

A rattler's tale for kids



Best Reads for Kids

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Guest columnist

What's the bessssst thing to do if you encounter a rattlesnake on a hike? Maybe the wisest advice might come from the snake! But, you might argue, snakes can't talk. Or can they? Almost every Arizonian can identify their warning sound, an unsettling clatter that puts out about 60 rattles per second. That's pretty impressive talk!

And the Arizona black rattlesnake has even more to offer us. He has recently written a book from his perspective to help children understand rattlesnakes and other wild animals in the Copper State.

Before we check in with our snake narrator and his new book, let's learn more about informational books for children. For several decades, literacy researchers have been shining a light on the importance of children reading informational books.

One concern has been children's access to these kinds of books. School libraries, classroom and even home libraries tend to have more fiction than non-fiction. At the start of the 21st century, researchers discovered that in first grade classrooms, children spent only 3.6 minutes per day interacting with informational text. Things have improved. More informational books are being published and educators continue to focus on this genre because of its vital role in academic learning.

Informational books come in various formats. Let's divide them into three categories. The first would be books that are written like Wikipedia. Researchers call this "expository" text. Typically this means present tense and third person. It sounds like this: The octopus has three hearts.

The second type of informational book is "narrative informational" text. This type sounds like a story, but based on facts. Here is an example: As I walked through the aquarium, I saw an octopus and counted all eight tentacles.

The final type is called "mixed text." This story includes fiction or even fantasy, but actual information is included. A

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prime example is the series "The Magic School Bus" by Joanna Cole. The children and their teacher take fictional explorations into space, inside germs or to the center of Earth. However, actual researched information is included within the story.

The creator of the magic school bus books passed away, but today we have a new voice! Arizonian Nancy Hicks Marshall took the idea of magic and gave it to an Arizona black rattlesnake! In her newly published book, "A Rattler's Tale: When Wild Animals Encounter Humans," Marshall introduces a cast of wild characters from a red tailed hawk to a white tailed deer.

Our fictive narrator slithers along to guide us through The National Forest, the setting for the book. Each vignette provides research and authentic (sometimes humorous) information. Marshall includes a page of projects, critter questions, a glossary and a taxonomy chart. There's no reference page, but there is a list of resources for curious readers.

This beautifully illustrated book is a compelling read that offers lively information about the wildlife in our state. I recommend it as an ideal read aloud for school-aged children and adults. Plus you have an opportunity to become friends with a rattlesnake. Now that's . . . wild!

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