

## Evoking the World of Poetic Nonfiction Picture Books

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**Abstract** An increasingly prevalent and accessible form of hybrid nonfiction picture books blends factual information with poetry or poetic devices to create literary nonfiction. This important form of hybrid text has been sparsely examined. This article addresses three questions about poetic nonfiction picture books: first, how might we categorize picture books that represent this hybrid text?; second, by what criteria might we evaluate the quality of these books?; third, based in Rosenblatt's concept of reader's stance, how might we read these books? The author develops a typology of six categories along a continuum from poetry to narrative or expository prose. He examines well-established criteria in the fields of picture books, children's nonfiction, and poetry that can apply to poetic nonfiction picture books. He argues that in the best of these books, the poetry or poetic devices are synergistic with the content and raise the overall reading experience. The author also argues that, depending where along the continuum each of these books is located, a reader's stance moves along the continuum of efferent to aesthetic experience. All these books demand a dynamic and recursive reading process. He suggests ways to work with teachers to teach deep readings of these books.

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Flowers filled the valley. Bees and butterflies that fed on the flowers returned. Warblers sang. Hummingbirds brightened the valley. Like pieces in a kaleidoscope, the broken parts of the wilderness were tumbling into place. The wolves were back (unpaged).

In this passage from *The Wolves Are Back* (George, 2008), I learn that, now that the wolves are back, life is once again teeming in the Lamar Valley of Yellowstone National Park. In the co-dependency of nature, the wolves, as predators at the top of the food chain, have restored balance, starting with the flowers, then the birds, bees and butterflies that feed on the nectar. Concurrently, I also take in the beauty of Jean Craighead George's writing. I notice alliteration, the balanced phrasing of *bees and butterflies*, the vivid verbs—*filled, returned, sang, brightened, and tumbling*, the use of metaphor that compares the balance of nature to pieces in a kaleidoscope, the varied sentence lengths that establish rhythm and tone. These are all elements of craft that poets might use, which establish this writing as literary nonfiction. They fill the ideas that George is expressing with a sense of wonder and power: we can bring barren valleys back to life and restore our natural habitats.

### Locating Poetic Nonfiction Picture Books

Christine Pappas (2006) constructs genre within social semiotic theory. Thus, while genre defines a stable corpus of texts, with defining forms, structures, and features, it also is evolving and dynamic because of its existence in social contexts of meaning making. Within this construct, Pappas explains that hybrid texts are atypical constructs of a genre, a deliberate breaking with regularity. Hybrid texts involve “the juxtaposing of texts from other genres, where elements from different genres are incorporated or embedded within texts based in intertextual mixing” (p. 240). One hybrid nonfiction text that Pappas describes is the “poetic informational coda hybrid” (p. 243). A book such as *Water Dance* (Locker, 1997) defines this category, in which the main body of the text is an extended poem, followed by a coda that uses the more typical expository, information language register. Similarly, Duke and Bennett-Armistead (2003) use the term “informational-poetic” texts, such as *Beast Feast* (Florian, 1994), that “have purposes and characteristics of both all-about informational texts and poetry,” and acknowledge that these books are “not a perfect fit” for the category of informational texts (p. 36), implying their hybridity. Although unstated, the texts that Pappas and Duke and Bennett-Armistead use as examples are also picture books. In this paper, I deliberately look at this hybridity and present and analyze a much broader corpus of children's nonfiction picture books that integrates poetry.

Using textual analysis, I examine these books from the position of the reader and address the following questions. First, how might we categorize picture books that represent this hybrid text? Second, by what criteria might we evaluate the quality of

these books? Third, based in Louise Rosenblatt's concept of reader's stance (1994), how might we read these books?

### Defining Poetic Nonfiction Picture Books

An increasingly prevalent form of hybrid text is the convergence of children's nonfiction and poetry in the form of picture books predominantly for readers in grades K through 8, which I call poetic nonfiction picture books. Therefore, for this analysis, it was necessary to define three key terms in this hybrid text: poetic, nonfiction, and picture book.

The artful qualities of literary nonfiction are clearly present in *The Wolves Are Back* (George, 2008), discussed in the opening. Heald (2008) discusses the musicality in the language of some picture books, which includes rhythm, rhyme, pattern, repetition, assonance, consonance, alliteration, and onomatopoeia. Heald asserts: "The skilled picture book author is a master of prosody, capturing rhythms and stresses within simple sentence structures, producing language that lends itself to being read aloud" (p. 233). In addition to the musicality of language, my conception of poetics in children's nonfiction picture books was guided by other well-established poetic devices, such as figurative language and imagery. I was also guided by the visual dimensions of poetry, such as line breaks, stanzas, the use of white space, fonts and colors of words, and shapes of words and passages. These visual dimensions give poetry spatial information that readers must synthesize with the temporal information of reading the words for meaning construction (Thomas, 2007), and, as I will discuss, these were important aspects of poetry in some of the books I analyzed in which authors wrote poems or used lyrical, musical, poetic devices as at least part of the content.

In defining nonfiction, Russell Freedman, the award-winning children's nonfiction author, provides some useful guidelines: "Certainly the basic purpose of nonfiction is to inform, to instruct, hopefully to enlighten. But that's not enough. An effective nonfiction book must animate its subject, infuse it with life. It must create a vivid and believable world that the reader will enter willingly and leave only with reluctance" (1992, p. 3). I also relied on Penny Colman's (2007) succinct definition of nonfiction: "Nonfiction is writing about reality (real people, places, events, ideas, feelings, things) in which nothing is made up" (p. 260). As a noted author of children's nonfiction, Colman's definition appropriately considers author's intent. Philip Gerard (1996) asserts that the first obligation of a nonfiction writer is to tell the truth. "Every strategy, every dramatic convention, every selective choice must be employed in the service of making the story *more* not *less* truthful" (p. 5).

Based in Colman's advice, I also avoided the term *information*. Colman states: The term *information book* does not readily trigger associations with the variety of nonfiction books—biographies, history, true adventure, science, sports, photographic essays, memoirs, etc.—that are available and accessible for children and young adults and can be just as compelling, engaging, and beautifully written as good fiction. (p. 258)

Furthermore, Colman explains, when this term is presented as a dichotomy with fiction books, it misleads children into believing that, therefore, we do not read fiction books for information, when in fact many fiction books are filled with carefully researched and accurate information.

Kiefer and Wilson (2011) cite the categorization work of Lounsberry, who distinguishes nonliterary from literary nonfiction, explaining that literary nonfiction is “‘artful,’ characterized by exhaustive research, style, and the writer’s ability to enlarge our understanding of the world” (p. 292). Colman (1999) argues, “in order to write good fiction and good nonfiction it is necessary to employ many of the same literary techniques and to pay close attention to the narrative, structure, point of view, language, syntax, sequence, pace, tone, and voice” (p. 217). Thus, elements of style are important criteria for evaluating the quality of literary nonfiction.

Lawrence Sipe (2011) defines picture books as a form that has a synergy between and gives equal weight to both words and pictures. By *synergy*, Sipe (1998) means that “the total effect depends not only on the union of the text and illustrations but also on the perceived interactions and transactions between these two parts” (pp. 98–99) and is greater than either the text or illustrations alone. He explains that picture books are multimodal because they include three primary modes for constructing meaning, namely visual images, design elements, and written language. To emphasize this synergy, Sipe even blends the words as *picturebooks*. Sipe explains that because of the multimodal construction of picture books, readers oscillate between the visual, textual, and design elements “in a potentially endless process” (p. 106) of meaning making. Additionally, Kiefer and Wilson (2011) note that “illustrations and visual displays seemed to be essential elements of nonfiction for children from its inception” (p. 292). In some of the poetic nonfiction picture books that I will discuss, the details in the visual displays demanded intense oscillation across modes for my meaning making process. However, what is new in this paper is the typology I develop by paying most attention to the synergy between nonfiction poetry and prose writing, and to privilege this focus over a focus on the synergy of words and pictures, I chose to keep the term *picture books* as separate words.

### **Building and Analyzing the Corpus**

I conducted a comprehensive search for poetic nonfiction picture books. I first referenced children’s literature book awards from 2000 to 2011, focusing on children’s nonfiction picture books for grades K through 8. I consulted awards bestowed on the basis of quality (e.g., Orbis Pictus, Robert Sibert, and the Francis Stieglitz Award of Bank Street College) and on the basis of specific school content areas (i.e., Outstanding Science Trade Books for Children and Notable Children’s Trade Books in the Field of Social Studies), since these awards especially focus on children’s nonfiction. Resources included national teaching organizations (i.e., International Reading Association, National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)), organizations that focus on children’s literature (i.e., American Library Association, the Children’s Literature Assembly), and awards sites (often within

these organizations). Focusing on awards lists enabled me to quickly identify children's books that are accessible, well-received, and already recognized for their excellence (Yokota, 2011).

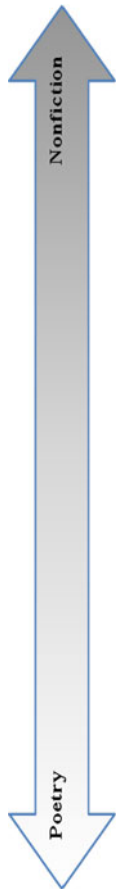
I narrowed this collection to the hybrid genre of poetic nonfiction picture books by considering the presence of poetry or the use of poetic qualities in the writing. The craft of writing in these books not only conveyed information in interesting and stimulating ways, but also deepened the meaning-making process through the use of lyrical overtones.

Concurrently, my focus on nonfiction criteria and books that were recognized by various awards committees for their excellence in content enabled me to exclude many outstanding poetry picture books about nonfiction topics. These books often lack the access features that Pappas (2006) calls informational codas, and while the poets certainly intend to entertain and to enlighten readers about a topic, they might not intend to inform or to instruct.

This gave me a collection of 51 books. I especially selected books that were recognized by two or more organizations, which reinforced their hybrid status. For example, *Dave the Potter: Artist, Poet, Slave* (Hill, 2010) was an Orbis Pictus Honor Book, the Coretta Scott King Award recipient, and a Caldecott Honor Book; *Dark Emperor and Other Poems of the Night* (Sidman, 2011) was a Newbery Honor Book, a notable book for Outstanding Science Trade Books for Children, and was recognized by several poetry awards committees. I kept an inventory of these books with the following categories: Author/Illustrator, Title, Summary/Notes, and Awards. I supplemented this collection with more books that fit this hybrid genre that were compiled and recommended to me by the children's book librarian at my college. Further, I included books by well-established authors in this hybrid genre, such as Diane Siebert, Thomas Locker, Ruth Heller, Jean Craighead George, and Ann Morris, who have also published books prior to 2000. However, even though Duke and Bennett-Armistead (2003) call books by Douglas Florian such as *Beast Feast* (1994) "informational-poetic" hybrid books, Florian uses anthropomorphism in his poetry. I also believe that he intends his poems to entertain more than to inform or to instruct. His books then do not fit the definitions of nonfiction by Freedman (1992) and Colman (2007) that I ascribe to, and I chose to not include his books in my corpus. With these supplements, I then had a collection of 76 books.

Then began the daunting task of developing a typology for these books. I relied on advice from Pappas (2006) to identify prototypical books and create categories based on "family resemblances" (p. 229). Specifically, I categorized books based on similar structural choices authors made for the use of poetry in their nonfiction hybrid texts. For this categorization work, similar to Pappas, I kept a matrix of structural characteristics for the use of poetry and prose to delineate each category as shown in Table 1. To validate my categories, I gave two colleagues two different sets of 18 books that represented three books from each of the six categories. I gave them a worksheet that had the headings and descriptions of each category. The directions were to sort the books, write the titles under the appropriate category, and put a question mark next to any titles for which they questioned the placement. They sorted these books independently then shared their results with me. One colleague differed from my categorization with four books but also put a question mark next to

**Table 1** Poetic nonfiction picture books



Collective poems	Extended poem	Rhyming verse	Coupled poems	Narrative or expository verse	Lyric prose
<p><b>Description</b></p> <p>These books contain a collection of poems that collectively contribute to the central focus</p>	<p>The text is one poem that extends across the pages of the book</p>	<p>The text uses rhyming verse to present the information, continuously across the pages of the book or in chapters</p>	<p>These books use poetry as an introduction to or coupled with expository writing</p>	<p>These books have narrative or expository writing that is written in verse form</p>	<p>These books use narrative or expository writing, but the authors use many poetic elements in the crafting of their writing</p>
<p>Children's nonfiction picture book examples</p> <p>+<i>Sweethearts of Rhythm: The Story of the Greatest All-Girl Swing Band in the World</i>, by Marilyn Nelson; Illust. by Jerry Pinkney (2009)</p>	<p>+<i>Dave the Potter: Artist, Poet, Slave</i>, by Laban Carrick Hill; Illust. by Bryan Collier (2010)</p>	<p>+<i>Mississippi</i>, by Diane Siebert; Illust. by Greg Harlin (2001) (and other books by Diane Siebert, such as <i>Track Song</i> 1984, <i>Mojave</i> (1988), <i>Heartland</i> (1989), <i>Train Song</i> (1990), <i>Sierra</i> (1991))</p>	<p>*<i>D is for Drinking Gourd: An African American Alphabet</i>, Written by Nancy L. Sanders; Illust. by E. B. Lewis (2007)</p>	<p>+<i>Eleanor: Quite No More</i>, by Doreen Rappaport; Illust. by Gary Kelley (2009)</p>	<p>*<i>The Wolves are Back</i>, by Jean Craighead George; Paintings by Wendell Minor (2008)</p>
<p>+<i>Hummingbird Nest: A Journal of Poems</i>, by Kristine O'Connell George; Illust. by Barry Moser (2004)</p>	<p>*<i>Welcome to the River of Grass</i>, by Jane Yolen; Illust. by Laura Regan (2001)</p>	<p>*<i>Twelve Rounds to Glory: The Story of Muhammad Ali</i>, by Charles R. Smith, Jr.; Illust. by Bryan Collier (2007)</p>	<p>*<i>Butterfly Eyes and Other Secrets of the Meadow</i>, by Joyce Sidman; Illust. by Beth Krommes (2006)</p>	<p>+<i>Ballet for Martha: Making Appalachian Spring</i>, by Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan; illust. by Brian Floca (2010)</p>	<p>+<i>One Giant Leap</i>, by Robert Burleigh; Paintings by Mike Wimmer (2009)</p>

**Table 1** continued

Collective poems	Extended poem	Rhyming verse	Coupled poems	Narrative or expository verse	Lyric prose
+Jazz A, B, Z, An A to Z <i>Collection of Jazz</i> <i>Portraits</i> , by Wynnton Marsalis, Illust. by Paul Rogers (2005)	+Who Was the Woman Who Wore the Hat? by Nancy Patz (2003)	*Bread Comes to Life: A Garden of Wheat and a Loaf to Eat, by George Levenson; Photos by Shmuel Thaler (2004)	+The Robin Makes a Laughing Sound: A Birder’s Journal, by Sallie Wolf (2010)	+Lightship, by Brian Floca (2007)	*Tracks of a Panda, by Nick Dowson; Illust. by Yu Rong (2007)

+ = Extensive access features (defined as three or more features)

\* = Some access features

all four titles. Upon further consideration, she then placed two of these titles in the same categories that I placed them. The other colleague placed all 18 books in the same categories as me and put a question mark next to one title. Both colleagues agreed about the clarity of the categories. Most compelling, however, was the conversation the placement of these books engendered between us, especially for titles with question marks or for those about which we disagreed.

I paid attention to which books had access features, such as an author's note, an illustrator's note, additional information (a foreword or an afterword), activities and suggestions, references or resources, maps, timelines, acknowledgements, an index, or a glossary. As Table 1 shows,<sup>1</sup> I demarcated no, some (one or two, \*), or extensive access features (three or more, +) for each book title. The majority of books ( $n = 65$ , or 85.5 %) across all six categories had some ( $n = 37$ ) or extensive ( $n = 28$ ) access features. Most of these access features were found as back matter; some were the endpapers. (In some books, the afterwords or notes and annotations were written by another author (e.g., *Fortune's Bones*, *On A Road in Africa*, *A Cool Drink of Water*.) These are common features of nonfiction that reinforced the research base and provided ways to assess the accuracy of the information in these books (Bamford and Kristo, 2003). This categorization work then enabled me to address the other two focuses of this paper: possible criteria for evaluating the quality of these books and reader's stance as we read these books.

### Categories of Poetic Nonfiction Picture Books

Table 1 shows three or more prototypical books in each of six categories I created for poetic nonfiction picture books. The categories are collective poems, extended poem, rhyming verse, coupled poems, narrative or expository verse, and lyric prose. I placed these categories along a continuum from poetry and verse to prose using expository or narrative modes. In fact, in the category "collective poems," some books have *poems* in their title, such as *Hummingbird Nest: A Journal of Poems* (George, 2004). In other books, the authors clearly intended the main written text to be poems. For example, *Train Song* (Siebert, 1990), which I placed in the category "rhyming verse," was first published as a poem in *Cricket* magazine in 1981. On the other end of the spectrum, books like *The Wolves Are Back* (George, 2008) or *One Giant Leap* (Burleigh, 2009) are clearly written in narrative or expository prose, but are laden with poetic devices that qualify them as literary nonfiction. Some books fit into more than one category: for example, parts of *Tracks of a Panda* (Dowson, 2007) are written in verse, but other parts are written in prose. I inferred that the verse pages had more to do with layout and design, and, based on the prose pages, placed this book in the "lyric prose" category.

In the end I developed the following typology. Starting with the poetry end of the continuum were books that I labeled "collective poems." These books contain a collection of poems that collectively build on the central focus of the book. The next clearly delineated category was "extended poem," in which the text is one poem

<sup>1</sup> For the complete chart of all 76 books, go to [www.tedsclassroom.com](http://www.tedsclassroom.com).



that extends across the pages of the book. As with “collective poems,” all the books that I analyzed in this category had expository writing as front and/or back matter, and Pappas (2006) calls these books, such as *Water Dance* (Locker, 1997), “poetic informational coda hybrid” (p. 243). The third category of books I labeled “rhyming verse,” in which the text uses rhyming verse to present the information, continuously across the pages of the book or in chapters.

Moving towards the prose end of the continuum, the fourth category I labeled “coupled poems.” Books in this category use poetry as an introduction to or coupled with expository writing. In these books poetry and expository writing work in partnership to convey meaning. The Discover the World series of books, such as *D is for Drinking Gourd: An African American Alphabet* (Sanders, 2007) are excellent examples. The fifth category I labeled “narrative or expository verse.” Books in this category have narrative or expository writing in verse form. Many books by Doreen Rappaport use this format. The sixth category I labeled “lyric prose.” These are books that use narrative or expository writing, but the authors use many poetic elements in their craft. The writing is both accurate and full of “compelling grace” (Gerard, 1996, p. 12). A book such as *One Giant Leap* (Burleigh, 2009) is a prototype.

It was challenging to determine whether to place a book in the category “extended poem” or “narrative or expository verse.” Again, I had to infer authors’ intentions. I paid attention to line breaks, phrasing, a sparseness of language that is more indicative of poetry, and the amount of poetic devices such as repetition, rhyme, and meter. For example, here is a passage from *Ballet for Martha* (Greenberg and Jordan, 2010):

To the dancers the stage is like an obstacle course,  
They dodge sharp angles and balance straight backed  
on thin ledges. Even when the dancing is hard,  
they must make it look easy (p. 20).

The line breaks, the complete sentences, the absence of key poetic devices all suggest that this book belongs in the category of “narrative verse.” Conversely, here is the opening to *Welcome to the River of Grass* (Yolen, 2001):

Welcome to the river of grass,  
running green  
from side to side,  
a river that is inches deep  
and miles wide. (unpaged)

The line breaks here express phrasing and meter. Jane Yolen also fills her writing with poetic devices, such as rhyme, alliteration, pattern, and assonance and I placed this book in “extended poem.”

Other books were challenging to categorize because of the dynamics of picture books, where written text combined with visual displays and overall design work together in the synergistic, multimodal construction of meaning (Sipe, 2011). Determining how much to attend to these dynamics was the primary cause of discrepancies with my colleagues in the placement of books into categories. The

book *An Egg is Quiet* (Aston, 2006) illustrates this point. I put this book in the “extended poem” category, but the book could also fit in the “coupled poems” category, since each line of the extended poem is so highly interactive with the visual displays, layout, and overall design on each page. For example, the line “An egg is giving” (unpaged) is on a double-page spread. The left-hand page shows timelines of egg development for a chicken, a salmon, and a grasshopper; the right-hand page shows a cross-section of a chicken embryo inside the egg with labels and a caption. I have to oscillate between this visual and other written information to construct an understanding of this poetic phrase. In the context of this page, “An egg is giving” means that it is the origin of new life. The poem, then, is tightly coupled to other written and visual information. However, the poem, line by line, also clearly extends across the pages of the book, and this structure determined my categorization decision.

### Evaluating the Quality of Poetic Nonfiction Picture Books

The poetic nonfiction picture books that I analyzed represent a convergence of children's nonfiction, poetry for children, and picture books. Excellent evaluative criteria exist for these three categories of children's books. The Caldecott Award provides criteria for evaluating picture books (<http://www.ala.org/alsc/awards/grants/bookmedia/caldecottmedal/caldecottterms/caldecottterms>). One salient criterion for my analysis was: “A ‘picture book for children’ is one for which children are an intended potential audience. The book displays respect for children's understandings, abilities, and appreciations.” This criterion held true for all the books in the corpus. Indeed, some of the poetic nonfiction books I analyzed were Caldecott Honor books, such as *Dave the Potter: Artist, Poet, Slave* (Hill, 2010), *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom* (Weatherford, 2006), *Song of the Water Boatman and Other Pond Poems* (Sidman, 2005), *Martin's Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Rappaport, 2002), and *Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra* (Pinkney, 1998).

While these and some other books that I analyzed, such as *An Egg Is Quiet* (Aston, 2006), achieved the Caldecott criteria for excellence in children's picture books, my primary concern was establishing criteria of excellence for the hybridity that was generated by the poetic use of language in these books. To establish these criteria, I first turned to criteria for excellence in children's nonfiction as established by the NCTE Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children. This committee considers criteria in four categories: accuracy, organization, design, and style (<http://www.ncte.org/awards/orbispictus>). I examined which books had some or substantial access features that supported the accuracy of the authors' research. For example, *Dave the Potter* (Hill, 2010) has an afterword about his life, an Author's Note, an Illustrator's Note, and a Bibliography, including websites. Many of the books I analyzed also have compelling organizations. For example, *Hummingbird Nest: A Journal of Poems* (George, 2004) is a collection of poems organized chronologically, that collectively tell the story of a hummingbird that builds a nest in the author's backyard, lays eggs, hatches them, and raises her

fledglings until they leave the nest. Likewise, many of the books have compelling designs. For instance, *An Egg is Quiet* (Aston, 2006) has so many design features that contribute significantly to meaning construction. The endpapers, for example, are mottled blue, as you might find for some bird's eggs. The front endpapers display all the variety of eggs that the book will explore with labels of the animals that produce them and the back endpapers show the adult animals with labels, thus producing a matching game for readers.

Not all the books I analyzed have various access features to assess accuracy or innovative organization or compelling design. For example, most of Diane Siebert's books have no access features, so the reader is unable to determine her research process and the accuracy of the information she provides, or the research process of the illustrator. My prevailing criterion was writing style, especially reading for poetic elements. The Orbis Pictus committee gives the following criteria for writing style: "writing is interesting, stimulating, reveals author's enthusiasm for subject; curiosity and wonder encouraged, appropriate terminology, rich language." The committee also recommends that the writing should be useful in classroom teaching grades K through 8, should encourage thinking and more reading, should be interesting subject matter, and appeal to a wide range of ages. Based on these criteria, all the books I analyzed had strong writing style. Indeed, several of the books were Orbis Pictus Award winners or honor books, such as *Dave the Potter* (Hill, 2010), *Henry Aaron's Dream* (Tavares, 2010), *Eleanor: Quiet No More* (Rappaport, 2009), *One Giant Leap* (Burleigh, 2009), *An Egg is Quiet* (Aston, 2006), *Bread Comes to Life* (Levenson, 2004), *The Shortest Day* (Pfeffer, 2003), *Duke Ellington* (Pinkney, 1998), *Everglades* (George, 1995), and *Flight* (Burleigh, 1991).

Since my focus was on poetic nonfiction, I also turned to the criteria of the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children. The committee gives the following criteria for evaluating high-quality poetry for children: literary merit, imagination, authenticity of voice, evidence of a strong persona, universality and timelessness, and appeal to children (<http://www.ncte.org/awards/poetry>). On the website, the committee explains:

In short, we're looking for a poet who creates poetry books that contain clean, spare lines; use language and form in fresh ways; surprise the reader by using syntax artistically; excite the reader's imagination with keen perceptions and sharp images; touch the reader's emotions. A maker of word events is what we're looking for.

These were certainly criteria in many of the poetic nonfiction books that I analyzed, and indeed, several of the books were cited as outstanding poetry books by this committee, such as *Hummingbird Nest* (George, 2004), *Song of the Water Boatman and Other Pond Poems* (Sidman, 2005), *Butterfly Eyes and Other Secrets of the Meadow* (Sidman, 2006), *Sweethearts of Rhythm* (Nelson, 2009), and the 2011 award winner J. Patrick Lewis (e.g., *Heroes and She-Roes: Poems of Amazing and Everyday Heroes*, 2005). The fact that several books were honored for their poetry, their picture book qualities, and/or their nonfiction qualities indicates the hybrid nature of poetic nonfiction picture books.

Some scholars of children's poetry lament prevailing tendencies towards rhyming verse, which they distinguish from high-quality poetry, because rhyming verse often presents simple or even crude subject matter with "thumping rhythms and rhymes" (Apol and Certo, 2011, p. 283) that lack rich poetic craft. However, the books I analyzed that used rhyming verse focused on compelling and even complex content. What purpose would rhyming verse have to convey this content? In an article about Northrop Frye, Glenna Sloan (2009) discusses Frye's advocacy for metered, rhyming verse for children. "For verse is closely related to dance and song; it is also closely related to the child's own speech" (Frye, as cited in Sloan, p. 131). Sloan states: "Without experiencing this initial pull of words, children will not readily or willingly make the considerable effort required to read and write them" (p. 131). Rhyming verse has the potential "to preserve delight and destroy drudgery" (p. 133) in nonfiction by connecting with children's emotions and imagination. Heald (2008) concurs: "The picture book whose language sings requires the brain not only to decode words and syntactical structures, but also to hear rhythmic patterns, durations of sounds and expressive contours" (p. 234).

This sense of delight in the topic is apparent in many of the rhyming verse books that I analyzed. Consider this passage from *On a Road in Africa* (Doner, 2008).

Children from the Banda School  
 Add their goodies to the pool.  
 In they pour a peanut rain,  
 Hear clunks from chunks of sugar cane.  
 Where you gonna go, Mama O, Mama O?  
 Where you gonna go, Mama O? (unpaged)

The verses *In they pour a peanut rain/Hear clunks from chunks of sugar cane* sound tripping on the tongue. The alliteration of *pour a peanut* and the internal rhyme of *clunks from chunks* make these lines fun to say. The final two lines—with the use of alliteration and internal rhyme and the repetition of *Mama O*, who is the central character in this book—read like the lilting chorus of a chant.

Ultimately, the best of the books I analyzed rise above even these stringent criteria for writing style. They certainly create "a vivid and believable world that the reader will enter willingly and leave only with reluctance" as Freedman advises (1992, p. 3). When we ask the question, why would an author choose to write poetry or in verse or with strong poetic qualities in the service of nonfiction writing, we realize that, like the synergistic relationship of strong visual displays and powerful design work (Sipe, 1998), the writing style must illuminate and enhance the themes and topics of the book. Sloan (2001) explains that when poems are absolutely right, they provide epiphany and insight, "wrapped economically in words so apt that no others can be considered to take their places" (p. 50). In many of the books, the poems deepen our understanding. In *Jazz A, B, Z* (2005), Wynton Marsalis, a noted jazz scholar and musician himself, uses a specific poetic form to fit the characteristics of each jazz musician he portrays. For example, for Duke Ellington, who composed great lyrical compositions, and was one of the pioneers of swing rhythm, Marsalis plays with meter in each stanza, using the longer, flowing shuffle

rhythm in the final stanza, the root rhythm of swing. In each of his poems, then, the form contributes to and deepens meaning.

Similarly, in *Where in the Wild?* (2007), David Schwartz and Yael Schy use shaped and concrete poems to match the form and function of some of the camouflaged animals they describe. “Motionless” is shaped like the eight spindly legs of the crab spider, and “Serpentine” has the flowing lines of a snake. In “Wary Eyes,” they use three syllable lines in three four-line stanzas to depict a fox. Each line ends with an ellipse to convey the fox’s watchful, wary, prowling habits. In the last line, the poets write, “Yip and Howl,” but shape the word *Howl* into a long, drawn-out howl. *One Leaf Rides the Wind* (Mannis, 2002) celebrates Japanese gardens and is organized as a counting book, one to ten. Each poem is haiku, a form of poetry that originated in Japan many hundreds of years ago. In the afterward, Celeste Mannis explains, “Spare style and snapshot-like images of nature stimulate the senses and challenge the reader to make connections between the natural world and the nature of man” (unpaged). Thus, haiku is a perfect form to illuminate the wonders of Japanese gardens.

In the books in the “narrative or expository verse” category, poetic craft also deepens readers’ constructed meanings. Consider the following passage in *Ballet for Martha* (Greenberg and Jordan, 2010):

Sometimes the dancers sit on the floor while she stands silently,  
staring out the window.  
“Let’s try this,” she says, turning.  
She has a tantrum.  
She screams.  
She yells.  
She throws a shoe.  
The dancers wait. Martha always figures it out (p. 17).

The writers use alliteration to make music in the language. They use line breaks after each of Martha’s actions, calling attention to her struggle. The final line heightens the dancers’ endurance. By keeping the two sentences on the same line, the phrasing reads like a sigh of relief following the tension of Martha’s struggle.

In summary, prestigious awards committees for outstanding children’s picture books, nonfiction, and poetry provide criteria for excellence that certainly describe prevailing qualities in many of the poetic nonfiction picture books I analyzed. But most relevant to establishing criteria of excellence to the hybrid nature of these books is the qualities of writing style for both nonfiction writing and poetry. All the books in the corpus, even the books using rhyming verse that might be perceived as “thumping rhythms and rhymes” (Apol and Certo, 2011, p. 283), upon close, careful reading, achieve excellence in writing style. I also discussed how the poetic craft, the musicality of the writing (Heald, 2008), has a synergistic relationship with the nonfiction content, deepening the meaning construction that is possible. The question remains how readers might engage with these books in order to construct deep meanings. To answer this question, I now turn to Rosenblatt’s (1994) transactional reading theory.

## Poetic Nonfiction and Reader's Stance

Rosenblatt developed a powerful theory of transactional reading that explains the intricate dance between the reader and the text in a particular context for the construction of meaning. One key concept in Rosenblatt's theory, reader's stance, is particularly pertinent to my focus. Rosenblatt (1994) explains that all readers mediate between the symbols of a text and their referents in the world to construct a coherent whole, the world of the text, by adopting selective attention, or a stance, along an aesthetic to efferent continuum. In an efferent stance, the reader's attention is directed outward towards what he will *take away from* the reading experience—"the information, the concepts, the guides to action, that will be left with him when the reading is over" (p. 27). In the chart (see Table 1), the books closer to the nonfiction side of the continuum signal more efferent reading stances. In an aesthetic stance, the reader's attention is directed inward toward her lived-through experience *during* the reading of a particular text—"the chiming of sound, sense, idea, and association" (p. 26), which produces the poem evoked by the text. In the chart (see Table 1), the books in the categories closer to the poetry side of the continuum especially signal more aesthetic reading stances. Since the transaction depends on a reader's stance, "each encounter between a reader and the text is a unique event" (pp. 35-36). Moreover, the same text may be recreated by the same reader, in different contexts, as both an efferent and an aesthetic experience.

What stance along the continuum a reader takes depends on the text, the context, and the reader's purposes for reading. For example, in the books I analyzed, the strong craft of the writing signals to readers to take an aesthetic stance, and readers invariably would have a rewarding lived-through experience. Conversely, these texts also signal to readers to take an efferent stance in order to process the information, the concepts, the guides to action that they convey. Rosenblatt (1994) argues that for texts like the poetic nonfiction I analyzed, a reader's stance will fall somewhere in the middle of the continuum. "In much of our reading, there is a to-and-fro movement of the attention from one aspect to another of the responses activated by the text. Thus, where we might place a particular reading on our continuum would be a matter of the relative emphasis or incidence of one or the other stance" (p. 37). A reader's job is to learn to control multiple, complex responses to texts, fluctuating the center of attention along the efferent/aesthetic gradient, in a matter of degrees (p. 39).

This matter of degree was indeed what I contended with as I constructed a reading of *The Wolves Are Back* that I described in the introduction. I was building counter-intuitive concepts about co-dependency in the food chain and the balance of nature by reestablishing the top predators, wolves, in Yellowstone National Park. Concurrently, the strong stylistic elements in the text signaled an aesthetic, lived-through experience that deepened my reading and, ultimately, my connection and engagement with the reestablishment of the wolves. Poetic nonfiction picture books provide a perfect manifestation of the fluency and flexibility of reader's stance that is necessary for a lived-through reading experience. Rosenblatt (1994) asserts that a reader ultimately "fuses the cognitive and the emotive, or perhaps more accurately,

apprehends them as facets of the same lived-through experience, thus giving [the text] its special meaning and quality” (p. 46).

## Conclusion and Implications

My analysis has important implications for future research with these hybrid books. Mainly, I wonder how children read these books. Do they recognize them as nonfiction or as poetry or, as I suggest, a hybrid blend? Do they take away from these books important information, key concepts, and guides to action from an efferent stance? Do they perceive “the chiming of sound, sense, idea, and association” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 26) and generate a lived-through experience from an aesthetic stance? Are they able to be flexible in their reading stance, moving along the aesthetic/efferent continuum for complete understanding, depending on their purposes and the reading context? I also wonder about the teaching of these books. Rosenblatt (1994) discusses how the questions we ask to direct readers’ attention in a text have powerful influence on their stance. For example, asking “what facts does this poem teach you?” implicitly directs students away from “what the words could make them see and hear and feel and think” (p. 40). How do teachers approach these texts with students? I worry that, in our high-accountability age of high-stakes testing, teachers are too directed towards efferent readings, which inevitably detract from the rich, affective readings that these texts make possible. Rosenblatt states this concern as follows: “to what extent do environmental pressures—home, school, societal—lead the child to focus attention on the efferent handling of language and to push the richly fused cognitive-affective matrix into the fringes of consciousness?” (p. 40).

One possible approach to teaching these texts to children using the flexible and dynamic transactions I advocate is suggested in an article focusing on teaching children comprehension strategies for reading historical fiction picture books (Youngs and Serafini, 2011). In the article, Suzette Youngs and Frank Serafini suggest multiple readings using guiding questions on an interpretive trajectory that “allows readers to cycle back to what they noticed in their initial experience with the text and subsequently analyze the text on a deeper level” (p. 117), leading to interpretive and critical readings. This approach is wholly consistent with the “active, synthesizing aspect of the reading process” that Rosenblatt professes (1994, p. 52). Rosenblatt advocates a dynamic, recursive reading process for evoking rich meanings in well-constructed texts. Moreover, this approach suggests an action research agenda using poetic nonfiction picture books in schools with teachers and students. To do this, teachers first need to be comfortable and skilled in identifying and categorizing poetic nonfiction picture books for their salient features.

A first step then would be to work with teachers to categorize these books as I propose in this paper. What is important in this categorization work is not whether we all agree on the placement of each book. On the contrary, it was the discussion of books with my colleagues where we saw more than one possibility or disagreed in our decisions that generated the most in depth analysis of how to approach reading them. This approach enacts the social semiotic theory to genre that Pappas (2006)

ascribes by honoring the evolving and dynamic nature of these hybrid books. This categorization work would enable teachers to discern the demands of particular texts on readers in the transaction. Teachers would then be prepared to plan and implement stronger supports to develop reader's stance in the first and in subsequent readings, enabling students to achieve rich, interpretive levels of understanding. This work is imperative since these hybrid books are increasingly pervasive and accessible, and provide the perfect manifestation of the powerful transactional reading experience that Rosenblatt advocates.

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