
TEACHINGBOOKS: What is the back-story behind the beginning of the Weird But True series? Was there a zany fact that got this whole thing started?

ROBIN TERRY BROWN: Weird But True started in National Geographic Kids magazine. Originally, it was a tiny tickertape of facts that ran through the game section of the magazine. There were no visuals. Then our editor-in-chief had the idea to expand it into a whole page of facts, with fun, whimsical typography. This is when we named it “Weird But True.” The design evolved over several years in the magazine. The designers slowly started adding more and more illustration and then photographs. And we discovered that the more visual it became, the better it worked. And it still evolves with every new series spin-off. It’s so much fun to keep stretching the brand, and see what it can do. It kind of has a life of its own.

TEACHINGBOOKS: If there is a mission or goal for the series, please share it.

ROBIN TERRY BROWN: Kids love to learn and they love to feel smart. Our job is to present information in a way that excites them about their world. And Weird But True is a perfect example of a formula that works! They are having so much fun, they don’t even realize that they are learning.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The Weird But True books have fun with the core topics of its famous publisher National Geographic.

ROBIN TERRY BROWN: Yes, that’s correct. We stick pretty close to National Geographic’s core topics, such as animals, nature, science, geography, history, and culture. But we put an extra-fun spin on these topics, and occasionally stretch outside of these core topics when we feel it’s appropriate. Here are examples of zany facts for the following topics:

ANIMALS
Owls can't move their eyeballs.

NATURE
Our planet has the same amount of water today as it did 100 million years ago.

SCIENCE
If you fell into black hole, you’d stretch out like spaghetti.

GEOGRAPHY
Mount Everest is 27 times taller than the Eiffel Tower.

CULTURE
In Peru, it’s considered good luck to wear yellow underwear on New Year’s Day.

HISTORY
Ancient Egyptians trained monkeys to dance and play music.

WACKY HUMAN FEATS AND INVENTIONS (these often fall outside of the National Geographic core topics, but they are a staple of the Weird but True Series)
A Harley-Davidson motorcycle was designed to look like a hamburger.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is the anatomy of a Weird But True fact? Please walk us through this process.

ROBIN TERRY BROWN: So many people have asked us this question, that we actually decided to reveal our secret formula in our books Ultimate Weird But True and Ultimate Weird But True 2. In the back of each book, we outline the “Anatomy of a Weird But True Fact.”

TEACHINGBOOKS: How does National Geographic make sure these facts are true? Hypothetically, for example, how do you confirm what the largest toilet is in the world?

ROBIN TERRY BROWN: We are sticklers for accuracy, so our policy is that you have to verify a fact in three reliable second-hand sources, or go straight to the original source. And Weird But True facts are so obscure, that we often have to go to the original source or a subject matter expert to verify information. In your example, if we wanted to verify that a toilet is actually the world’s largest toilet, we would call the person who made the toilet to verify the dimensions. However, this would not be the person to verify that it’s the world’s largest, because of course the builder will say that’s true for the publicity. Instead we would go to an
organization such as a toilet museum (yes, there really is one), or a toilet manufacturer’s trade association to see if they could verify that it is the largest in the world.

**TEACHINGBOOKS**: As your editorial team does fact checking, have there been any fantastic stories that come from researching and fact-confirming work? Do you meet amazing people in this process who reveal wacky things to you? If so, please share an example.

**ROBIN TERRY BROWN**: Good question! One of my colleagues who does the research for these books, Julie Beer, thinks that what is always so terrific about the research side of things is getting to reach out to the scientists, etc. who are experts in whatever field that we’re working on – and talking with them about their passion. Most of them are delighted to talk with us about their subject area, and usually quite surprised that we’re interested in what they do!

One example of this: For *Ye Olde Weird But True*, Julie was trying to track down if it was true that Andrew Jackson’s parrot was at his funeral and that it had to be removed because it had a foul mouth. She had found contradictions online and in books, where some said it was true and others said it wasn’t. So, she reached out to an Andrew Jackson historian who weighed in (and confirmed it was true). The historian was quite surprised that National Geographic goes to such lengths to vett its facts. He said:

“I’m immensely impressed that you took the trouble to verify this story before publishing it. You’re adhering to a higher standard not only than most children’s books authors and publishers, but most authors of any kind -- including, sad to say, many professional historians. Apocryphal stories and quotations flourish around Jackson, as they do around any famous figure (especially [Abraham] Lincoln). The internet has made it easier than ever to find them, and they get repeated and multiplied to the point where their very ubiquity gets taken for veracity. It’s the rare and special author or editor who still says, ‘I won’t print it if I’m not sure it’s true.’”

We, of course, loved hearing that! Our *Weird But True* researchers talk about the best part of their job being the opportunity to communicate with experts in the field, to learn more about these subjects, and to really get to the bottom of things. That fun is what keeps them at it!

**TEACHINGBOOKS**: As the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy take hold in 46 states, the Weird But True books are very relevant because they present information in varied formats for all types of readers. Can you give some examples of the different ways information is presented in these books?
ROBIN TERRY BROWN: Common Core places a new emphasis on informational texts in the classroom. National Geographic Kids has been a leader in nonfiction publishing for years, so almost all of our books support the Common Core standards. Weird But True by definition is nonfiction, which falls solidly into that category. *Ultimate Weird But True* and *Ultimate Weird But True* 2, allow kids to read on different levels, exploring the main text, sidebars, and captions. And all of the books cleverly intertwine illustrations, photos, and text, so kids can explore how the images and text work together to support each other.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Children love the facts in these books, and the Weird But True books make numbers comprehensible and accessible by comparing quantities to recognizable objects and facts. Please give an example or two of this.

ROBIN TERRY BROWN: We always try to think like a kid, including making large numbers easier to understand by helping them visualize the quantities. These fun comparisons are some of the bread-and-butter of *Weird But True*:
- A Tyrannosaurus’s teeth were the size of bananas.
- A gold nugget found in California, U.S.A., weighed a whopping 160 pounds—about as much as 12 bowling balls.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How has Weird But True grown and evolved over time?

ROBIN TERRY BROWN: Weird But True was born in 2004 as a monthly page in *National Geographic Kids* magazine, and has been the magazine’s most popular feature every month since its inception. We had a feeling we were on to something big, so we launched a book series in late 2009. Weird But True paperbacks—with their distinct colorful design, whimsical typography, and square shape—became instant hits, with more than 700,000 copies of the first two books in print in less than a year. We introduced the hardcover, large-format *Ultimate Weird But True* in 2011. This book, too, flew off the shelves and hasn’t stopped since. The momentum continues with *Ultimate Weird But True* 2 (2013), as well as a series of themed Weird But True spin-offs, such as *Weird But True Stupid Criminals* (2012), and *Ye Olde Weird But True* (2013), which features wacky facts about history.

The Weird But True brand keeps growing, with a successful app and even a small museum exhibit under its belt. In total, the Weird But True book series has more than 1.4 million copies in print, and shows no sign of slowing down.
TEACHINGBOOKS: The Weird But True app is very popular, and it even has a weird-o-meter. What was it like to create an interactive version of this fun material?

ROBIN TERRY BROWN: It was great to see Weird But True come alive with funny sound effects and interactive elements that kids can play with. The weird-o-meter is especially fun, because kids get to rate how weird the facts are on a scale from “Duh!” [Translation: not weird at all], to “Getting Weirder” [moderately weird], to “Totally Outrageous” [Top score! Off-the-charts weird]. It’s been so much fun to add new dimensions to Weird But True, and to see how well it adapts to so many different platforms. What’s the most satisfying is that kids respond to it equally well across all platforms.

TEACHINGBOOKS: There was a Weird But True museum exhibit at the National Geographic headquarters. What was this 3D version of the series like?

ROBIN TERRY BROWN: Yes, we held a small Weird But True exhibit at National Geographic. We had very little time and a tight budget, but our museum staff was really clever about how to bring it to life for kids. For example, to illustrate the fact, “A baby humpback whale drinks up to 130 gallons of milk each day,” they actually stuck 130 milk cartons to the wall!

TEACHINGBOOKS: As the editor of this series, you must have some weird facts that you rattle off at parties. Can you wrap up our interview by sharing a couple?

ROBIN TERRY BROWN: These are my favorites of all time!

1. Dolphins sleep with one eye open.
2. Peanut butter can be converted into a diamond.

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For more information about the Weird But True series, go to http://teachingbooks.net/. Questions regarding this program should be directed to info@teachingbooks.net.

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