most of Aronson’s claims. According to Freedman, the work of speculation was not new in children’s nonfiction, and he argued that it could be found throughout his body of work. Still, his defense indicated a narrower understanding of

the implications of what Aronson meant by *speculation*. Freedman concluded the letter by writing,

I continue to believe that books of history and biography should offer the motivation of a compelling story and the pursuit of and respect for the documented historical record—something that cannot be taken for granted by anyone, least of all today’s young readers, who can find plenty of speculation, conjecture, and guesswork on the internet and in our media environment, where it is not always easy to determine when facts end and speculation begins.⁴⁰

Although most of the letter made the case that the “new” techniques that Aronson championed could be found throughout Freedman’s oeuvre, this conclusion was almost a paraphrase of Aronson’s original complaint about Freedman. Whereas Aronson (and the rising tide of inquiry-oriented education theorists) called for joint exploration with child readers of process and evidence, Freedman insisted in this passage on motivating readers to pursue and “respect” settled knowledge. Freedman’s reply even suggests that “today’s young readers” are especially poorly positioned to engage with destabilized knowledge. The final phrase, “when facts end and speculation begins” doubles down on Freedman’s allegiance to settled knowledge and asserts a firm division between information and the understanding of information that enables an ideologically pure project for writers of children’s nonfiction.

5. The “Special Responsibility”

Here, we begin to touch on how the contending visions of children’s nonfiction are embedded in a specific and highly fraught construction of childhood. In the project that Freedman sets out for children’s nonfiction, an unbiased, transparent author serves tidy information to children whose vulnerability will not be threatened by knowledge that is still up for debate and that might contain elements that are wrong. That vulnerability is implicit in his concerns about “today’s young readers” who are under constant threat from the contemporary “media environment”, but it has been explicit in other comments he has made on children’s nonfiction, including as early as 2000, in a keynote address at the Hubbs Children’s Literature Conference at the University of St. Thomas. There, Freedman explained a unique burden that authors of children’s nonfiction bear:

Writing history for young readers imposes a special responsibility. Your book may be the first they have ever read on that particular subject. It may linger in their minds and imaginations forever after, coloring their view of the past, influencing their understanding of the present. That’s why a deceptively simple book for children can have an impact on the future that few adult best-sellers can.⁴¹

In the same year that he made these statements in his keynote address, he also articulated them in a letter to *Horn Book*, reflecting on what he called “my responsibility to my impressionable young readers”.⁴² This vision of children, one likely descended from John Locke,⁴³ characterizes children as malleable, as blank slates awaiting indelible inscription. Because Freedman endorses this construction of childhood multiple times across his career, it is fair to assume that this construction is key to his understanding of how children’s nonfiction should operate. Because Freedman has been a trend-setting figure in children’s nonfiction for more than 40 years, it is reasonable to assume that this construction is also deeply embedded in children’s nonfiction.⁴⁴ It is a construction that the speculation debate specifically highlights, as, despite all its heated language, the debate does ultimately rest on a conflict between Freedman’s belief in a “special responsibility” to protect children and Aronson’s belief that “young people will enjoy being with us where knowledge takes shape—however parlous and fraught with possible error that may be”.⁴⁵

To those who have not been following academic discourse about children’s literature, this conflict might seem surprising, especially given how familiar the concept of childhood vulnerability has become. That construction of childhood has held a central place in Western culture for centuries, but it is a construction that has come under heavy attack in

literary and cultural studies. James R. Kincaid is probably the writer most associated with this attack, beginning with his 1992 study of how the cultural construction of childhood innocence led to the cultural construction of childhood vulnerability in Victorian England,⁴⁶ and later in his 1998 study of how that vulnerability has contributed to policies and practices that have harmed both children and adults.⁴⁷ Kincaid's central point is that adults have fostered the construction of children as a way of serving adult needs rather than the needs of actual children and that an emphasis on vulnerability in children routinely leads to cultural structures that disempower children and set them up for failure. Perry Nodelman similarly finds an insistence, first, that children are malleable and, second, that it is the duty of children's literature to mold them to be continuous with "repressively manipulative mechanisms" aimed not at serving real children but reinforcing a status quo that serves adults.⁴⁸ Indeed, Nodelman goes so far as to suggest that adults—and he is writing here notably about children's literature professionals—insist on this construction of childhood because doing so upholds "the power and authority" of grownups.⁴⁹ In 2011—again, the year of the speculate debate—Robin Bernstein published *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, in which she argued that the Lockean innocence that has held such power over American imaginings of childhood carries with it an assumption of whiteness. Therefore, Bernstein claims, the American version of this vulnerable child protected the white child it imagined at the expense of imagined versions of black children, such as the "pickaninny", a term used in the nineteenth century to denigrate black children. "As childhood was defined as tender innocence, as vulnerability", she writes, "and as the pickaninny was defined by the inability to feel or to suffer, then the pickaninny—and the black juvenile it purported to represent—was defined out of childhood".⁵⁰

To be clear, I am not accusing Freedman of racist portrayals of children or disingenuously strategizing for the power of adults at the cost of children. I am, however, pointing out that the "special responsibility" of nonfiction, as articulated through Freedman's philosophy of nonfiction and that has proved financially viable through his trailblazing career, is founded on a construction of childhood that is of a piece with manipulation and oppression, one that has extensively been argued to contribute to a structure in which children are marginalized. That construction is highlighted by the speculate debate.

6. The Special Place of Biography in Critical Engagement

It would be narratively satisfying at this point to turn my argument to point to how Aronson's side of the argument, the one that calls on writers for children to open spaces for the "parlous" work of critical engagement, similarly rests on a construction of childhood, which, of course, it does: it rests on a construction of children as capable of navigating conflicting information, doing the work that historians do, and being both willing and able to hold one thought and then reject that thought when better evidence presents itself. But there is no revelation here: whereas the anti-speculation perspective takes for granted a definition of childhood that has held power for centuries, the pro-speculation perspective understands that it is making the case for a different vision of childhood. "We believe young people will enjoy being with us there where knowledge takes shape", as Aronson writes,⁵¹ stating both that his proposal requires belief, meaning that he anticipates it will clash with the current construction of childhood, and what that believed-in child will look like, meaning that he anticipates that it will be unfamiliar enough to require description.

However, there is another subtler dimension of identity construction exposed by the speculate debate, one that is unique to how subject positions are imagined in children's nonfiction. A major component of the speculate debate was the extent to which authors of children's nonfiction felt justified in performing their own research when presenting a body of knowledge to their readers. The title of Aronson's article, "New Knowledge", referred to his perception that nonfiction writers working in the vein he preferred routinely provided their readers with information that was not yet, as he put it, "available in the adult world". He characterized the older style, the one with which he would associate

Freedman, as one in which “the writer would trawl through the resources of the wide world and bring back the stories, images, and characters” that had already been established in informational materials for adults. Children’s nonfiction authors in this mode would shape that information so that it was as engaging as possible for their young audience, but they would only present information that had “gone through the filters of general approval” by being published in trade nonfiction or peer-reviewed scholarship intended for adult consumers. For children’s writers working in the “explorer” mold that Aronson championed, however, the task was to go further, “gathering new insights on our own, or alongside pioneering experts [. . .] sharing new ideas—ideas adults don’t even know about yet”.⁵² He pointed to Freedman’s earlier statement that “Digging up new information and speculating on it isn’t your primary purpose when you’re writing a biography intended for young readers”⁵³ as evidence that “translators”, unlike “explorers”, would keep to the old ways of trawling existing research rather than finding their own.

Freedman and others protested this claim,⁵⁴ and a survey of his published comments on his own writing process demonstrates a long commitment to including original research in his books. In his response to Aronson, Freedman noted that in his recent biography of Lafayette, he read Lafayette’s personal correspondence in addition to reading what scholars had written about Lafayette.⁵⁵ In his interview with Sutton, he pointed out that he performed what he called “original research”, interviewing Eleanor Roosevelt’s grandchildren and reading her letters and columns for his biography of the former first lady, though he did so in the context of explaining that he would be reluctant to go about “speculating” on what he found.⁵⁶ In his keynote address for the Hubbs Children’s Literature Conference, he primarily emphasized the literary craft of nonfiction, but he also noted that “In addition to these narrative techniques, nonfiction benefits from another powerful ingredient: firsthand, eyewitness research. Whenever possible, I include such research in my work”.⁵⁷ The examples that he provided, however, again implied a search for information that provided depth rather than a conclusion that might go beyond those established in materials published for adults. For example, Freedman told his audience about how, when preparing for a biography of the Wright Brothers, he mentioned to the director of a historical park in possession of an early-century airplane that he had trouble visualizing how part of early airplanes worked. “[T]he next thing I knew I was lying facedown on the lower wing in the pilot’s position”, he recalled, “my hands on the controls, working the wing-twisting mechanism myself. That hands-on experience was quite a thrill, of course, and it helped me to convey to my readers just how the pilot navigated that early airplane”.⁵⁸

Obviously, these many examples of collecting information first-hand must qualify as gathering information directly, without reference to secondary materials intended for adults, but there is still something different about the kind of research Freedman describes. This tangling with primary evidence does not serve the purpose of inviting young readers to interpretation. If anything, it further solidifies information. As Freedman notes, it supports the process of “convey[ing]” information, not destabilizing it. In the 2002 interview, Freedman told *Horn Book’s* editor that “A biography for young people calls for the demanding art of distillation, the art of storytelling, and your responsibility is to stick as closely as possible to the documented record”.⁵⁹ This statement is nearly synonymous with Aronson’s accusation: what Aronson would dub translating, trawling, and shaping, Freedman calls distillation and storytelling well within the bounds of the information that has already been documented, though enlivened by insights gained first-hand.

Still, there is a subtler point to be made here. When Freedman explained his original research, he did so not within the context of researcher, as did Aronson, or the context of the broader debate about inquiry and critical engagement, but in the context of Freedman’s sense of his responsibilities as a *biographer*. In all of the examples above in which he called attention to his original research, he was explaining a research process that brought him into better attunement with his biographical subject. Reading the letters of Lafayette and Roosevelt helped him understand them better, and in physically inhabiting the space that an early-century aviator occupied in an airplane contemporaneous with the Wright

brothers, he better understood the physical experiences of Orville and Wilbur. Aronson was not wrong that in doing this sort of research, Freedman translated history for his young audience rather than providing them a space in which to think like a historian, but it might be that a more nuanced explanation of Freedman's philosophy is that it calls for a researcher whose work explores vertically, not horizontally: through a first-hand process of research, the biographer portrays biographical subjects with greater depth and shading, more robustly. In this light, Freedman's explanation of his philosophy takes on a new meaning. "A *biography* for young people", we might read this quotation, with new emphasis and a bit of paraphrase, calls for distillation guided by an *understanding of the subject*, a sort of storytelling that is guided by a deep *knowledge of the primary character*, an examination *animated by a faithful representation* of what existing primary and secondary sources permit.⁶⁰ Aronson is right that the information remains stable, that the process of thinking like a historian is erased from the final draft but in place of a horizontal exploration beyond the established record is a vertical excavation that is characterized by a rigorous exercise of original research.

7. Conclusions

The critical context for the speculate debate called for an increase in invitations for children to practice engaging critically with information. Aronson's framing of different philosophies of nonfiction as older and newer probably concerned professional writers of nonfiction for children who feared being seen as part of a fading generation,⁶¹ leading to a short but dramatic outcry. Russell Freedman's protests were intended to prove that his philosophy of nonfiction provided the kind of nonfiction that Aronson championed, but a close analysis of his arguments does not bolster his claim. Still, it is possible that inquiry will often take on a different shape in this specific subgenre of children's nonfiction, where the construction of the historical subject requires a certain care that speculation is not committed to respect. I do not think that the kind of inquiry called for by the larger critical conversation and the speculate debate is impossible in children's biography,⁶² but it is possible, given Freedman's influential example, that we will have to look for invitations to critical engagement in biography in ways that take into account how an investment in a deeper character changes the ways that readers can explore.

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Notes

¹ (Aronson 2011, pp. 57–62).

² See for example (Wendt et al. 2018).

³ See for example (Sanders 2018, p. 8). See also (Smith and Robertson 2019). See also (Hollins and Schlessinger 2024).

⁴ An especially explicit example comes in the Introduction to a recently edited collection of theory and advice for teachers considering nonfiction. (Yenika-Agbaw 2018, pp. 1–3).

⁵ For an example of the attention to such texts in the CCSS, see <https://www.thecorestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RI/8/>, accessed on 26 June 2024.

⁶ (Short 2018, p. xiii).

⁷ See (Kersten 2017). See also (Crisp et al. 2021, pp. xv–xxi).

⁸ (Short 2018, p. xv).

⁹ For an explicit example, see (VanSledright and Kelly 1998). Samuel S. Wineberg had earlier used "cognitive processes" as the broader term for the activities that came to be called "critical engagement" and "inquiry", and sometimes the terms overlapped, for example in (Wineburg 1991b).

¹⁰ See for example (Pérez-Martínez and Muela-Bermejo 2024).

¹¹ (Aronson 2011, p. 57).

- 12 I recognize, of course, that “writers of adult nonfiction” and “writers of scholarship” are not synonymous terms, that whereas all writers of scholarship are adults writing a kind of nonfiction for other adults, not all nonfiction for adults is scholarship. However, whereas that distinction is perhaps significant to the readers of *Literature*, it was not a significant distinction to Aronson in his essay that touched off the debate under consideration, and all of the writers who contributed to the debate in the following months accepted his implication that the phrase “adult research” and its various cognates included within its reach both what I might call “scholarship” and “nonfiction”. Because my essay is situated within that debate and focused on reading the assumptions undergirding that debate, I will reproduce Aronson’s imprecise elision in my own essay.
- 13 (Aronson 2011, p. 59; Hoose 2009).
- 14 (Aronson 2011, p. 59).
- 15 (Nelson and Aronson 2008).
- 16 (Brugar 2019).
- 17 (Brugar 2019, p. 158).
- 18 (Aronson 2011, p. 58).
- 19 (Aronson 2011, p. 60).
- 20 (Sanders 2018).
- 21 (Aronson 1996).
- 22 (Aronson 1996, p. 25).
- 23 His 2001 book about teens and reading contains many further examples, and Patty Campbell’s 1997 article in *Horn Book* recalls similarly pitched comments he made at a 1996 panel. (Aronson 2001; Campbell 1997).
- 24 (Zarnowski and Turkel 2012).
- 25 (Zarnowski and Turkel 2012, p. 28).
- 26 (Zarnowski and Turkel 2012, pp. 28–29).
- 27 These posts were originally posted on 11 and 12 March 2011 on the website of a different journal than the one in which he published his inciting essay, and they have sadly been deleted from that journal’s current website design. However, the archival site The Wayback Machine still retains a version of these posts, though they are difficult to read in their current format. Determined readers can find them at <https://web.archive.org/web/20120525015150/>, accessed on 26 June 2024; <http://blog.schoollibraryjournal.com/nonfictionmatters/2011/03/11/speculation-and-debate-responses-to-my-hb-article/>, accessed on 26 June 2024; and <http://blog.schoollibraryjournal.com/nonfictionmatters/2011/03/12/speculations/>, accessed on 26 June 2024.
- 28 (Bader 2011).
- 29 (Murphy 2011), <http://inkrethink.blogspot.com/2011/03/line-of-difference.html>, accessed on 26 June 2024.
- 30 (Freedman 2011).
- 31 (Freedman 2000b).
- 32 (Sanders 2018, p. 150).
- 33 Perhaps the two most influential of those essays were “On the Reading of Historical Texts”, mentioned above, and (Wineburg 1991a).
- 34 (Wineburg 2001).
- 35 (Wineburg et al. 2011).
- 36 (Wineburg et al. 2011, p. x).
- 37 (Wineburg et al. 2011, p. xi).
- 38 And I have already made that argument in an extended reading of photography in Freedman’s work, pp. 150–75.
- 39 (Aronson 2011, pp. 57–58).
- 40 (Freedman 2011, p. 124).
- 41 (Freedman 2000a, p. 19), “Bringing”.
- 42 (Freedman 2000b, p. 4).
- 43 Locke expressed this construction of childhood in many places, but it can be found clearly (and offensively) in the fifth point of the second chapter of *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, published in 1689.
- 44 Indeed, a potent articulation of the “special responsibility” argument is the point of another article in the same issue of *Horn Book* in which Aronson published “New Knowledge”: (Stone 2011).
- 45 See note 11 above.
- 46 (Kincaid 1992).
- 47 (Kincaid 1998).
- 48 (Nodelman 2008, p. 157).

- 49 (Nodelman 2008, p. 169).
- 50 (Bernstein 2011, p. 20).
- 51 (Aronson 2011, p. 57), “New Knowledge”.
- 52 See note 51 above.
- 53 For the original quotation, see Sutton, “Interview”, p. 697.
- 54 See (Freedman 2011), Murphy, and Bader.
- 55 (Freedman 2011), No. 4.
- 56 Sutton, “Interview”, pp. 696–97.
- 57 (Freedman 2000a).
- 58 (Freedman 2000a, p. 20), “Bringing”.
- 59 Sutton, “Interview”, p. 697.
- 60 Here I paraphrase Sutton, “Interview”, p. 697.
- 61 Zarnowski and Turkel have already made this point, pp. 28–29.
- 62 Brugar’s study is of a biography, after all, and my book repeatedly finds invitations to critical engagement in biographies. Too, Aronson pointed to Hoose’s biography of Claudette Colvin as a successful exercise in exploration.

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