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Book Review

A Literature of Questions: Nonfiction for the Critical Child by Joe Sutliff Sanders, 2018. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. ISBN: 978-1-5179-0301-5

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A Literature of Questions aims to fill a gap within research on children's non-fiction by providing an aesthetic analysis of individual moments in which texts facilitate critical engagement. Writing from within the field of children's literature, Joe Sutliff Sanders sets out to chart a relatively unexamined area of research and provide a set of critical lenses that researchers and educators can use to analyse, evaluate and teach nonfiction for younger readers. His aim is to develop "a theory of the genre that is grounded in aesthetics, but whose ramifications are hardly limited to form" (6) because they point to existing debates within contemporary classrooms in the United States of America.

A Literature of Questions is divided into nine chapters. The introduction and conclusion bookend the discussion, situating it within the field of children's literature studies and gesturing to how it might contribute to the field of educational research more generally. In the introduction, Sutliff Sanders justifies the focus and scope of his study with reference to existing scholarship and offers definitions of two key terms: nonfiction and criticality. The first key term, nonfiction, is defined in contrast to textbooks, as a literature written and marketed as pleasurable rather than edifying to individual children and parents. The definition of the second key term, criticality, is grounded in an appreciation of Paulo Freire's work on 'critical pedagogy' that is sustained throughout the book. Alongside Freire, Sutliff Sanders draws on work by Joe Kincheloe, Myra Zarnowski, Roland Barthes and Avon Crismore to argue for children's nonfiction being a literature of questions rather than answers. While the focus of his study is of great interest to researchers in children's literature and education, the aim is possibly a little too ambitious for a single study. Consequently, he is unable to engage with literary and pedagogical theory simultaneously to the extent that the topic deserves, leading to a concern that a theory of children's nonfiction is not clearly established.

The first chapter fleshes out more fully the argument for children's nonfiction being a literature of questions by arguing that "a literature of facts cannot be a literature of critical engagement" because it produces "a reading relationship between book and reader in which the book ushers in truth and the reader meekly receives what the book says without questioning" (45). Within this discussion, there are some interesting suggestions linking criticality to nonlinear thinking, creativity and role-taking through the work of Anne Haas Dyson and Julie Martello. However, these are not explored in further detail. The next four chapters examine specific aesthetic features in the light of this argument, beginning with narratological features and then moving onto structural elements. In this way, Sutliff Sanders examines narrative voice, character construction, peritexts and photographs in children's nonfiction before moving onto explore issues of reliability and empathy more generally in the last two chapters.

In each chapter, questions of authority and critical engagement are examined in relation to a selection of primary texts that cover a variety of subject areas, publication dates and intended audiences. Most of these texts are probably unfamiliar to non-American audiences, but Sutliff Sanders justifies his selection by arguing that a close analysis of them helps "advance the

conversation about nonfiction” (10). Indeed in the fifth chapter, his discussion on the use of photographs in Russell Freedman’s *Lincoln: A Photobiography* (1987) sensitively explores how children’s nonfiction can augment or undercut the authority of a photograph through a close and sustained analysis of examples from the text. In particular, Sutliff Sanders draws out how nonfiction might support readers in asking questions by making, “the photograph opaque, thereby asking us to think about it as a photograph, as something taken and shaped and therefore shot through with perspective, intention, imperfection, and bias” (137). Like the other chapters, this chapter begins by engaging briefly with key theorists to sketch out a broad understanding of the aesthetic feature before focusing on existing literary and pedagogical research related to the manner in which young people might engage with it. From here, the second half of the chapter involves a close and sustained reading of two or three primary texts. While this has the potential of showing how these aesthetic features might stimulate critical engagement, it limits the scope and reliability of the study because it focuses on a narrow selection of primary texts that are predominantly historical nonfiction.

As an initial foray into the field of children’s nonfiction, Sutliff Sanders’ book works well to open up the debate by drawing attention to how a handful of aesthetic features might shape young readers’ engagements. In particular, some of the terms included provide a valuable resource for researchers and teachers. In Chapter Two, the terms hedges, visible authors and necromancy are introduced as a means of analysing the relative authority of narrative voice in children’s nonfiction. Through his use of these terms, Sutliff Sanders suggests that if the narrative voice’s authority is subverted, nonfiction has the potential to invite young people to consider the processes of knowledge generation within a discipline as well as the known content. However, the discussion treads a fine line between being an aesthetic analysis that cannot make claims about readers’ responses while wanting to suggest how readers might respond. We would recommend reading this text alongside the work of scholars who have conducted empirical research on using nonfiction in the classroom. While reading through *A Literature of Questions*, we kept coming back to the focus on critical engagement in the light of our experience of teaching young people: Is it possible to have a literature of questions without it also being a literature of facts? Can it ever be one without the other?

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