Using Nonfiction to Form Partnerships:  
A Collaborative Conversation

From the Editors: We are pleased to feature a written conversation among several authors of young adult nonfiction. These authors encourage readers to find real-world relevance in their texts and inspire young people to take action. We hope you agree that their diverse approaches and perspectives fostered rich conversation about the concept of partnership.

As to process, we generated and sent a series of questions to all of the authors at once. We compiled the initial responses they shared into a single document and then, over several iterations spanning several months, we sent the compiled version back and forth to authors to solicit questions, elaborations, and revisions until all were satisfied with the end result. We hope this piece both engages readers and generates ideas for further collaborations using nonfiction.

Can you tell us a little bit about your recent work(s) of nonfiction and how you were inspired by the topic(s) you chose?

Marc and Marina: The first book we wrote together was Sugar Changed the World (2010). As we say in the book, it came about because we knew that sugar had played a key role in the Indian side of Marina’s family, but while we were in Jerusalem visiting with Marc’s originally Russian family, we learned that there was a sugar link via a beautiful and mysterious aunt of his. Thinking about one substance that had a dramatic effect on two very different families inspired us to research and then write the book.

Just now we are working on a new joint project, which is itself in large part about artistic collaboration. The inspiration for The Eyes of the World came out of a very different conversation. We were in Montpelier to speak at the Vermont College Master of Fine Arts program. Marina began talking about photography with Walter Dean Myers, who was researching a heavily photographic work centered on African Americans and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Marina, who has always had a passion for photography, and especially the Magnum photographers, suddenly realized that the story of Robert Capa, his less-known girlfriend Gerda Taro, and the romantic idealism of the Spanish Civil War would make a great topic for a young adult book.

Laurie: My recent nonfiction titles, a teen how-to and a picturebook biography, both evolved from the same idea. I’ve always been a fan of underdog stories and unsung heroes, so I was working on a collection of profiles of people who have changed the world but are not well known. When I heard about Emmanuel Ofosu Yeboah—a young man who was born disabled in Ghana and overcame social stigma and discrimination to fight for rights for disabled people—I knew his story had to go in my book. While searching for others to include, I read David Bornstein’s How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas (2007), which is full of amazing case studies of changemakers around the world. I thought a book like that, but
with even more actionable how-to advice, needed to be written specifically for teenagers to empower them to act on their passion and idealism. That was the beginning of *Be a Changemaker: How to Start Something That Matters* (2014). Eventually, an agent told me she loved the profile of Emmanuel and wanted to see it as a stand-alone picturebook, so *Emmanuel’s Dream* (2015) was born. I’m grateful for the path that led me to these books, but I hope I’ll eventually get to do the original book about unsung heroes, too!

**Jim:** My most recent published works are about Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and Biruté Galdikas in *Primates* (2013) and Alan Turing in *The Imitation Game* (2014) (no relation to the feature film of the same name, even though it’s also about Turing. We arrived at the same title independently, I’m sure). *Primates* is a triple biography, if there is such a genre, that shows how these three scientists came to revolutionize the field of primatology. It follows their early careers and major discoveries, and it shows how they became much more than scientists—not that being a scientist isn’t enough in and of itself, of course! *The Imitation Game* tells the tragic story of Alan Turing who, as a mathematician, code-breaker during World War II, and computer scientist, laid the groundwork for many aspects of modern technology. He was also openly gay in a time and place where that choice was not only discriminated against but criminalized. He paid a high price for his decision not to hide who he was, and the world is poorer for that.

*How do you select your topic(s) for writing? Do you form your own partnerships (for information, guidance, etc.) in the writing process?*

**Jim:** When it comes to selecting topics, I’ve only ever followed my nose, so to speak. I began writing comics about scientists because over the course of my early career as a nuclear engineer, I had encountered so many interesting anecdotes about the people behind the equations and discoveries I learned about and relied on in my work. Since then, there has always been a new person, discipline, or discovery that has drawn me in—and done so just as I was beginning to think about what I should do next. I’ve been very lucky!

I have indeed formed most of the partnerships as each project developed. Whether it is reaching out to an archive or an artist, I have usually taken that first step, and here again I have always been fortunate to have my interests met more than halfway by whomever I’ve approached. People like science, and they like comics!

**Laurie:** I write about things I want to learn more about and stories that I feel need to be shared.

I have a wonderful critique group and a talented agent, all of whom I rely on for feedback. And once a project has been acquired by a publisher, a whole team of people step in to bring a book to life: editors, illustrators, designers, copyeditors, proofreaders, cover artists, production specialists, and more. I don’t always get to know these people, but I’m grateful for their skilled contributions to my books.

In addition, every book lends itself to unique, focused partnerships. For *Emmanuel’s Dream* (2015), I partnered with the Ghanaian Association of Greater Seattle for fact checking and background information as well as with Emmanuel himself, who answered my questions by email, phone, and in person and supplied me with reference photos. For *Be a Changemaker* (2014), I partnered with Ashoka’s Youth Venture, a nonprofit that supports young changemakers. They helped me find young people to interview, and I volunteered with them and met some of the teens in person. I fell in love with their organization and the great work that they do here and around the world. I was extremely honored when Ashoka’s founder, Bill Drayton, wrote the foreword for *Be a Changemaker.*

**Marc and Marina:** The truth is, collaborations, or partnerships, are at the center of our life together as husband and wife and coauthors. We confer with each other all the time in our private lives while parenting, while working on our house, while planning our future travel, and in our separate work as writers. We are both fascinated with how the voice and a perspective of another person can amplify or clarify the process of creation.
When it comes to the books we write together, the topic has to be one that we are both drawn to—though our interests may not be identical. In general—this was true in Sugar (2010) and again in Eyes (in preparation)—Marc is more drawn to historical context and large issues of politics, culture, society, vast trends, big conclusions; Marina—who is also a novelist—has her own interest in big ideas, context, and history, but in her writing, she tends to build toward them through story, character, and drama.

This is not absolute, as Marina follows issues of international politics and policy more closely than Marc does, and Marc—who was long a YA editor—is drawn to fast-paced drama and examples of moral passion. Still, in general, Marc will tend to read many academic background books to understand, for example, how experts have described Europe in the 1930s. He is interested in assimilating the interpretations of professional historians, to make them accessible for a young reader, and to prompt his readers to ask questions about history. Marina’s interest is in recreating and explaining, giving a glimpse of unknown perspectives and events through evocative, strong writing.

Sugar (2010) covers vast spans of time and place, so Marc did most of the writing, while Marina edited and rewrote, pushed for more human moments, and wrote chapters related to her own heritage, where she had done a lot of research and looked at primary documents connected to sugar growing.

For Eyes of the World (in preparation), Marina read everything that is either available in English or that she can make her way through in French or German about the lives of Robert Capa and Gerda Taro. Then she plunged into writing a draft from start to finish, while Marc studied the broader history. Together, we pored over primary documents—like interviews, letters, and photos at the International Center for Photography—for those pungent details that can make a narrative book come alive. In a reverse of Sugar, she handed over the manuscript to him, and he is now adding other elements—the volunteers on both sides of the conflict, for instance—and editing and shaping the final product.

In your own schooling or visits to schools, have you seen any particularly beneficial or inspirational partnerships?

Jim: I see them all the time, though it’s hard to pinpoint any single one that’s more deserving of mention than all of the others. I guess the thing I would note is how many excellent independent bookstores that I’ve had a chance to work with also have partnerships with schools.

Marc and Marina: One school that Marc learned about asks older students, say those in upper elementary or middle school, who have written research reports to present those reports to younger students. The older students, knowing how restless younger kids are, learn to be concise, dramatic, engaging, while providing a goal and model for the younger students.

Laurie: I’ve seen several excellent partnerships between Ashoka and high schools where Youth Venture facilitators teach business or leadership courses. These facilitators walk students through the process of choosing, researching, and launching a socially conscious business or nonprofit. The students learn the same skills they would with more traditional coursework, but they are more motivated and engaged because they get to work on a problem they care about and can have a real influence on.

I’ve also had the opportunity to work with schools where students participate in service-learning projects as part of the curriculum. In some cases, students research a problem, find organizations in their community that are working to solve that problem, and then fundraise and/or volunteer for those organizations. In others, students start their own service organizations. These service-learning-centered units seem particularly beneficial because students focus on a problem that matters to them personally while they achieve interdisciplinary learning outcomes and contribute to their communities all at the same time.
**Laurie:** Be a Changemaker: How to Start Something That Matters (2014) is a how-to guide that helps teens start their own organizations to effect real social change in their communities or around the world. Nonfiction, particularly this kind, can play a key role in providing students with the background knowledge and inspiration necessary to take action. Those actions often lead to collaboration and partnerships with other students, with teachers across various subject areas, and with experts and organizations from the larger community and around the world.

**Marc and Marina:** We were thrilled when both New York and Louisiana built modules for English Language Arts (ELA) teachers around Sugar (2010). In the past, publishers believed that nonfiction needed to be ruled by the scope and sequence of Social Studies departments. But here, students in ELA classes use our nonfiction book to learn about evidence, argument, point of view, main and subsidiary points, and also to investigate moral issues. We could not have asked for more.

Eyes (in preparation) presents what is both an opportunity and a challenge: many great artists were involved with the Spanish Civil War—from Pablo Picasso and Frederico Garcia Lorca to Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson and, of course, Ernest Hemingway. Our book is about photography, but it could link to media studies, to social studies, to art, to film, and to ELA. The challenge is that neither Hemingway nor the Spanish Civil War is still taught in most high schools. We will have to hope that, as with Sugar, the book opens eyes in schools rather than already fitting what schools know they want to do.

**Jim:** A comic book story—or graphic novel, if you prefer—is told with words and pictures working together to produce something that (if the artist and I do our jobs well) is greater than either could do on their own. So combining art and prose, storytelling and science, I think (I hope!) points to the strength and power of interdisciplinary partnerships. It’s all right there on the page.

**Marc and Marina:** There is a weird truth about nonfiction: young children and adults know they love to read nonfiction, but at the heart of K–12 education, nonfiction is often viewed as a lesser form of book—good, at best, for reports, and a close cousin to that hated beast, the textbook. Yet there are always students who are more drawn to understand

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**How is nonfiction unique in its ability to afford opportunities for readers to make meaning of their world? How might collaboration play a role in this search for meaning?**

**Laurie:** Nonfiction helps readers understand their world by providing them with information. With more information, they can make more connections and develop broader perspectives. Collaboration also allows people to make connections and broaden perspectives by sharing unique experiences and expertise.

As our world continues to change at an ever-increasing pace, the most successful people will be those who are able to acquire information quickly and then work collaboratively with others to solve our most complex problems. Having students read nonfiction texts and then apply what they have learned offers excellent opportunities for them to practice both of these increasingly critical skills.

**Jim:** The thing is, I don’t think nonfiction is unique in this, because fiction makes meaning, too. But nonfiction presents its characters in a reality that we all share, even after we set the book down. So though nonfiction puts “imagination in a tight straightjacket,” to quote Richard Feynman (Sykes, 1993), it also shows readers what’s possible for real people to do—and be.

Regarding collaboration, the age of the lone genius making a breakthrough in his lab or discovering and solving equations by herself at her desk is gone. ( Mostly. I think. I’ll probably be proven wrong before this gets published.) Collaboration is how science gets done, so it doesn’t only play a role, it plays a leading role in the search for meaning.
the world through direct inquiry and evidence—history, science, math—than through fiction, plays, or poetry. Fiction, plays, and poetry can be compelling; truth telling can shape how we experience the world. But that does not mean we should assume that they are the only kinds of writing that can do so. For Marc, the key is that nonfiction—however well told—must inherently involve inquiry. The authors must have searched for and found evidence that they have pieced together and presented. Thus, nonfiction can show readers a passageway toward their own insight and understanding—ask questions, seek evidence, develop theories, test your theories, make claims. Nonfiction can be and should be exploration.

Have any specific people in your life inspired your writing? What message(s) do you hope your readers take away from your books?

Marc and Marina: In Sugar (2010), the fact that the British (who made more money in sugar slavery than any other nation) were the first to finally abolish slavery shows that we can make difficult choices—a key issue now as we face questions about climate change. In Eyes (in preparation), we see that two artists can work together as equals—critiquing each other, improving each other—and that there is real heroism in being a journalist, a photographer, who risks everything to tell the world about a truth she or he is determined to share . . . at any price. We could not help but see the parallels between the massive demonstrations in Paris after the January Charlie Hebdo murders and the massive demonstrations in exactly the same square in the 1930s. As we face the dramas of today, we can be inspired by the artists and heroes of yesterday.

Jim: I aspire to write as well as any number of people, ranging from Doris Kearns Goodwin to George Herriman—to pick two almost polar opposites in terms of style and substance—but I’m too close to my own writing to pinpoint anyone specific who has inspired how I write.

As for the messages, here again I can’t pick just one, but maybe I can sum them up using the very last words of the very last Calvin and Hobbes (Watterson, 1995) comic strip: “It’s a magical world, Hobbes ol’ buddy . . . let’s go exploring!” The word “magical” may seem odd to describe a message coming out of science comics, but the most inspiring scientists have the sense of wonder that we associate with magic, and I hope that comes through in the books I’ve written.

Laurie: My parents always told me I could do anything or be anything I wanted to be, but unfortunately others weren’t always so encouraging. I remember being told that I was too short, too shy, too sensitive, too female, too something . . . or not enough of something else. It felt like everywhere I turned, there were people telling me I couldn’t. I want to tell my readers that they can. And I want to give them the tools to go out and do it.

Marc Aronson earned his doctorate in American History at New York University while working as an editor at what was then Harper & Row in the children’s books division. The first winner of the Robert F. Sibert Medal for Excellence in Informational Books from the American Library Association for Sir Walter Raleigh and the Quest for El Dorado (2000), he has gone on to write about the Salem witch trials, the rescue of trapped miners, and the idea of Race, and has collaborated with scientists and historians. Aronson now trains librarians at the Rutgers School of Communication and Information and speaks frequently to teachers, librarians, and students about the Common Core State Standards. He lives with his wife, Marina Budhos, and their two sons in New Jersey.

Marina Budhos earned her Master’s degree at Brown University and writes fiction and nonfiction for adults and teenagers. Her recent books include the award-winning YA novel Ask Me No Questions (2006), Tell Us We’re Home (2010), and the forthcoming Watched. Having grown up in a multiracial family in a community largely made up of families involved in the United Nations, she is intensely interested in the experiences of immigrants—those who see dominant cultures from an outsider’s perspective. She wrote Remix: Conversations with Immigrant Teenagers (1999) as a nonfiction exploration of some of the themes she then investigated in her novels. Ms. Budhos is an associate professor at William Paterson University where she teaches courses in Asian American literature, young adult literature, and narrative nonfiction.
Jim Ottaviani is the author of many graphic novels about scientists, ranging from physicists to paleontologists to behaviorists. His most recent are the New York Times bestsellers, Primates, about Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and Biruté Galdikas, and Feynman, about Nobel-prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman. His books are probably the only ones to have received praise from both Nature and Vampirella Magazine and from publications as diverse as Physics World, Entertainment Weekly, Discover, Variety, and Time. His upcoming books are The Imitation Game: Alan Turing Decoded, a biography of Alan Turing illustrated by Leland Purvis, and Hawking, illustrated by Leland Myrick. He lives in Michigan and comes to comics via careers in nuclear engineering and librarianship. Visit him at www.gt-labs.com, on Twitter at @gtlabsrat, and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/jim.ottaviani.

A former software engineer, Laurie Ann Thompson writes for children and young adults to help readers—and herself—make better sense of the world we live in, so they can contribute to making it a better place for all of us. She writes nonfiction that gives wings to active imaginations and fiction that taps into our universal human truths, as seen in her books Be a Changemaker: How to Start Something That Matters (2014), a teen how-to guide filled with practical advice and inspiration for young social entrepreneurs; Emmanuel’s Dream: The True Story of Emmanuel Oloso Yeboah (2015), a picturebook biography of a young man who changed Ghana’s perception of people with disabilities; and My Dog Is the Best (2015), a fiction picturebook about the bond that exists between a child and a beloved family pet. Visit her at lauriethompson.com and on Twitter at @lauriethompson.

References