

The Role of Design in Nonfiction Books:

Taking a Closer Look at *Moonbird* and Other Winners of the YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction

“Attractive design is more than cosmetic appeal. The design of a book helps in two ways to capture readers. The first is catching the reader’s attention, and the second is keeping it” (Michael O. Tunnell, James S. Jacobs, Terrell A. Young, & Gregory Bryan, 2012, p. 177).

Multiple-award-winning author and illustrator David Macaulay (1993) considers nonfiction to be “a literary work . . . whose content [is] based on fact and communicated with imagination” (1993, p. 145). Accuracy of the facts is always of the utmost importance in nonfiction, but those facts must be shared in a compelling manner. Communicating with imagination is a shared responsibility between authors and designers. Through their careful word choice, authors breathe life into a topic about which they are passionate. Moreover, they write in such a manner as to engage readers. Additionally, book designers share this responsibility, since their work has a key function in the appeal and comprehensibility of nonfiction trade books for young adults. Thus, design elements such as dust jackets and endpapers help draw readers’ attention to visual elements, as well as important facts and details. Since design and visual elements convey a great deal of meaning, it is important that teachers help their students examine them as closely as they examine the written text (Sipe, 2007).

According to Kress (2003), young adults are increasingly exposed to multimodal texts—those that contain a combination of written text, visual images, and design elements. This is certainly true for many recent nonfiction trade books. Thus, it is important

for readers not only to understand the written text, but also to be able to “read” visual images and design elements in order to truly comprehend a book’s meaning (Kress, 2000). Indeed, there is a synergistic relationship between visual elements and written text so what is constructed between the two systems is much greater than the potential interpretation of either the written text or the visual elements alone (Youngs & Serafini, 2011). Visual images and design elements can often convey things that written text alone cannot (Kress, 2000). Carter notes that visual elements often make “points that either need emphasis or can best be shown through photographs or original art. A picture isn’t always worth a thousand words, but sometimes illustrations help [young adults] *read* those thousand words” (2010, p. 202).

Traditionally, books had a rigidly defined reading path from beginning to end, cover to cover (Kress, 2003). Today’s multimodal nonfiction often empowers young adults to make decisions as they read, since “[m]ultimodal texts include various pathways to follow, parallel displays of information, extensive cross-referencing elements, evocative graphics and images that extend, and often replace, the printed word as the primary carrier of meaning” (Hassett & Curwood, 2009, p. 271). Visual and design elements provide

students with choices as to where to look and how to engage with features of texts. Thus, Wilson suggests that teachers provide students with explicit instruction about “the characteristics of multimodal representations” (2011, p. 441).

In this article, we identify and explain the various elements of book design and illustrate how teachers can call attention to these elements to help students appreciate and comprehend the various aspects of nonfiction texts. We use examples from the YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction finalists to illustrate each design element. Additionally, through an interview with book designer Roberta Pressel, we explore how exemplary design elements contribute richly to both aesthetic and efferent reading experiences in Philip Hoose’s (2012) *Moonbird: A Year on the Wind with the Great Survivor B95*. Not only was *Moonbird* a finalist for the YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction, but the book also received a Sibert Honor and was selected as the Green Earth Book Award Winner for Young Adult Nonfiction. The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) Award for Excellence in Nonfiction “honors the best nonfiction book published for young adults (ages 12–18) during a November 1–October 31 publishing year” (YALSA, n.d.). For a list of the 2013 honorees, see Table 1.

Elements of Book Design

Often when thinking of design in nonfiction, readers only consider illustrated nonfiction. Yet, designers also must keep in mind the use of white space and how text is presented on the page, since readers benefit when a text is more visual. According to Kristo and Bamford, “In nonfiction, information is not necessarily presented in a linear fashion on the page, nor is visual information always restated in the running text. Readers’ eyes need to move around the page, noting *all* information, textual and visual” (2004, p. 51). For example, font sizes, types, and colors, as well as endpapers and photograph placement, are all design elements that enhance the appearance of a work of nonfiction, carrying a visual message about its subject. Kristo and Bamford (2004, p. 55) note the following as possible elements that can complement and extend the running text:

- dust jackets/covers of the book
- endpapers (sometimes called end pages)

- labels and captions
- illustrations/photographs/archival materials
- diagrams: simple, scale, cross section, cutaways, flow, tree, web
- graphs: line, bar, column, pie
- sidebars
- tables (charts)
- maps: geographical, bird’s eye view, flow
- time lines

The illustrations, photographs, archival materials, diagrams, and maps are all visual elements. The dust jackets, book covers, and endpapers are design elements, while the labels and captions, graphs, sidebars, tables and charts, and time lines are access features or tools for locating, clarifying, defining, or explaining information. Other access features include tables of contents, headings and subheadings, bolded words, indexes, glossaries, references, and additional readings. Access

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Table 1. YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction

Books
2013 Winner
<i>Bomb: The Race to Build—and Steal—the World’s Most Dangerous Weapon</i> , written by Steve Sheinkin and published by Flash Point/Roaring Brook Press.
2013 Finalists
<i>Steve Jobs: The Man Who Thought Different</i> , written by Karen Blumenthal and published by Feiwel & Friends.
<i>Moonbird: A Year on the Wind with the Great Survivor B95</i> , written by Phillip Hoose and published by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
<i>Titantic: Voices from the Disaster</i> , written by Deborah Hopkinson, published by Scholastic Press.
<i>We’ve Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children’s March</i> , written by Cynthia Levinson and published by Peachtree Publishers.

features transform into design elements when different fonts, colors, or visual images are employed with them. Thus, Hasset and Curwood note that “words can express meaning through typesetting . . . where the symbols and sizes of the fonts are carefully chosen to represent a sense of feeling and connotation over denotation.” Likewise, “words can express meaning through color changes” (2009, p. 271).

Looking from the Outside In

Readers are often drawn into a book because of its dust jacket. Also referred to as a book jacket, this

wrap-around poster typically contains the title, author’s name, and some visual element(s) representing the topic. The inside flap of the front cover typically provides information about the book while the inside flap of the back cover provides a photo of and information about the author. We discovered that all five YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults finalists

had shorter main titles with longer subheadings that led to placement decisions. For instance, in YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults and Sibert Medal Winner *Bomb: The Race to Build—and Steal—the World’s Most Dangerous Weapon* (Sheinkin, 2012), the title is centered on the dust jacket with large, bold letters falling vertically. A plane is centered on the letter ‘o’ with the remaining two letters underneath suggesting a barrage of bombs. The subheading is placed in the lower right corner, providing information and an invitation into the book.

The dust jacket for *Titanic: Voices from the Disaster* (Hopkinson, 2012), another YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults finalist, is equally dramatic, with the title and name of the ship in huge white letters on a red background running vertically along the far left. Opposite the main title is a night view of the ship that dominates the remainder of the cover. A small lifeboat with survivors is in the foreground, and the subheading below reflects the

reality that theirs will likely be the voices from the disaster. Such jackets attract readers and provide opportunities for discussion.

The book’s casing is exposed when the dust jacket is removed. Sometimes casings exactly mirror the dust jacket. In other instances, the casing contributes to the book’s topic or message through the color of the cloth or paper or even some design or motif. As one example, *Bomb* contains the stamp of the same airplane on its cover but this time against a vivid red background. The book designer chose a simple white casing with no stamp or design for *Steve Jobs: The Man Who Thought Different* (Blumenthal, 2012), possibly to pick up the white background on the book jacket or as a contrast to the colorful letters in the word “DIFFERENT” in the book’s title. *Titanic* (Hopkinson, 2012) also relies on the use of carefully placed colors in its casing, as the spine features red letters spelled out against a silver spine, surrounded by a thick red band, and then an even larger off-white band around that. The colors hint at the anniversary of the famous ship disaster, since the book was published 100 years after it occurred.

Moving Inside

As readers open the book and move inside, more design decisions become apparent. They will next encounter the endpapers. These pages “are glued to the casing to provide a transition between the exterior and the interior of the book and create a structural bond between the casing and the printed pages of the book” (Kerper, 2003, p. 70). The endpapers can provide readers with a link to the book’s content through visual elements, text, or a color that echoes back to the dust jacket to develop continuity. For instance, a photo of young Steve Jobs sitting in front of early Apple computers spans both sides of the front and back endpapers in *Steve Jobs* (Blumenthal, 2012).

Some books have a half-title page that follows the endpapers. Although typically containing only the book’s title, this page sometimes includes other visual elements. The half-title page generally precedes the title page that typically includes the names of the author(s), illustrator, and publisher (Harms & Lettow, 1998). As we examined the YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults finalists, we found some variation regarding how half-title pages

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and title pages appear in the books. For example, *Moonbird* has two half-title pages—one that precedes the title page and another after the title page, copy-right page, dedication, and table of contents. In *Steve Jobs*, there is a simple half-title page with the main title only. The title page is followed by a two-page spread with text on the left facing a photo of Steve Jobs early in his career. Similar to the Jobs biography, *Bomb* has a half-title page with the main title only, followed by a two-page spread with a full title page opposite an archival photo of a bomb. The title page of *Titanic* is preceded by a postcard oilette or reproduction of the ship. The upper left corner of the title page is the logo of the White Star Line, a flag with one star. This logo design is repeated on the upper left of the first page of each chapter in the book.

Frequently, one book page is set aside so that authors and illustrators can show their appreciation to colleagues, experts in a subject matter field, relatives, or friends “by dedicating their works to them” (Harms & Lettow, 1998, p. 22). Dedication pages may include visual and text elements or provide only terse dedication, such as the “For Sandi” found in Hoose’s *Moonbird*. Hopkinson’s dedication in *Titanic* is two-fold. First, she states that the book is for “Michele, who is always there whenever I send a CQD . . .” (p. vii). CQD stands for close quarters defense, one of the first distress signals adopted for radio use. Next, Hopkinson dedicates the book “. . . in memory of those who lost their lives on the *Titanic* so long ago” (p. vii). Thus, even the dedication page may provide additional information or insider references on the topic for alert readers.

Copyright information pages typically provide specific information about the book as well as genre designation. While this page is rarely part of the design, the copyright page of *Titanic* has been designed to reflect the book’s subject matter. Its “iceberg” format, so called because there is a black column or iceberg rising from the dark water, provides a space for information to be displayed.

The pages of a book between the end pages and the text are referred to as the book’s front matter. In *Steve Jobs*, the front matter includes a simple table of contents facing a photo in which Steve Jobs and the Apple logo are placed in the left foreground of a photo of the world. The table of contents in *We’ve Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children’s March* (Levinson,

2012) lists the chapter title followed by a quote. This quote is then repeated with the title at the beginning of each chapter. For instance, Chapter 1, “Audrey Faye Hendricks,” features the quote, “There wasn’t a bombing that I wasn’t at”—sobering words to begin the chapter. The next page after the table of contents uses song lyrics to evoke the civil rights era. The refrain of the song that serves as the main title of the book, “We’ve got a job, We’ve got a job to do. We can’t get freedom ‘til we get through,” is printed on a black background with white print.

Following the title page of *Titanic*, there is a double-page spread with a photocopy of the last message sent from the ship. The haunting handwritten message states, “We are sinking . . . passengers being put into boats” (pp. iv–v). The table of contents for *Titanic* spans two pages with the list of chapters and back matter in a gray box superimposed over an image of the ship. This gray and black motif is repeated throughout the book in tables, charts, and diagrams as a design feature that reflects the archival photos and materials from this era. All of these design elements in *Titanic* set a somber tone befitting this story.

Once the text begins, other design features are evident. In *Steve Jobs*, the first page of each chapter faces a black-and-white photo that mirrors Jobs’s life at that point. Thus, as the book moves through Jobs’s life, the text is supported with visual images for readers to connect to the words. The text of *Titanic* begins with a foreword in white print on a black background opposite a photo of the wreck of the ship at the bottom of the ocean.

Chapter headings, labels, and captions offer readers direct information as well as other more indirect and subtle cues. In the case of *Bomb*, the headings are reminiscent of old-fashioned typewriter print signaling the World War II setting of the book. In other instances, important quotes and facts are highlighted through sidebars or text boxes. *We’ve Got a Job* (Levinson, 2012) makes excellent use of topical sidebars and boxed quotes. The topical sidebars are on a

Chapter headings, labels, and captions offer readers direct information as well as other more indirect and subtle cues.

black background with white print, such as the one detailing Segregation Ordinances (p. 7). Likewise, the boxed quotes are on a black background resembling a brushstroke with white print, and they feature powerful words to consider, such as “No way for me not to be involved” (p. 5). Ending most chapters in the Steve Jobs biography are boxed insets with additional information. The format for the boxes resembles early computer screens.

Archival photos abound in several of the YALSA Award finalists. In *We’ve Got a Job* (Levinson, 2012), large black-and-white photos paint an honest and startling picture of the turbulent times. *Bomb* introduces each of the book’s four sections with a double page collage of photos highlighting individuals mentioned in that section. Each photo has a caption noting the person’s name and role, such as “Eugene Wigner, physicist, helped initiate Manhattan Project” (p. 5). In *Titanic*, double-page spreads of archival photos are common, and copies of primary source documents, such as menus for first-class dinner, telegrams, and tickets for passage, support the facts and give the reader a real sense of the ship and the tragedy.

Timelines are another critical visual element to help readers organize the facts and events in nonfiction books. In *Steve Jobs* (Blumenthal, 2012), not only does the timeline include important dates but also icons depicting various Apple products linked to certain events.

Design Elements in *Moonbird*: An Interview with Roberta Pressel

We chose *Moonbird* as the young adult book exemplar for our article because of its outstanding design features coupled with the engaging writing of author Philip Hoose. Roberta Pressel, a senior designer from Farrar, Straus and Giroux, designed this book. Our interview provides insights into the thinking behind the design and the decisions made to effectively combine visual elements, design features, and engaging text for this book.

TAR: Arguably, many readers judge books by their covers, and in the case of this book, the cover features a photograph of B95 winging his way over the surf. Is that actually B95? What other photographs were considered in selecting this one? Why was this one chosen? There are other design consider-

ations for the book’s cover, for instance, the choice of font—size, type, and placement—and the back cover. Could you describe some of the considerations you made as you designed the cover and back and decided where to place the book’s title?

Roberta Pressel: The book cover is the reader’s first impression of the book. The jacket photo is indeed B95. It was the only photo we considered as it was a great close-up of B95 in flight and clearly shows the orange plastic flag fastened around his upper left leg. This flag has the letter and number combination that gives B95 his name.

The color palette of the entire jacket was inspired by the colors of the photo. We wanted the title to be large, but also needed a subhead to explain to readers just who the “moonbird” is. The subhead is in a darker shade of blue so it stands out a bit, as is the author’s name. We wanted Phillip Hoose’s name to be prominent, as he is an extraordinary writer who has won many awards for his books. The back cover was kept simple in order to highlight the glowing comments from renowned authors. To enhance them even more, I used the larger display type, instead of the text font, to make the copy more interesting and stand out a little more. I loved the image of the knots in flight, and felt that would make a nice background when converted to a one-color image.

On the spine of the book, we also wanted to make the title type large and bold, in case the book is shelved with the spine facing out. The author’s name needed to be bold and readable also. If you lift the jacket, you’ll see what we call a “blind stamp” of B95 on the case cover. It’s always fun to be able to add these little decorative elements to the case cover when possible.

TAR: The book’s chapter headings are printed in a light blue reminiscent of the blue on the cover. Why was that color selected? What other colors were considered and rejected? Does the use of blue contribute to a certain “feel” that the book has or evoke a certain sort of emotion or remind readers of all the time B95 spends in the sky?

RP: The chapter heading color was chosen to tie in with the blue of the cover. At one point, orange

was considered, to match the flag on B95's leg, but the lighter orange that we would have used on the sidebars wasn't as pleasing as the lighter blue. The blue is reminiscent of the sky color throughout and is neutral enough to complement most of the photos. Light yellow was chosen for the Profile pages to help them stand out, but not distract from the overall look of the book.

TAR: How important is a book's overall design? Why? What are some of the elements of book design you consider to be the most important of all? How does someone become a book designer?

RP: A book designer's job is to interpret and translate the text visually for the reader. It's important that the design doesn't overwhelm the book; it should enhance it. The designer has a responsibility to the author, the editor, and the publisher to design books that will look good today and in the future. Aspiring designers should research the marketplace by going to bookstores and libraries to see what book designs they like. They should put together a portfolio that showcases their best work. Computers have revolutionized the book design field, so it's important to be competent in all the appropriate design programs.

TAR: What is the first thing a book designer does? What was the very first step you took in designing this beautiful book? The last step? Do you see the manuscript as you are designing the book or make suggestions for additional elements, such as the short informational text boxes that fill the book? Take, for instance, "Why Do Red Knots Go So Far?" on page 15 and "Molt" on page 20. Why were those bits of information placed separate from the rest of the text?

RP: The first thing a book designer does is read the manuscript. For *Moonbird*, the editors had included color copies of most of the photos interspersed with the text pages, which really helped give me a sense of the framework of the book. The information in the sidebar boxes was specified by the author to be highlighted as separate elements throughout the book. Instead of using plain square boxes, I used

boxes with a light blue tint in them, with indented corners to make them more interesting and eye-catching.

TAR: There are several profiles of scientists and young activists such as Mike Hudson included. Can you talk about the inclusion of those profiles? How do they help make this a more kid-friendly book?

RP: Reading about the young activists is something kids can definitely relate to. You don't have to be an adult to make a difference. In addition to the bios of the scientists, there are projects described that young adults can participate in, which also makes the book more kid-friendly.

TAR: Often, today's students race through texts and ignore elements such as maps, charts, and photographs. Why shouldn't those elements be skipped over?

RP: All of those extra materials, such as maps and photos, help to draw the reader into the story. In addition to reading about B95's travels, the maps can be used to visually follow his route and get a better sense of the incredible distance that he's traveled.

TAR: The book contains several photographs. How many were considered and rejected? Why were these chosen?

RP: The photos were supplied by the author and keyed into the manuscript by him and the editors. When there were multiple images of some of the subject matter, we chose the photos that would reproduce the best, as well as ones that would best fit into the overall design. It was exciting to get the photo on page 105, for example, as it showed the latest sighting of B95 at Rio Grande. The quality of the photo is not great, but we felt it was important to show the most recent photo of this amazing bird.

TAR: Even the Source Notes section contains thumbnail photographs that introduce each chapter. Could you talk about that design decision, as well as how you chose the photos to open each chapter?

RP: Often back matter in books can be uninteresting and skipped over. Adding the photos was a way to relate the source notes to the chapters they correspond to. The author, Phillip Hoose, chose the chapter opening photos that he felt were important to set the tone for each chapter.

TAR: In terms of design, do you have a favorite page? What is it? Why do you like it so much?

RP: I don't have a favorite page, but I do like all of the chapter opening pages, especially the ones with the photos. Having the photos bleed on all sides gives the opening pages more impact and makes a dynamic intro to each section of the book. They also give the readers a heads-up as to the content of each chapter. Using blue for the chapter heads and subheads also makes an attractive lead-in to the chapters.

Focusing Readers on Design Elements

One possible way to help young adult readers consider the design and visual elements in nonfiction trade books is to have them work in pairs to analyze and evaluate a book they have read. Kristo and Bamford (2004) suggest that students respond to the following questions as they analyze the book's visual elements:

- Is the visual/feature clear in describing or explaining the information?
- Does the visual/feature help readers understand the content?
- Is the visual/feature appropriately placed to connect directly with the text?
- Is the visual/feature clear and easy to read?
- If appropriate, is a key provided to explain how to read the visual/feature?
- Is there sufficient information in the running text to understand the visual/feature?

Harms and Lettow (1998) note that as students develop an understanding of design elements, they attend more closely to the design and visual elements in the books they read, enhancing both their enjoyment and comprehension. Teen readers may enjoy filling several Venn diagrams with elements that nonfiction books have in common.

In addition to reading the YALSA Award finalists,

students may want to search for additional books on one of the topics explored in those books and compare and contrast. For instance, Allan Wolf's masterful novel in verse *The Watch That Ends the Night: Voices from the Titanic* (2011, Candlewick) covers some of the same territory as Hopkins's book but in a fictionalized version of the story. Readers may also find it helpful to compare the two versions of this shipwreck disaster as they compare and contrast design elements in fiction versus nonfiction versions. Or after reading *We've Got a Job*, students may be interested in examining the documentary of the same events, *Mighty Times: The Children's March*, available free to teachers at the Teaching Tolerance website at <http://www.tolerance.org/kit/mighty-times-childrens-march>.

Conclusion

Young adults learn that nonfiction books are more than words and facts when they are taught about design elements. Instruction about book design elements provides them with new tools for reading, understanding, and appreciating nonfiction books. With eyes that are more aware, they are likely to enjoy unlocking some of the elements of nonfiction titles.

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2013 Promising Researcher Winner Named

Dr. Amy Stornaiuolo, Assistant Professor, University of Pennsylvania, has won the 2013 Promising Researcher Award for “‘Like Two Different Worlds’: Teachers’ Perspectives on Social Networking and Schooling.” This award, given in commemoration of Bernard O’Donnell, is sponsored by the NCTE Standing Committee on Research. The 2013 Promising Researcher Award will be presented at the NCTE Annual Convention in Boston, Massachusetts, at the Opening Session of the Day of Research, Saturday, November 23, 2013.
