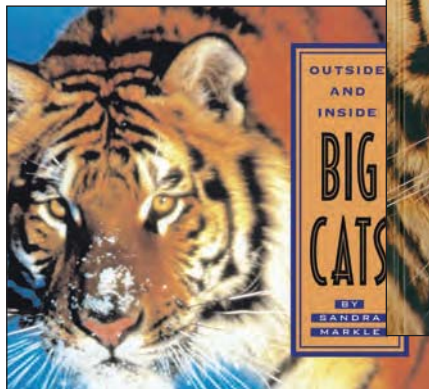


Series Nonfiction in the Classroom

by Susan Dove Lempke

Elementary school through middle school

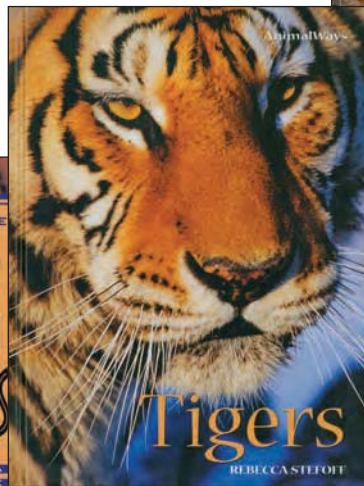
Why do the Harry Potter books continue to be so popular? Everyone has his or her own theory, but one compelling reason that kids have latched onto them is that they are a series. Kids love a good series. Of course, it's quite a leap from a series of fantasy novels to nonfiction series books, but the similarities are there, too, from the handsome appearance of a row of well-designed books to the appeal of knowing what to expect. For students and teachers, nonfiction series can be very useful for working on reading skills and building up knowledge at the same time.



Comprehensive Yet Expensive

Series titles can be found in every subject area. They can cover people, places, science, and sports. They work both for the kids who are content to soak up facts, and for those who want hands-on experience. Students can use series books to learn to draw

or to cook, to train their puppy or to improve their game. They can read about the general or the very specific—animals in general (*Animals* by Peter Riley); or just mammals (*Mammals* by Edward Parker); or from the mammals, just the big cats (*Outside and Inside Big Cats* by Sandra Markle); or from the big cats, just tigers (*Tigers* by Rebecca Steffoff); or from the tigers, just Siberian or white or Bengal tigers

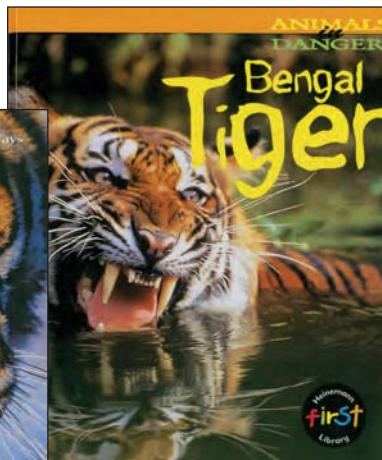


(*Bengal Tiger* by Richard Spilsbury), or even prehistoric tigers (*Saber-Toothed Cat* by Michael P. Goecke).

The fact that series can be quite long is both a good thing and a bad thing. Obviously for whoever is purchasing a series, whether it is a public library or a school media center, a series with many titles can put a huge strain on limited funds. Series books, with their typically thick, shiny paper, extremely durable bindings, and plen-

tiful color illustrations, are some of the most expensive items a library for children can buy. Prices are rarely under \$15 apiece and are sometimes more than \$30 for just one book—multiply that by 15 sports, or 20 dog breeds, or (worst of all!) 50 states, and it can take quite a bite out of a budget.

At the same time, the multiple titles in a series can be one of the



The focus of series nonfiction ranges from general to specific, as these three books show: *Outside and Inside Big Cats* by Sandra Markle, *Tigers* by Rebecca Steffoff, and *Bengal Tiger* by Richard Spilsbury.

strongest reasons in favor of teachers using series nonfiction with their students. Facing a wall of shelves filled with books can be intimidating even for adult readers who feel confident of their skills and interests. For a newer reader, making a choice out of thousands of possibilities can be almost impossible. This is where books in a series, whether it is fiction or nonfiction, can be so invaluable. Once a child finds something that strikes a chord, he or she can then seek out another like the first, a task made much easier when books come in a series.

Content and Breadth

Series books have the advantage of (usually) being very consistent in difficulty and content. So, when children find a subject they read, understand, and enjoy, they can reliably expect to find a number of other books that will also fit the bill. For a fifth- or sixth-grader, that isn't so important, but for a second-grader it is key to success. Finding the right balance between "babyish" and "too hard" can be difficult; with a series book, if children manage to find one, then they have more to draw upon. They can also become familiar with a book's format, making it easier for them to locate the information they need, and that in turn may help them master the skill of finding information in other books once they know some of the format traditions, such as indexes coming last.

Another advantage to the extended number of titles in a series is the chance it offers teachers to expand the number of topics they assign for reports. When Black History Month rolls around, librarians know to expect lots of requests for books on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, and a handful of others. A series like the excellent and long-running *Journey to Freedom: The African American Library* from Child's World offers dozens of other significant African Americans to report on, such as Marian Anderson, Matthew Henson, Thurgood Marshall, Jesse Owens, and even Condoleezza Rice. Not only does this broaden the number of potential reports, but it gives students sufficient information for writing their reports.

Format and Presentation

It's a given that series books can entice a child into reading if the subject is exciting enough. Even avowed non-readers can sometimes be lured into reading a book on extreme skateboarding or hurricanes or tarantulas. But it's also true that series nonfiction

can sometimes take a dry topic and, with jazzy formatting and an energetic style, make it engaging. It's hard to imagine that a book named *Acids and Bases* could be very alluring, but Carol Baldwin's book of that name in Raintree's new *Freestyle* series starts with a striking cover and continues inside with a great example of why acids and bases matter in real life:

When a bee or wasp stings you, it injects venom. Bee and wasp venom

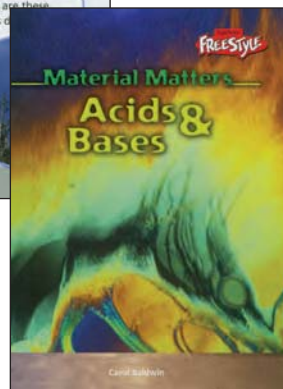
across the bottom of each page that defines terms right there and compiles them all in a glossary at the back, making them much more likely to be useful. A panel along the side holds additional photographs with intriguing questions—for instance, alongside the picture of a runner's legs is the question "What do acids have to do with sore muscles?" The answers to these questions can be found later in the book.



Carol Baldwin's *Acids and Bases* may cover a less-than-thrilling subject, but catchy writing and an appealing design will win over readers.

contain different chemicals, so the stings need to be treated differently. Because bee venom is an acid, baking soda can help make the pain go away. Baking soda is a base. A base is a chemical that can cancel out an acid. Wasp venom is also a base. Treating this sting with vinegar can ease the pain, because vinegar is an acid. It cancels out the base.

The text is accompanied by a spectacular photograph of a bee on bright red flowers. Right from the beginning, students learn the terms in an understandable way and get more than one example to help the facts gel. This series also includes a terrific design innovation of a "Word Bank"



The improvements in series book design over the past

decade make the books far more appealing than they once were. Color photographs are now the norm, and since the advent of Dorling Kindersley's *Eyewitness* books, text is usually broken into more manageable pieces, with plenty of supplementary information in captions, boxes, and sidebars. So even a subject of marginal immediate interest to a student can be conveyed in a way that catches his or her eye.

Quality of Writing

Sadly, the writing in series nonfiction frequently remains uninspiring. While a top-notch series features excellence in both design and writing, in many series the text is the weak spot. Compare these two excerpts from books on the planet Earth:

The seasons change. Winter follows summer, and summer follows winter. As Earth travels around the sun, the north is tilted away. The northern places become colder. The southern half of Earth is tilted toward the sun, and summer comes. As the year goes by, the place where you live on Earth warms up or cools off. —Seymour Simon, *Earth*

The world is not uniformly hot or cold. Some days it is cold and snowy, while other days it is hot and humid. This change in temperature and climate occurs regularly over a year's time and gives rise to the seasons. —David M. Haugen, *Earth*

Simon's writing is simple and even poetic—the other example isn't terrible, but just dull. Many fine children's nonfiction authors got their start in writing series nonfiction. For example, Dennis Brindell Fradin and Judith Bloom Fradin's recent single-title biographies such as *Ida B. Wells* (Clarion, 2000) received excellent reviews, but not so many years ago they were writing all of Children's Press' series *From Sea to Shining Sea*. So the writers themselves may be very good, but tight deadlines, a desire for uniformity, and the publisher's need to keep content bland and inoffensive in order to attract a wide variety of school districts all combine to make the writing lackluster and pedestrian all too often.

Oversimplifying and Stereotyping

Other pitfalls teachers should bear in mind when using series books is the danger of oversimplification for the sake of format. With so many publishers entering the market for nonfiction easy readers, an increasing number of limited-vocabulary, short-sentence books are being published. Some of these seem to be better for building reading skills than for communicating information. When writing about a country, authors may make huge, sweeping statements just so a topic is covered, giving children the impression that everyone in Colombia loves to dance, or that Cesar Chavez was very happy until age 10—countries are more complicated, and people are more complicated, and series nonfiction for younger students can gloss over important facts because they only have 1,000 words to work with.

This also highlights the need for teachers to remind students to find multiple sources of information. No one book can present a whole picture, and students should be trained from early on to look things up in the encyclopedia, on the Internet, and in more than one book.

Using Both Series and Stand-Alone Titles

In general, the field of series books has drastically improved. There was a time when biography series were filled with made-up conversations and events, and indexes were a rarity in a children's book. We now have scrupulously researched and documented material. Many series books

• Besides the series titles mentioned in this article, turn to the next page for a selection of series nonfiction recently recommended by *Booklist* magazine.

include primary source materials such as letters, maps, and documents, and even the shortest of books will usually include a list for further reading, a glossary, and an index. Books for older students generally include notes (giving teachers an opportunity to explain how and why notes are used in writing) and time lines, and lists of quick facts often help create an overall picture of the topic. However, teachers should not rely entirely on series nonfiction. The standard of writing for children's nonfiction has gone up across the board, and individual titles by authors such as James Cross Giblin, Dorothy Hinshaw Patent, Russell Freedman, Seymour Simon, Sandra Markle, and Sy Montgomery include excellent writing as well as spiffed-up formats.

They aren't Harry Potter, but series nonfiction books can be genuinely engaging and informative. Whether students need to brush up on their reading skills, reinforce something they are studying in social studies, find a science experiment (or do the background research), or simply keep broadening their horizons, series nonfiction books can be a great tool in the classroom.

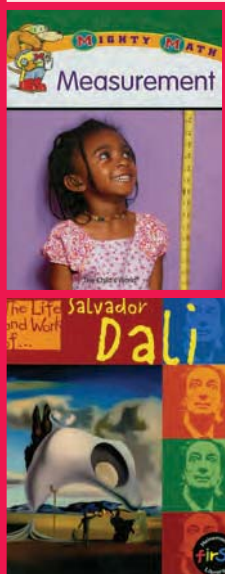
Susan Dove Lempke is a freelance book reviewer and children's services supervisor for the Niles Public Library District in Niles, Illinois.

RECOMMENDED SERIES NONFICTION

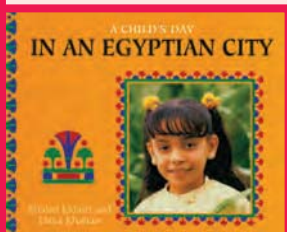
Below is a selection of series nonfiction recommended from 2003 to the present by the editors and reviewers of *Booklist* magazine, which publishes two spotlight issues every year on series nonfiction (in October and April). These series stand out for a variety of reasons, including their innovative designs, their fresh approach to ubiquitous subjects, and their exemplary coverage of topics.

Preschool–Grade 3

- **A Child's Day.** Marshall Cavendish/Benchmark. Individual books, 32p., \$25.64.
Gr. 2–3. In a series with a global perspective, primary-graders learn about life in a particular city or village through the eyes of a child who lives there. Engaging color photos bring the surroundings up close as the text gives a glimpse of the town and the individual child's life.
- **First Step.** Lerner. Individual books, 24p., \$17.27; paper, \$3.95.
Preschool–Gr. 1. This extensive series uses one sentence per page together with color photographs to get information across. The writing is clear and direct, and the text reflects an understanding of what preschool and young primary-grade children already know and what they need to know. The subjects generally tie in with school curriculum standards and include weather, money, citizenship, and much more.

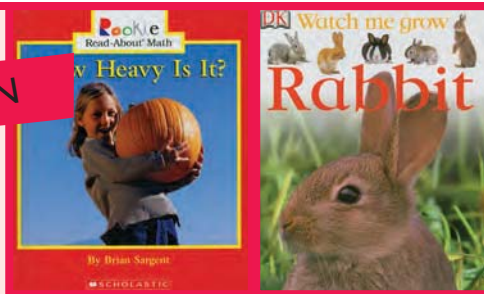


- **Let's-Read-and-Find-Out Science.** HarperCollins. Individual books, 32–40p., \$15.99; paper, \$4.99.
Preschool–Gr. 3. This is one of the oldest series for young children, but it's still one



of the best. Unlike those in many other series books, the illustrations are done in a variety of styles. Accurate and well-targeted, these books will engage a child's curiosity and sense of wonder at the world.

- **The Life and Work of . . .** Heinemann Library. Individual books, 32p., \$17.75; paper, \$7.60.
Gr. 2–3. Providing a balanced view of a large number of well-known artists, books in this series help children discover the importance of an artist's work as well as how it fits into the artist's life. Excellent color reproductions are used together with photographs or drawings of the artists.
- **Mighty Math.** Child's World. Individual books, 24p., \$16.95.
Gr. 1–3. Using short sentences and clear photographs, each volume in this five-book series takes a mathematical concept, such as fractions, measurement, or patterns, and makes it understandable. Clean, white backgrounds eliminate distractions, and the focus is on the math itself, not on a story.
- **Picture Book Biographies.** Holiday. Individual books, 32p., \$16.95; paper, \$6.95.
Preschool–Gr. 3. David A. Adler, who began this series in the late 1980s, works with several different artists and offers nuanced, sensitive biographies of a variety of important people, from Ben Franklin to Helen Keller.
- **Rookie Read-About.** Children's Press. Individual books, 32p., \$19.50.
Preschool–Gr. 3. Books in this extensive series are produced with a firm understanding of a young child's frame of reference and learning style. Subjects include science, geography, and health, and each title features carefully selected color photographs to enhance understanding of the succinct text.
- **Watch Me Grow.** DK. Individual books, 24p., \$7.99.
Gr. 1–2. Dynamic color photographs distinguish the books in this series about animal development. Thrilling images



of animals in many stages of growth will draw children to the simple texts, which are written from the animals' perspectives.

Grades 3–8

- **Animal Predators.** Carolrhoda. Individual books, 40p., \$25.26.
Gr. 3–6. Long the go-to nature writer for the elementary-school audience, author and photographer Sandra Markle lives up to her reputation in this series, which offers adrenaline-pumping glimpses of the creatures who rule the food chain, including wolves, great white sharks, lions, and more.
- **Civil War Library.** Enslow. Individual books, 48p., \$23.93.
Gr. 3–5. Perfectly pitched for upper-elementary readers, this series by Carin T. Ford examines thematic Civil War topics (such as the Underground Railroad or the participation of women in the war), with a particular emphasis on individuals caught up in national strife. Primary-source quotations and compelling archival images add vibrancy to the accessible content.
- **Crossroads America.** National Geographic. Individual books, 40p., \$12.95.
Gr. 3–5. An enticing, jacketed format will draw readers to books in this welcome U.S. history series, and the approachable text within will help them absorb the information about pivotal topics such as the development of the railroads and the evolution of women's roles.
- **EarthWorks.** Marshall Cavendish/Benchmark. Individual books, 80p., \$29.93.
Gr. 4–8. Written by Roy A. Gallant, an award-winning author of science books, this series focuses on basic substances of life, such as air and water. In smooth, almost conversational prose, Gallant clearly explains facts and ideas while showing the complex issues of human dependency and conservation.

- **Environmental Disasters.** World Almanac. Individual books, 48p., \$22.50.
Gr. 4–8. Succinct and thorough, the slim, well-illustrated books in this series offer overviews of environmental catastrophes and the issues that they raise, from Chernobyl to the *Exxon Valdez*. Quotes from eyewitnesses, politicians, scientists, and journalists help place each event within industrial and environmental history.

- **From Sea to Shining Sea, Second Series.** Children’s Press. Individual books, 80p., \$30.50.
Gr. 4–6. Each book in this attractive series on the 50 states covers geography, history, government, and the people, and provides a mini-tour of the state. The graphics are strong; there are many color photographs, maps, and illustrations. A representative recipe, an almanac of state facts, a glossary, and a miscellany of famous people from the state are appended.

- **The Human Body.** Child’s World. Individual books, 32p., \$18.95.
Gr. 3–6. In titles that begin with a common activity (running a race, for example), this series introduces the human anatomy’s basic systems with examples from a real child’s world.

- **Life Balance.** Franklin Watts. Individual books, 80p., \$20.50; paper, \$6.95.
Gr. 4–8. This approachable series focuses on topics that affect everyday mental health and well-being. Titles include *Therapy*, *School Conflict*, *Yoga*, *Dyslexia*, and *Date Violence* and are geared toward middle-schoolers and young teens. The brief, accessible chapters feature sidebars and two-color illustrations, and a glossary, index, and list of further information appear in each volume.

- **True Books.** Children’s Press. Individual books, 48p., \$25; paper, \$6.95.
Gr. 3–5. This long-standing series features several hundred titles grouped under general categories such as Animals, Civics, Space, Sports, and more. Large type and clear color photos, diagrams, and other illustrations appear on pages with plenty of white space. A glossary, an index, and a “To Find Out More” section is included in each title.

- **Voyages through Time.** DK. Individual books, 144p., \$19.99; paper, \$9.99.
Gr. 4–8. Volumes in this visually exciting series by Peter Ackroyd explore key eras of life on earth, starting with *The Beginning*, which follows the evolution of our planet’s creatures from primordial soup to Cro-Magnons. Digitally rendered illustrations are startlingly realistic, and the colorful language brings the facts and the science up close.

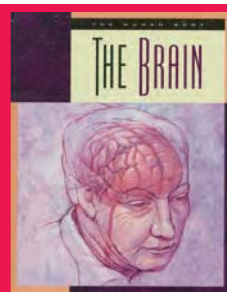
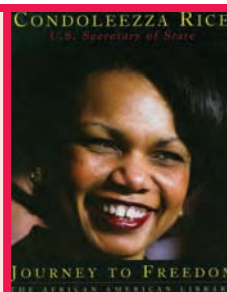
Grades 6–up

- **Careers in Search and Rescue Operations.** Rosen. Individual books, 64p., \$26.50.
Gr. 6–9. These titles introduce jobs with inherent interest for kids—those that are performed under stressful and often dangerous conditions. Crisp color photographs accompany the well-written texts, and the appended resources include links to a continuously updated Web site, making further research easy.

- **Coming to America.** Barron’s. Individual books, 128p., \$14.95.
Gr. 7–10. Of the many recent series about the immigrant experience, this is one of the best. Handsome, informative graphics complement fine texts that describe the conditions that made emigration seem desirable as well as what life was like for the newly arrived. Selections of first-person writing further personalize these attractive, balanced accounts.

- **Holocaust in History.** Enslow. Individual books, 104p., \$26.60.
Gr. 6–10. Author Linda Jacobs Altman describes with simple, clear sentences the horrifying truths of the Holocaust, covering the leaders as well as the ordinary people who were perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. The text and black-and-white archival photos are organized into a spacious design.

- **Journey to Freedom: The African American Library.** Child’s World. Individual books, 40p., \$19.95.
Gr. 6–8. With an open design, clear text, and abundant illustrations, this series features more than 40 titles and includes biographies of both famous and lesser-known figures as well as books on key events and groups in African American history.



- **Opposing Viewpoints Digest.** Gale/Greenhaven. Individual books, 112–144p., \$29.95; paper, \$19.95.
Gr. 6–9.



Middle-school and junior-high term paper researchers can rely on the digest version of the venerable *Opposing Viewpoints* series to present a simple but still fair overview of opposing sides of controversial topics such as abortion, censorship, and gun control.

- **People of the Ancient World.** Franklin Watts. Individual books, 112p., \$30.50.
Gr. 6–8. Crisp reproductions of visuals, along with impressive ancillary content (including a fully illustrated “biographical dictionary”), help make titles in this series among the best available on ancient civilizations.

- **Science on the Edge.** Gale/Blackbirch. Individual books, 48p., \$23.70.
Gr. 6–9. Exemplary in their balanced, easy-to-grasp coverage of complex issues, the titles in this series present the controversies and facts behind edgy science topics, such as stem cells and cloning, without sensationalizing. Crystal-clear microscopic images mix with photos of scientists at work in these useful titles to support student debate or reports.

