

## 5

# The Significance of Topics of Orbis Pictus Award-Winning Books

**Elaine M. Aoki**

Bush School, Seattle, Washington

The designation of an award is evidence of something unique. Orbis Pictus Award-winning texts and honor books are distinguished from other nonfiction works by their presentation and treatment of topics and issues. Examining an award-winning text with a critical eye allows us to view the many facets of the work. Each facet, however, forms but a small part of the total image. We see the “individualness” of detail, but only when we combine all the parts and envision the entire work are we able to form a final critical assessment of the value of the contribution. Key among Orbis Pictus Award Committee concerns when assessing books are the following: What is the potential impact of this text? Is the presentation “timeless,” enabling the reader to draw analogies to other events occurring in different contexts? What is the relationship of the subject to contemporary concerns? And, finally, to what extent does the text enlighten, enhance, or illuminate curricular issues? Consideration of such elements allows committee members to identify a text as one exhibiting that special potential to stimulate the interest, curiosity, and imagination of the young reader.

## **Defining Significance**

What makes a topic significant? Are significant topics found only within designated “factual” genres such as biography, history, and science? Readers evaluate the significance of a text in light of their experiences. What makes a work significant is the degree to which the subject is part of a collective social consciousness and whether the text is accessible at precisely the right time in the life of a reader or, as in the case of the committee, a community of readers. A literary work becomes significant because the reader is able to make a timely connection to the text, fulfilling a need, which in turn leads to satisfaction. A feeling of excitement accompanies the discovery of a “significant” contribution. The reader may be led to wonder (almost

enviously, perhaps!) how the author managed to create such an exemplary work.

Significance is a dynamic variable in the committee's decision-making process. It can change with time and shifting social priorities. An example of such a shift in social priorities is our thinking about the reality of African slavery and its complex, far-reaching legacy. Not surprisingly, during the nineteenth century and in fact up through the period of the civil rights movement, few honest accounts of the evil effects of slavery were available to the public and particularly to young people. In the nineteenth century, the economy of our nation benefited from the slave practice. In succeeding years, though the institution of slavery was outlawed, the American people were still not willing to openly acknowledge the cruel effects of the practice. The advent of the civil rights movement, however, changed the tide of public opinion about acknowledging the details of the slave experience and its aftereffects. The issue was now openly acknowledged and discussed in school textbooks. And as we advanced into the final quarter of the twentieth century, public acknowledgment permeated the trade books written for young people. As of this writing, there is a bill before the United States Congress advocating that a public apology for having supported, developed, and benefited from slavery be given to African American people. Now that the causes and effects of slavery have become part of our historical consciousness, well-researched nonfiction books for children that offer fresh viewpoints on the origins and effects of the "peculiar institution" would certainly be deemed "significant" contributions. Two such books are James Haskins and Kathleen Benson's *Bound for America: The Forced Migration of Africans to the New World* (1999), an Orbis Pictus recommended book for 2000, and Walter Dean Myers's *At Her Majesty's Request* (1999), an Orbis Pictus honor book for 2000.

Whether or not a subject rises to a level of importance in the eyes of readers is an even more complex issue than it first appears. It involves consideration of the broad subject categories that make up nonfiction literature, exemplified by the arts, social science, or history. Readers must consider whether a variety of these areas, crucial for young readers' general learning and knowledge, is represented in the books singled out for distinction.

In examining the broad categories of past Orbis Pictus Award winners, we note that generally they represent at least one of four categories: science and mathematics, geography, history, and the arts. A brief analysis of the honor books for the ten-year period indicates that they are equally distributed within the three areas of science, history, and biography. One conclusion we can draw is that

---

---

we need more outstanding books in a wider range of nonfiction literature. Of course, next year or the year after, the committee might be presented with one or more extraordinary works that fall into categories not yet represented in the list of Orbis Pictus Award winners.

### **Impact: Considering the Power and/or Attractiveness of the Subject**

As committee members evaluate the multiple perspectives of the texts before them, it is necessary for us to be constantly aware of the larger framework of children's nonfiction writing. Original insight is certainly a factor for consideration. Inherent in the American ideal of freedom of expression is the right to approach an issue in more than one way.

When one designates a work as significant because of its contribution to the nonfiction field, to a certain degree that choice is always relative or subjective. We need only consider the case of M. D. Lankford's *Jacks around the World* (1996), a simple book on the child's game of jacks. In 1997, when this book came to the attention of the Orbis Pictus Award Committee, we were impressed with this small 7" x 7" text with its brightly illustrated double-spread pages focusing on the development of the game and how it is played around the world. The age range of the material was certainly within the framework for committee consideration and, in fact, it met most of the other criteria. But this book, which can be placed in the "game" category, ultimately was not selected for any award. While we felt that it made a substantial contribution to nonfiction in its provision of multicultural/international insights into the historical aspects of the universal game of jacks, Lankford's book still had to compete with other nonfiction titles published the same year. These included books by notable authors such as Rhoda Blumberg (*Full Steam Ahead: The Race to Build the Transcontinental Railroad*, 1996), Russell Freedman (*The Life and Death of Crazy Horse*, 1996), and Diane Stanley (*Leonardo da Vinci*, 1996). These authors utilized themes and focused on significant social contributions through unusual and creative accounts of (1) the transcontinental railroad (complete with photography by the National Geographic Society), (2) the American Indian warrior Crazy Horse, and (3) the brilliant Leonardo da Vinci. These subjects have over time been sanctioned and validated by historians, scientists, and educators as valuable, which adds substantially to their "significance" factor. The combination of a gifted author writing on a powerful or arresting subject is a potent combination. Unless educators eventually take a different look at games in the context of curriculum and world studies, the topic of jacks remains, in relative terms, less significant.

---

## The Timelessness of Presentation

The work of William Shakespeare has been revered since his own day not only because of the author's gifted and poetic writing, but also because of his ability to select themes, issues, and ideas that have remained "timeless" in terms of human concerns. This timelessness allows Shakespeare's plays to be performed in modern-day apparel in an urban setting as well as in sixteenth-century dress and settings. The innate versatility of his work allows it to remain relevant even though the world has changed dramatically over the past four centuries. Therefore, it is not surprising that among the outstanding titles selected by the committee for the year 1999 was the talented Alik's informational picture book *William Shakespeare & the Globe* (1999). The timeless topic and the attractive and informative presentation was a wonderful combination. Likewise, the theme of survival and endurance against unbeatable odds is also a timeless as well as a powerful concern. Thanks to the gifted writing and meticulous research of Jennifer Armstrong, *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World: The Extraordinary True Story of Shackleton and the Endurance* (1998) was selected as an Orbis Pictus Award winner.

Just as the experiences faced by human beings can have a timeless quality, giving them a universal significance, human beings throughout history have had similar reactions to reoccurring phenomena. Such is the case with our response to fire. Jim Murphy's *The Great Fire* (1995) immediately engages the reader's attention by focusing on an event that few would find lacking in drama or interest. In fact, the Great Fire of Chicago has stimulated so much interest over time that numerous myths have been generated about how this fire actually began. The most memorable by far is the one that attributes the origin of the fire to a lamp kicked over by Mrs. O'Leary's cow. Yet another story implied that Mrs. O'Leary set fire to her barn in revenge for having been removed from the city's relief rolls. In truth, there is no evidence to support either premise. In his book, Murphy removes the Chicago Fire from surrounding myth and places it within a factual setting, presenting information from multiple points of view. Murphy's account offers survivors' first-hand descriptions that appeared in newspaper stories. The reader becomes an invisible witness, walking the city streets, viewing the disaster from different perspectives, and ultimately learning of errors in judgment and rushes to judgment. Although the Chicago Fire took place on October 8, 1871, the subject retains a sense of drama. Jim Murphy's unique approach allows this event to transcend its nineteenth-century setting and stir the imaginations of twenty-first-century readers.

---

## Connections to Contemporary Concerns

Related to the notion of appealing to human interest over time is the concept of relevance—that is, how is a book related to contemporary concerns? History provides us with a record of events that illustrate a progression (or regression, as the case may be) of incidents that often explain a present-day phenomenon or show us how something familiar to us originated. The building of the transcontinental railroad, for example, is a precursor to today's rapid transport capabilities.

We are also at a point historically when it is important to highlight contributions made by various ethnic groups to the building of this nation. Jim Murphy's *Across America on an Emigrant Train* (1993) is not simply the retelling of Robert Louis Stevenson's 1879 journey across the Atlantic Ocean and the United States. It is also a narration of historically significant events such as the building of the transcontinental railroad, the impact of steam travel, the contributions of Chinese Americans to the building of the railroad, the histories of ethnic communities such as the Mennonites, African Americans, Native Americans, and others. Murphy's well-written narrative of Stevenson's journey culminates in a significant contribution to children's nonfiction and won the Orbis Pictus Award for 1994.

Exposure to quality books containing multiple perspectives helps young readers develop an understanding of the cultures, practices, and values of society. Taken further, such works often illustrate the skills needed to play a productive role in modern society. Jerry Stanley's *Children of the Dust Bowl: The True Story of the School at Weedpatch Camp* (1992), which won the Orbis Pictus Award in 1993, examines the contributions of Leo Hart to the education of homeless children. Stanley's depiction of perseverance and the importance of education as a way of escaping poverty offers an important model for young people as they seek to negotiate a world dominated by fast food and the demand for quick results.

The best nonfiction transcends the author's message and encourages the audience to branch out by reading more about the topic. We need to teach our young readers what is worth knowing; who is a reliable source; how facts are emphasized or ignored; whose sense of "normal" is evident in the description or recreation of events; whose perception of time and of pleasure or pain we are being offered (Saul, 1994, p. 7). In so doing, we can call attention to issues that have affected (and continue to affect) the contemporary populace.

## Connections to Curricular Issues

In *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* (1998), the American Library Association reminds us that students integrate new information into their current knowledge, drawing conclusions by developing new ideas based on information they gather and connecting new ideas with prior knowledge (p. 19). A well-written,

well-presented nonfiction work can assist in both stimulating interest in a previously unexplored area of study and enhancing preexisting knowledge. The Orbis Pictus Award Committee understands and appreciates the need for the continued support and strengthening of the school curriculum. It understands the powerful effect that materials available to young people can have on their learning. In this regard, we must consider the depth of knowledge apparent in a submitted work. We ask ourselves, Does this text add significantly to the body of literature already available on the topic? Does it “say (or illustrate) better” what we already have at hand? Is this a pioneering work on a subject about which nothing previously has been written for young people?

Dennis Fradin’s *“We Have Conquered Pain”: The Discovery of Anesthesia* (1996) is a case in point. During an age when technology has increased the type and number of surgical procedures, there is always concern about patient preparation and comfort level. Fradin’s book offers a fascinating look at the origins of anesthesia and demonstrates to young people just how far we have come in addressing the need to reduce pain during invasive procedures. This work also serves as a reminder to young people of the importance of the process of discovery in science, a factor all too often not fully appreciated by the young. Fradin highlights process in an engaging manner. He also shares fascinating insights on the influence that rivalries among scientists had on the development of anesthesia.

The study of weather is an important component of the science curriculum. The impact of El Niño and other recently publicized environmental phenomena is under constant scrutiny in the news and consequently in classrooms around the country. As a result of weather changes due to global warming, the world has experienced an increased frequency of violent storms. Therefore, Patricia Lauber’s book *Hurricanes: Earth’s Mightiest Storms* (1996), with its clear discussions of the forecasting capabilities of meteorologists and the potential for economic and social devastation caused by these storms, as well as the accompanying brilliant photographs of hurricanes, is a strong contributor to the body of knowledge available for young people on the subject.

Diane Swanson’s *Safari beneath the Sea: The Wonder World of the North Pacific Coast* (1994), winner of the Orbis Pictus Award for 1995, uses an engaging style to encourage interest in the deep waters of the North Pacific Coast. Swanson begins one chapter by stating, “Fish may not smell good but they certainly smell well” (p. 35). One can imagine a young reader reacting in amazement to the implications of this statement: “How can you breathe and smell through water?” Readers would certainly be fascinated by this “hook” and moved to keep reading. Swanson has an outstanding ability to reach

---

young people through clearly explicated text and magnificently photographed examples of deepwater life.

Orbis Pictus Award selections have been particularly strong in the genre of biography, which transcends subject-area designation. Students are often asked to conduct research on specific individuals. Therefore, it is important to provide books that offer new information about well-known people, as well as information about those who were previously, sometimes purposely, overlooked. Speaking of informational picture books, Patricia J. Cianciolo, author of *Informational Picture Books for Children* (2000), reiterates the need for nonfiction for young people that avoids romanticizing and fictionalizing (p. 21). Romanticized and fictionalized offerings do not make significant contributions to the field and in fact can be perceived as devaluing the capabilities of young people. Cianciolo acknowledges that the subject matter of a book such as Diane Stanley's *Leonardo da Vinci* (1996), the 1997 Orbis Pictus Award winner, is not for everyone because of the specificity of its subject matter: "I have little doubt it is one that will be enjoyed and appreciated and probably long remembered by those readers who are already interested in visual art or the 'great masters' or by those who are 'ready' for this kind of literature and need only that extra little nudge to be connected with it" (p. 23). She goes on to describe the attributes of Stanley's presentation and comments on issues the Orbis Pictus Award Committee also felt helped make this work so significant that it deserved to be honored as the Orbis Pictus Award winner for 1997:

Stanley's carefully written text details, but not too overwhelmingly for young readers, major aspects of da Vinci's successes and failures. His diverse talents as well as his human weaknesses are described. She makes quite clear his place in the history of art in general and his status and artistic accomplishments in relation to other noted artists of his time. Stanley's full-color, full-page paintings competently support and extend and make so much more concrete the specific paintings, frescoes, and sculptures discussed in the text. (Cianciolo, 2000, p. 23)

The committee has also found significance in works that, while they make an important contribution, may be controversial in their inclusion of subject matter deemed sensitive in educational contexts. Mary Pope Osborne, in her book *One World, Many Religions: The Ways We Worship* (1996), a 1997 Orbis Pictus honor book, effectively presents the topic of world religions not only from the perspective of the country of origin, but also through discussions of differences occurring when religions have been transplanted to other places and other cultures. For example, Buddhism is traced historically and explained from the point of view of its country of origin, India; however, Pope also contrasts Buddhism in India with Tibetan,

Zen, and Shin Buddhism. She explains the traditions and practices of Buddhism in present-day United States as well. Clearly, in a world of increased migration to places with different cultures and traditions, it is important to consider issues such as how religions are interpreted and practiced in different settings.

## Conclusion

Books selected for the Orbis Pictus Award and for special recognition have the potential to enhance the knowledge base of young people. These books also offer them opportunities to think about issues and topics in new ways. The Orbis Pictus Award acknowledges nonfiction authors' outstanding contributions and highlights books that encourage young readers to take a look at works offering unique and noteworthy presentations on topics of significance.

## References

- American Association of School Librarians, American Library Association. (1998). *Information power: Building partnerships for learning*. Chicago: American Association of School Librarians, American Library Association.
- Cianciolo, P. J. (2000). *Informational picture books for children*. Chicago: American Library Association.
- Saul, E. W. (Ed). (1994). *Nonfiction for the classroom: Milton Meltzer on writing, history and social responsibility*. New York: Teachers College Press.

## Children's Books

- Aliki. (1999). *William Shakespeare & the Globe*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Armstrong, J. (1998). *Shipwreck at the bottom of the world: The extraordinary true story of Shackleton and the Endurance*. New York: Crown.
- Blumberg, Rhoda. (1996). *Full steam ahead: The race to build the transcontinental railroad*. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society.
- Fradin, D. (1996). *"We have conquered pain": The discovery of anesthesia*. New York: McElderry/Simon & Schuster.
- Freedman, R. (1996). *The life and death of Crazy Horse*. New York: Holiday House.
- Haskins, J., & Benson, K. (1999). *Bound for America: The forced migration of Africans to the New World*. Illus. Floyd Cooper. New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Books.
- Lankford, M.D. (1996). *Jacks around the world*. New York: Morrow Junior Books.
- Lauber, P. (1996). *Hurricanes: Earth's mightiest storms*. New York: Scholastic.
- Murphy, J. (1993). *Across America on an emigrant train*. New York: Clarion Books.

- Murphy, J. (1995). *The great fire*. New York: Scholastic.
- Myers, W. D. (1999). *At her majesty's request: An African princess in Victorian England*. New York: Scholastic.
- Osborne, M. P. (1996). *One world, many religions: The ways we worship*. New York: Knopf.
- Stanley, D. (1996). *Leonardo da Vinci*. New York: Morrow Junior Books.
- Stanley, J. (1992). *Children of the dust bowl: The true story of the school at Weedpatch Camp*. New York: Crown.
- Swanson, D. (1994). *Safari beneath the sea: The wonder world of the North Pacific coast*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books for Children.
-