



We must give children tools to become truth detectives in their own right. Glossaries, source lists, and other text features all play a part, but we also need to encourage more critical thinking.

Raising Young Thinkers

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Truth matters. Facts matter.

And therein lies the rub, because what is truth anymore?

"Standing up for what's right," says one news source. "The most trusted name in news," says another. And yet anyone reading both—as I do as a matter of principle—would conclude that, so different are the headlines, they couldn't *possibly* be covering the same events of even the same country.

It's this polarization that makes me wonder: do we really care about what's true, or is finding the "truth" simply an exercise in shoring up our own biases? Since even a glance at one's social newsfeed seems to suggest the latter, I'm left to ponder what Marie Curie once said: "Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less."

Fear, it seems, is what drives our flight from truth. Fear of the unknown, fear of being wrong, or, hardest of all, fear of what being wrong might *mean*. It's understandable; after all, the choices we make, the people we decide to be, the very purpose we put on our existence, are all built upon the worldview we've adopted. And worldviews, it seems, are surprisingly fragile things. Thus we guard them with "fact," we insulate them with confirmation bias, we feed them with cable news, because the thought of them crumbling—the loss of our very identity—is the gravest of threats.

It's no wonder, then, that children's books—our earliest introductions to the worlds and words of outsiders—have become ground zero in this fight over truth.

I once, rather naively I suppose, thought that working in children's publishing would be a quiet, happy backwater of bookmaking. After all, how controversial could an "I love you" book be? A is for apple. The cow says moo. Full stop. But as anyone familiar with banned books, boycotts, and all the rest of it knows, some of society's fiercest battles are fought on the pages of children's literature.

If we cannot collectively agree on what is true, we can at least agree to try to understand. It is for precisely this reason that the world needs children's books.

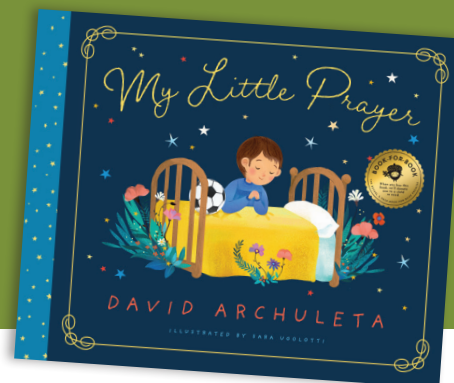
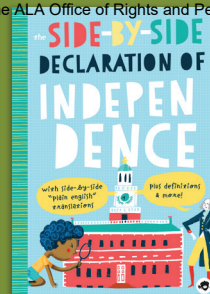
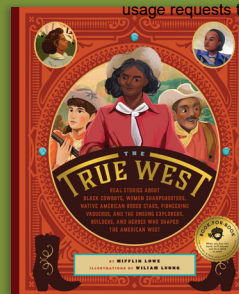
Perhaps our parental angst can be forgiven. After all, children are still developing their worldviews. And with our children in that vulnerable, trusting incubator called childhood, we well-meaning adults—with biases of our own—sometimes fear what might hatch.

But fear cannot be abolished by circling the wagons. In the spirit of Marie Curie, it is *understanding*—that rarest of gems—that helps one fear less. If we cannot collectively agree on what is true, we can at least agree to try to understand. It is for precisely this reason that the world needs children's books. Different books. Conflicting books. *Lots* of books. Because only then will we give children the kind of environment where thinking, listening, empathy, and yes, understanding, can happen.

The question you and I must ask ourselves is this: as stewards of children's literature, what role should we play? Or to borrow a warning from another industry, do we have a duty to "create responsibly?"

I believe we do.

First, I believe we must safeguard a plurality of voices. When things run counter to our own worldview, it's tempting to want to silence those voices. "Cancel her!" people cry. "Boycott his publication!" others shout. But we in the business of books—we of all people—should be the ones to know that censorship—whether of the left or the right—is not the answer: education is. As we find ourselves afloat in today's sudden, rising flood of information, it is perhaps not for us to dam the river, but to become the river guides—teaching the younger generation how to think, how to analyze, how to question, how to fact-check, how to challenge oneself. It's hard work, and it's a work that requires us to be just as disciplined in our own thinking, but it's a necessary work; shortcuts are but short-lived.



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Perhaps it's our interest in this plurality of voices—in information in general—that has drawn our publishing house, Bushel & Peck, to so many challenging topics. Our authors come from diverse backgrounds, and since we began in 2018, we've published books for kids on subjects as complex as atomic theory, climate change, race, sexting, the mechanics of flight, the Constitution, advanced astronomy, and even prayer. The question we continually ask ourselves and our authors is, "What

does each book bring to the collective conversation? Are we just more noise, or are we adding perspective?" If the former, we've failed in our duties as content stewards. If the latter, we've advanced the cause of dialogue and mutual understanding.

Which brings us to our second duty: we must help our children learn to listen. Listening is the surest path to empathy, and it cannot happen in an echo chamber of homogenous voices and opinions. In that regard,

I hope our library shelves are filled with books that challenge our own worldview. We recently published a book called *Your Life Matters* by Chris Singleton. Chris and I come from very different backgrounds. I was raised in Pennsylvania in a nearly all-white community. Chris is a Black baseball player who hails from South Carolina. In 2015 his mother was killed in a racially motivated shooting at his family's church in Charleston. Working together on his book changed me forever. I stepped into Chris's shoes. I thought more deeply about the challenges faced by Black kids in our communities. I discovered just how much I didn't understand. Best of all I found a friend. My hope is that reading the book will do the same for many others.

Finally, we must give children tools to become truth detectives in their own right. Glossaries, source lists, and other text features all play a part, but we also need to encourage more critical thinking. In a book we published called *The Side-by-Side Declaration of Independence*, we do more than recite historical events; we challenge kids to form their own opinions about how government works best. Should it be small? Expansive? What does it mean to be free? What does it mean to safeguard one's pursuit of happiness? Our goal in that book isn't to teach one philosophy over another, but to invite thoughtful consideration of the debate as a whole.

We do the same in a new series called Read-Aloud Kid's Classics.

Throughout the unabridged text of kid's literary classics, we include moments to pause and critically consider why an author wrote the way she did or why a character might have said what he did. (What great training for considering motive and context of a person's tweets later in life!)

And the pattern continues in many of our other titles. In S. E. Abramson's *Grit* we challenge kids to reconsider what society has taught them about failure. In Mifflin Lowe's *The True West* we discover forgotten heroes of the American West, where, contrary to popular culture, it turns out that as many as one in four cowboys were Black. And in David Archuleta's *My Little Prayer*, we ponder the tough question of what it means when it seems God doesn't answer one's prayer.

It is this diverse library of voices, punctuated with invitations to think, that we hope will get kids doing just that: *thinking*. Because while you and I may write differently, publish differently, read differently, and maybe even disagree on fundamental truths, if we're at least *thinking*, then there's a chance we'll be *listening*. And listening, if we let it, can change us forever.

We might even stop being afraid.

David Miles is an award-winning and bestselling author and illustrator of over 40 books, including *Book*, *The Interactive Constitution*, *Allegro*, *Unicorn and Horse*, and other titles. He has worked as a designer, illustrator, and creative director, and he now runs *Bushel & Peck Books* with his wife, *Stephanie*. He's been named a *CYBILS Award* Finalist, *Publishers Weekly Star Watch* Nominee, *Trust Changemaker*, *New York Book Show Award* Winner, and *Bill Fisher Award* Finalist, among other accolades. He lives in *Fresno, California*, with his family.

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Knowledge Quest, Publication No. 483-860, is published five times per year by the American Association of School Librarians, American Library Association, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611-2795. Annual subscription price, \$50. Printed in U.S.A. with periodical class postage paid at (Illinois). As a nonprofit organization authorized to mail at special rates (DMM Section 424.12 only), the purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes have not changed during the preceding twelve months.

EXTENT AND NATURE OF CIRCULATION

("Average" figures denote the average number of copies printed each issue during the preceding twelve months; "actual" figures denote actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: September/October 2019 issue). Total number of copies printed average 7,640; actual 7,303. Sales through dealers, carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: none. Mail subscription: actual 6,961. Free distribution actual 110. Total distribution average 7,256; actual 7,213. Office use, leftover, unaccounted, spoiled after printing average 384; actual 90. Total: average/actual 7,640/7,303. Percentage paid: average 96.4; actual 96.5.

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