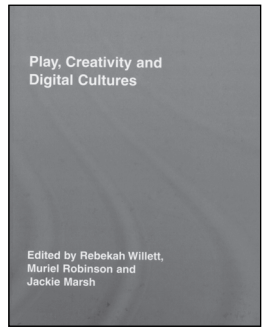
Children's Reading Today and in the Future: Igniting Their Passions and Engaging Their Interests

Martille R. Elias, Rebecca Rogers, E. Wendy Saul, Lawrence R. Sipe, Jennifer L. Wilson, and Karen E. Wohlwend

To understand what young children are reading today, we have to extend our appreciation of children's reading beyond traditional school literacies. Often, the reading practices that children encounter in school represent only a small range of the countless ways in which students engage meaningfully with texts. Recent reports indicate that children are reading less literature than they have in the past. Are children reading less overall, or is it simply that the texts they read are changing?

The reviews in this column reflect the complexity of the issue at hand: Who is reading and what is being read? The review of *Play, Creativity, and Digital Cultures* edited by Rebekah Willett, Muriel Robinson, and Jackie Marsh examines how children's interactions with digital media influence their multimodal literacy development. It also addresses ways for teachers to connect children's love of new media to classroom practice. In keeping with the theme of new literacies, the second entry in this column is not a book review, but rather a website review. INK: *"Interesting Nonfiction for Kids"* is a website that seeks to encourage children's reading of nonfiction. This site includes commentary by nonfiction authors and aims to spark young readers' interest in nonfiction texts. This is a particularly salient issue as the concern that children are reading less is perhaps exceeded only by the concern that readers have abandoned nonfiction altogether. The next title, *Embracing, Evaluating, and Examining African American Children's & Young Adult Literature* edited by Wanda Brooks and Jonda McNair highlights the importance of including rich, culturally diverse literature in the classroom. If we are to engage all readers, then children of all cultures, ethnicities, and races should be able to see themselves in the literature of our classrooms. The final title reviewed in this column is *Readicide: How Schools Are Killing Reading and What You Can Do about It* by Kelly Gallagher. This book challenges educators and administrators to consider how policy and curriculum are extinguishing children's passion for books. Gallagher asserts that the only way to create readers is to give them books that matter and teach them to read deeply.

Educators want children to love reading. Yet even those most concerned about the preservation of books and traditional reading have to recognize that children today need a range of reading experiences both in process and content. Young readers need to engage in the kind of reading that interests them most, whether that is digital, print, or paperback books. Perhaps the question of who is reading and what they are reading can't be explored in full until we start including, recognizing, and valuing an extended definition of literacy.



Play, Creativity and Digital Cultures

Edited by Rebekah Willett, Muriel Robinson, and Jackie Marsh

Routledge, 2009, 243 pp., ISBN 978-0-415-96311-4

In expanded definitions of literacy, reading includes creative interactions with the digital media we encounter in a 21st-century global landscape. Rebekah Willett, Muriel Robinson, and Jackie Marsh's edited volume shows that play is uniquely suited for creative uses with new media technologies; the shape-shifting quality of play

makes it a prime means for manipulating identities and meanings in video games, blogs, video- and photo-sharing sites, and social networks.

However, we still know relatively little about the ways that young children play with new media or the ways that "play itself is repurposing and embedding technology in meaningful everyday practices" (p. 2). The authors offer much-needed critical perspectives on the complicated tensions among play, creativity, and digital worlds. The chapters in this collection avoid a common tendency to "romanticize or domesticate" play (p. 179). Rather, the studies in this book investigate children's digital play as complex cultural activity subject to multiple, contradictory interpretations: as agentic creativity, as a neutral tool that fosters technology skills, as pleasure in a zone insulated from adult control, or as ideological practice that enables social exclusion.

The book is organized into three sections that explain different aspects of digital play in relation to intertwined processes of consumption, production, identity, representation, and regulation. Part I takes a producer's perspective on "commodified contexts" to examine the interactive flow of influence between global industries and play cultures. Meanings and power converge in commercial texts, made visible in gamers' critiques of a cola ad's use of World of Warcraft elements, in the uses of anime in marketing international cartoons, and in YouTube parodies that appropriate and redistribute the power of the original commercial text. Part II considers children as consumers of media, looking at the ways popular culture shapes their identity enactments in contexts ranging from MySpace profiles to backyard play. Part III reveals how understandings about play and creativity are constructed and represented by children through game-making digital photography and online composing in blogs.

Connectedness is a thread that weaves through the chapters. Play in online contexts simultaneously produces complexity and fluidity of meanings. For example, Margaret Mackey shows that children's "thick play" and "slippery texts" allow layered meanings in their fanfiction to signal multiple film narratives. The social utility of connectedness is evident in chapters in which children create memes in Facebook and Flickr, use hypertext to link blogs, and import film themes into their backyard play. Victoria Carrington's analysis of rapid dissemination of photographs through cell phone photography shows that sharing—photo-sharing, commenting, and hypertexts in blogs and social networks—is a way of "signposting" to others the skills and practices that are valued in participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*).

The nuanced analyses of play across a broad range of new technologies make this book a valuable resource for researchers, teacher educators, and graduate students who are interested in multimodal literacy and New Literacy Studies. Jackie Marsh's chapter will be of particular interest to classroom teachers who seek to create "productive pedagogies" that connect children's out-of-school digital play to literacy curricula. Marsh's study of a classroom blogging project identified physical and discursive barriers to digital play that will be familiar to many teachers: from regulatory firewalls that prohibit access to blogging websites to child development concerns that "set up engagement with technologies and "real" play as oppositional," typical of "frequent, negative reactions some adults express towards changing childhoods" (p. 208). However, the blogging project provided equitable access and rich opportunities for creatively linking multiple media texts and for connecting to competencies and problems beyond the classroom. (KW)

I.N.K.: Interesting Nonfiction for Kids (http://inkrethink.blogspot.com)

www

I believe in books—not only books for students, but also carefully conceived and well-edited books for educators. Publishers rely on organizations like NCTE to review their publications and are honored by being selected; frankly, they need such attention to stay in business. Thus, it is with mixed emotions that I choose to review a website rather than a book in this column. But this site—actually it's a blog called "Interesting Nonfiction for Kids" (INK) found at http://inkrethink.blogspot.com—does such an excellent job of keeping readers current and engaged in the world of informational reading that it deserves our attention.

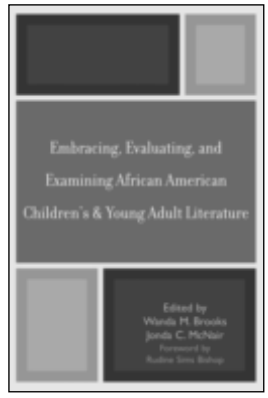
A rich menu of options greets the visitor. Read chronologically: notes from the many popular

authors sharing their latest thoughts; a retrospective from Jean Reynolds, highly regarded publisher of children's nonfiction; the latest about new titles and the stories behind their creation; posts from other thoughtful educators who have something to say about their own and their students' reading. The architecture of the site lets you easily follow an individual author (makes setting up an author corner or giving a book talk easy!) or a subject of interest. You or your students can explore current trends in nonfiction, browse new titles, or link to other sites concerned with informational reading.

Since 2008, Linda Salzman, the blog's originator, has invited some of the best informational storytellers to talk about their writing practices: how they choose topics, gather facts, disentangle ideas, and learn from interesting graphics. Others—teachers, librarians, and readers one and all—are invited to comment. Salzman began contacting close to 40 writers she admired, asking them if they would consider joining the blog; at first, 15 of them said, "Yes." After a few weeks, people started asking if they could join. Her goal is to make the site a community forum, a place for exchanging ideas and possibly influencing the direction of how editors and others in the publishing industry view nonfiction. The posts are smart and witty, energetic and useful, and always filled with "voice." Author Deborah Heligman, for instance, talks about the value of being nosey and provides personal examples that make Harriet the Spy look like an amateur. Thinking about setting up a classroom museum? Your students can read an entry on writing lively labels by science star Vicki Cobb. And if you like what she said, check out her new video series (linked right on the site). Tanya Lee Stone, author of this year's *Boston Globe–Hornbook* Award for her newest title, *Women Who Dared to Dream,* talks about what she calls "American Heroes Behaving Badly" and the art of putting difficult knowledge into context.

What undergirds all of these fascinating details is a respect for and a love of what authors can do through books. Stone addresses the issue directly: Educators one and all, we don't really think that an Internet search on a topic can replace the book, do we? . . . On the Internet, to be sure, one can learn a little bit about a lot of things. But it takes the skill and craft and research and patience and love of a writer dedicated to learning every possible piece of a story to put it together with context and meaning in a way that kids will find engaging. "And why do we do it? I think it's because we are compelled to. We are driven to find out why, what was the motivation, what else was going on behind the scenes, who else was involved, how else could this be viewed, and what does it all mean as we try to make sense of this vast world and hand our small part in it over to kids. It's a passion." If you're interested in learning more about the authors who take on this passionate task, I can think of no better place to begin than the INK site.

One caveat—please don't let students believe that this is the complete panoply of excellent nonfiction authors; greats like Seymour Simon, Jean Craighead George, Milton Meltzer, and Russell Freedman should not be forgotten. Still, with just a click of the mouse, you and your students can join a community of really smart, funny, and experienced writers as they reflect on and make evident the thorny pleasures and inspiring difficulties of writing excellent nonfiction for young people. (WS)



Embracing, Evaluating, and Examining African American Children's & Young Adult Literature

Edited by Wanda M. Brooks & Jonda C. McNair

The Scarecrow Press, 2009, 262 pp., ISBN 978-0-8108-6027-8

This carefully edited volume adds significantly to the professional and scholarly body of work concerning African American literature for children and young adults. Wanda Brooks and Jonda McNair, both professors in schools of Education, have assembled an impressive array of scholars from the fields of Education, English, and English Education to contribute to this 12-chapter exploration of many of the issues surrounding African American texts for children and teens, which they define as "books intended for youth that are written by and about African Americans" (p. ix). Though this definition excludes some excellent texts (such as Gary Paulsen's *Nightjohn*), the virtue of this approach is that it allows the editors and authors to concentrate on a cleanly demarcated body of literature.

The book is divided sensibly and usefully into three sections: textual analysis; research on reader response to the texts; and pedagogical approaches. It thus would appeal to a wide range of academic and practical interests, including practitioners in elementary, junior high, and secondary schools; and scholars from the fields of English, Education, and Library Science. I applaud the editors for taking this broad approach, because I believe that those of us who are professionally interested in literature written for children and young adults tend to employ a limited range of theoretical lenses, and that this volume can positively expand our knowledge of the ways in which this literature can be approached. This book will, I hope, open up conversations among people from a variety of disciplines; the resulting sharing will be enriching for everyone.

Though the great majority of chapters are concerned with contemporary texts, there are a few essays with a historical perspective. McNair's chapter compares and contrasts the themes in *The Brownies' Book,* W. E. B. Du Bois's short-lived but influential foray into a periodical intended for "children of the sun," with books by Patricia McKissack, thereby combining the historical with the contemporary. Michelle Martin discusses the children's poems and novels of Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes. The contemporary category includes what Rudine Sims Bishop (author of the Foreword) calls "canonical African American writers such as Mildred Taylor and Walter Dean Myers" (p. vii). I was a bit surprised to see Virginia Hamilton's name mentioned only once, in KaaVonia Hinton's chapter on neo-slave narratives (in connection with *The House of Dies Drear* and *Anthony Burns: The Defeat and Triumph of a Fugitive Slave*). Other well-known and upcoming authors such as Christopher Paul Curtis, Sharon Draper, Jacqueline Woodson, and Rita Williams-Garcia figure prominently. The emphasis is on novels; few picturebooks are mentioned in any of the chapters. The genres of the novels are mainly realistic fiction, historical fiction, and biography.

The set of chapters on response and pedagogy include Nina Nilsson's useful review of research on reader response to African American children's literature; descriptions of out-of-school reading clubs with various age groups (in chapters by Kimberly Parker and Susan Browne); and Peggy S. Rice's analysis of preservice teachers' reactions to Jacqueline Woodson's *The Other Side.* Space prevents me from mentioning all of the chapters; however, what I have highlighted gives an idea of the range covered by the book. It is this range that will make the book an interesting and much-needed addition to the personal libraries of newcomers to the field of children's literature, as well as those with more advanced knowledge. I can also envision the book's use as a text in a course on African American children's literature or multicultural literature in general. (LS)

Readicide: How Schools Are Killing Reading and What You Can Do about It

Written by Kelly Gallagher

Stenhouse, 2009, 166 pp., ISBN 978-157110-780-0

I just returned from a year visiting secondary schools in Norway, a country that buys the most books per capita and has, combined with its Scandinavian neighbors, some of the highest scores in international tests of literacy. With their low emphasis on standardized tests, high rate of bilingual speakers, and finances that have been reappropriated to give schools with high numbers of immigrant students more money to spend on resources, the Norwegian secondary schools are offering a model of equitable and effective education. Norway is also known for historically advocating for human rights. This experience, combined with their strong model of education, is what drew me to Kelly Gallagher's *Readicide: How Schools Are Killing Reading and What You Can Do about It.*

In *Readacide,* Gallagher accuses US schools of systematically "killing the love of reading" (p. 2) by teaching to the test, over- and under-teaching the canon, and by offering a lack of interesting reading materials to students. In chapters one and two ("The Elephant in the Room" and "Endangered Minds," respectively), he lays out his argument for readicide by highlighting statistics like:

- 87% of American adults are incapable of performing complex literacy tasks.
- 3,000 US students with limited literacy skills drop out of school every year.
- One in four secondary students are unable to comprehend their textbooks.

Through personal stories from his own classroom, Gallagher provides a window into the lives of secondary students as they are inundated with media

influences that often exacerbate the problem. Due to the culture of Internet and text messaging, he argues that students are not given the opportunity for deep reading, the kind of reading necessary to both help them become educated citizens and give them a chance to wrestle with and make sense of adulthood. However, teachers who are teaching to the test and using short passages to help students score better on state and national standardized tests are contributing even more to the shallow reading habits students are exhibiting. Gallagher suggests that teachers need to help students gain stamina for longer texts through self-selected independent reading and the teaching of novels.

Gallagher believes that teaching the canon is important, so he devotes a chapter each to how not to over-teach a novel ("Avoiding the Tsunami") and to under-teaching a novel ("Finding the 'Sweet Spot' of Instruction"). These two chapters, though seemingly contradictory, highlight the close refinement secondary teachers must struggle to maintain daily as they work to meet their students' needs. Gallagher highlights specific examples of how he teaches such novels as *1984, The Grapes of Wrath, Hamlet, Animal Farm,* and *To Kill a Mockingbird.* He suggests avoiding massive amounts of sticky notes, preferring instead to highlight for the students the relevant aspects of the novels that connect with their lives.

In the final chapter, "Ending Readicide," Gallagher offers suggestions on "flooding" students with rich texts that are not only relevant to students, but will provide them opportunities to become immersed in interesting texts that build their reading stamina, their background knowledge, and their love of reading.

Though a bit redundant in places, Gallagher provides teachers statistics that back his argument about readicide and suggests ways to prevent it in their own schools. Throughout the text, Gallagher offers an explanation on how he diverges from Nancie Atwell's (2007) *The Reading Zone,* and references his own work, *Reading Reasons* (2003) and *Deeper Reading* (2004). *Readicide* is a companion to those works, but does something more. It gives teachers strong research support to become advocates for the prevention of readicide in their own classrooms. (JW)

Martille Elias is an assistant professor and **Rebecca Rogers** is an associate professor in the College of Education at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Together, they serve as coeditors for the *Language Arts* Professional Books Review department for Volume 87. **Karen E. Wohlwend** is an assistant professor in Literacy, Culture, and Language Education at Indiana University, Bloomington. **E. Wendy Saul** serves as the Allen B. and Helen S. Shopmaker Professor of Education at the University of Missouri-St Louis. Her recent work focuses on the literacies of science. **Lawrence R. Sipe** is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, where he teaches courses in children's and young adult literature. Dr. Sipe is the current North American editor of the journal *Children's Literature in Education.* His research focuses on kindergarten, first- and second-grade children's responses to picture books. **Jennifer L. Wilson** is an assistant professor of Language and Literacy and Middle Level Education at the University of South Carolina. She was recently a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Oslo, Norway. Her research focuses on adolescent literacy.

CEE Awards Announced

A number of awards were presented by the Conference on English Education at the NCTE Annual Convention in Philadelphia. **The 2009 James N. Britton Award** for Inquiry within the English Language Arts was presented to Penny Kittle, *Write beside Them: Risk, Voice, and Clarity in High School Writing* (Heinemann, 2008). **The 2009 Richard A. Meade Award** for Research in English Education was presented to Carol Booth Olson and Robert Land, "A Cognitive Strategies Approach to Reading and Writing Instruction for English Language Learners in Secondary School" (*Research in the Teaching of English,* February 2007). **The 2009 Janet Emig Award** for Exemplary Scholarship in English Education was presented to Anne Whitney, Sheridan Blau, Alison Bright, Rosemary Cabe, Tim Dewar, Jason Levin, Roseanne Macias, and Paul Rogers for their article, "Beyond Strategies: Teacher Practice, Writing Process, and the Influence of Inquiry" (*English Education,* April 2008). **The 2009 Cultural Diversity Grants** went to Erika Martinez for her proposal, "Creating a Literate Culture through Place-Based Writing in the Dominican Republic," and Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz for her proposal, "Reading, Writing, and Racism: First-Year Composition as a Space for Critical Discourse." **The 2009 James Moffett Award** for Teacher Research was presented to Wren Hayes and Elizabeth Whittington, Virtual Learning Academy Charter School, Exeter, New Hampshire.