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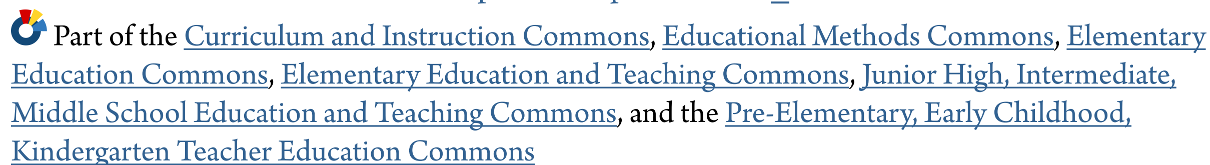
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Read the Past: Write Now! Responding to Historical Fiction through Writing

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This year as we moved from house to house on Halloween, my son's familiar refrain of "trick-or-treat" was usually followed with an explanation of his costume choice. Often mistaken for either Davey Crocket or Daniel Boone, Kade took great pleasure in introducing our neighbors to Francis Tucket, the adolescent hero from Gary Paulsen's *The Tucket Adventures* series. My second grader's fascination with and knowledge of westward expansion was obvious as he recounted Francis's escapades from his capture by Pawnees and rescue by a one-armed mountain man to his stand-off with Mexican soldiers and recovery of Spanish gold. Based on true occurrences, Paulsen's fictional accounts were captivating to an eight-year-old boy largely because they were presented as narrative and told through the eyes of a peer. Using historical fiction to study our country's history turns the past into a dynamic place by capturing the essence of an era and conveying it to children better than any textbook can (McGowan, 1987). From the American Revolution through the Civil War and beyond, fictional characters enrich social studies by bringing the past to life for young readers.

Defining Historical Fiction

The term historical fiction might, at first glance, appear to be an oxymoron, since the word "historical" implies the content is based on reality while "fiction" refers to literary work that is not necessarily based on fact. However, this genre of literature effectively weaves history into fiction. Literally defined, "Historical fiction tells stories set in the past; it portrays events that actually occurred or possibly could have occurred. Authors create plot and character within an authentic historical setting" (Cullinan & Galda, 2002, p. 15).

Historical fiction offers a great variety of topics in various formats, including novels, short stories, picture books, poems, and plays. Topics range from well-loved classics such as Longfellow's *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere* illustrated by Ted Rand (London: Puffin, 1996) to contemporary parodies like Lane Smith's interpretation of the founding fathers in *John, Paul, George and Ben* (New York: Hypernia Books, 2006). At first glance, it appears that typical themes in historical fiction, such as battles, new frontiers, and war time sagas like *Baseball Saved Us* by Ken Mochizuki (New York: Lee & Low Books, 1995) may be of more interest to boys. But, the availability of

stories about courageous and daring heroines such as the main character in *Katie's Trunk* by Ann Turner (New York, Aladdin, 1997) proves this genre to be of interest to all children.

Dual-genre selections, which merge two types of literature, extend the learning possibilities of historical fiction even further. In biographical fiction, fabricated dialogue and embellished details are used to describe events that happened to a true historical figure. For example, Marie Bradby shares a fictionalized account of a young Booker T. Washington achieving his dreams in the book *More Than Anything Else* (London: Orchard Books, 1995). Another example of dual-genre literature is fantasized historical fiction. These stories, like *The Magic Tree House* series by Mary Pope Osborne, introduce time-travel or magic to offer a genuine account of life in different times.

Integrating Social Studies and Literacy

The concept of integrating two or more subjects is not new. Beane (1996) reminds us that 21st century advocates for curriculum integration "stand on the shoulders of giants" (p. 6) including the work of John Dewey, William Heard Kilpatrick, and countless educators who have taught using the approach. Similarly, Forgarty (1999) refers to cognitive psychologists such as Piaget, Vygotsky, and Feuerstein as "architects of the intellect" (p. 76) who laid the foundation for educators to teach in order to meet the cognitive and social needs of children. There has been and continues to be strong support for integrating content areas. Today's immediate availability of technology to teachers and students in classrooms further contributes to a climate of teaching through integrated curriculum (Beane, 1996, 2005).

As educators, we cannot take for granted that students will automatically understand how all content areas work together when they are taught through separation and discontinuity. If, however, students are taught through connecting and integrating content, they will see for themselves how subjects fit together (Brophy, Alleman & Halvorsen, 2012). The primary rationale for integrated learning is that it more accurately approximates people's daily lives outside of school settings. This is accomplished through establishing classroom communities where students question, study, and learn in a collaborative atmosphere (Alleman, Knighton, & Brophy, 2007). Integrating Social Studies and literacy is supported by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) as stated in the very definition of teaching this content area: "The integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence" (www.socialstudies.org/).

Benefits of Using Historical Fiction

As children read or listen to stories of historical fiction, they are acquiring useful background knowledge that forms the foundation for future learning. The facts gleaned from stories serve as a reference point for when these time periods are later introduced in social studies. Historical fiction often piques children's curiosity making them eager to learn more about a particular time. Historical fiction also provides a glimpse into the details of daily life including what people ate, how they dressed, where they lived, and how they were entertained. The more details children have about how people of the past lived, the better prepared they are to see connections between themselves and those who lived long ago. By providing a vicarious experience

with people and places, good historical fiction creates an emotional connection between children of today and their historical counterparts (Rycik & Rosler, 2009). "Through historical fiction, students learn that people in all times have faced change and crisis, that people in all times have basic needs in common, and that these needs remain in our time" (Freeman & Levstik, 1998, p. 333).

Nonfiction, including textbooks, provides facts for the purpose of conveying information or clarifying concepts; thus, it is best suited for explaining how and why. In contrast, fictional sources offer a deeper look into the heart and minds of people (McCarty, 2007) making them more suitable for reaching emotions and developing empathy, compassion and understanding of others (Brophy & Allerman, 2003). Because literature is written to tell a story, it should not be used as a substitute for fact (McKay, 1995). Quality historical fiction, however, can complement the curriculum by adding a personal dimension to the study of a significant historical age or event.

Selecting Historical Fiction

The quality of historical fiction depends on extensive research and ensuring the text and images are historically accurate. According to Rycik and Rosler (2009), "Recent authors of historical fiction have perfected the art of combining an exciting story with memorable characters set against a backdrop of a historical time and place" (p. 163). With so many worthy titles from which to choose, the following guidelines can assist teachers in selecting the best available historical fiction for their classrooms: 1) Characters are realistically portrayed in authentic settings; 2) all aspects of the story, including dialogue and illustrations, reflect the time period being depicted, and 3) the author avoids promoting common stereotypes and myths (Linquist, 1995). The best historical fiction is identified as that which truly evokes the past through characters whose sensibilities and entire worldview mirrors the historical setting (Sharratt, 2012).

Fortunately, many resources are available to help teachers identify and choose quality historical fiction. The National Council for the Social Studies in cooperation with the Children's Book Council annually publishes an annotated bibliography of "Notable Trade Books in the Field of Social Studies." This list, which appears in the May/June issue of *Social Education*, contains recommended historical fiction titles. Awards are another way to identify quality works in children's and adolescent literature. Established in 1982, *The Scott ODell Award for Historical Fiction* is awarded annually to an author for a meritorious book published in the previous year for children or young adults. *The Jefferson Cup Award*, awarded annually since 1983 by the Virginia Library Association's Childrens and Young Adult Round Table, recognizes biographies, historical fiction, or books about American history. The Historical Association, in association with *BBC History Magazine*, established the *Young Quills* award for children's historical fiction in 2010. The selection procedure for this award is unique as nominations are based on reviews written by children, with adults involved at the end for final judging.

For the purpose of this article, we have chosen to focus on historical fiction published in picture book format. Picture books blend text with images adding additional information and richness of detail for the reader. Children's literature scholar Charlotte Huck defined picture books as "art objects in which images and ideas join to form a unique whole"(Huck & Kiefer, 2010). Typically, picture books are made for a specific audience who gain understanding from illustrations as well as the written story (Sawyer, 2011). Picture books use text and images to blend the story, so it is told as a continuous body of text rather than broken down into chapters. The length is a standard of thirty-two pages with a word count averaging five hundred to one thousand words, making them ideal for reading in their entirety in a single sitting. Although appropriate for older children, picture book vocabulary is carefully chosen and written to be easily understood by a younger audience as well.

Responding to the Past in Print

Historical fiction at its best challenges misconceptions and reveals facets of history never before considered (Sharratt, 2012), like how it felt to witness Columbus's arrival on the island of San Salvador in 1492 (*Encounter* by Jane Yolen. London: Sandpiper, 1996) or beginning a new life after years of being enslaved (*Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule* by Harriette Gillem Robinet New York: Jean Karl Books, 1998). Writing in response to such wondering encourages and documents children's critical thinking, and there are numerous possible forms for children's writing (see Textbox for list of possible writing forms). Regardless of the form the finished product takes, putting thoughts and ideas down on paper provides an avenue for analyzing assumptions, assimilating information, and reflecting on viewpoints (Linquist, 1995).

Textbox: Possible Writing Forms

advertisements	eye-witness accounts	menus	scripts
announcements	fact sheets/books	messages	sequels
billboards	fan letters	newspaper stories	surveys
bumper stickers	friendly letters	post cards	telegrams
character sketches	graffiti	posters or signs	time lines
comic strips	greeting cards	questionnaires	travel brochures
complaints	headlines	recipes	travel brochures
conversations	interviews	riddles	want ads
diaries, journals and logs	invitations	rules	wanted posters
directions	lost/found notices	schedules	

Here we offer a few examples of how teachers can encourage writing using quality historical fiction picture books.

Letter Writing: In *Nettie's Trip South* by Ann Turner (New York: Aladdin, 1995), Nettie recalls the details of her trip to the pre-Civil War South through the letter she is writing to her friend. This

book's use of letter-writing to present an engaging story is sure to generate interest in this time-honored choice for long distance communication. After discussing the difference in communication options available today and in generations past, teachers model how to write a friendly letter and have children write their own friendly letters. While students may choose the recipients of their letters, each letter should describe a well-researched historical event that they experienced first-hand, such as Hurricane Katrina or the election of our 44th president. Another example of historical fiction written in letters is *The Gardener* (New York: Square Fish, 2007) by Sarah Stewart. While living with her uncle in the city during the Great Depression, Lydia Grace introduces the neighbors to her favorite hobby. Through her correspondence to those at home, she is able to share the experience with her family on the farm.

Simulated Journal Writing: *Freedom Summer* by Deborah Wiles (New York: Aladdin, 2005) describes the friendship of two young boys in the 1960s. Joe and John Henry have much in common including their love for swimming, but the segregation laws prohibit them from sharing the public pool. After reading *Freedom Summer,* the teacher initiates a classroom discussion about life in the South before the Civil Rights Movement. Students gain a different perspective by writing a historical simulated journal entry. For this type of writing, students assume the role of another person and consider daily life in a different time and place. The students write from the viewpoint of the young protagonists living with Jim Crow laws. Simulated journals may consist of a single journal entry or a series of entries. *The Wright Brothers* by Quinten Reynolds (New York: Random House Books for Young Readers, 1981) is another selection that can be shared as a springboard for writing historical simulated journals. Long before the Wright Brothers made history in 1903 by taking flight, Orville and Wilbur loved to fix and build things. Students, pretending to be one of the bothers, can write about their experiences repairing bicycles, creating the fastest sled or inventing the highest-flying kite. *Playing in Pigtails* by Shana Corey (New York: Scholastic, 2003) can inspire students to record their experiences as a member of the 1940s all female professional baseball league. The challenge in this type of assignment, especially for young children, is to help students write with historical accuracy and integrity. Supplementing historical fiction with appropriate primary sources is one way to address this issue and assist children in obtaining authenticity in their writing.

Writing for an Interview: In his book *Home to Medicine Mountain* (New York: Children's Book Press, 2002), Chiori Santiago tells the story of two brothers who are sent to a residential school for Native American children where they are forbidden from speaking their native language or following their traditions. Set in the 1930s, the boys' journey home for the summer is chronicled as the healing power of their culture is revealed. *Home to Medicine Mountain* was inspired by stories the author heard from her father and uncle. After reading the book, students are assigned the task of writing their own set of questions that will be used to interview a family member and report their findings. Using actual newspapers from recent history, have students use headlines to generate questions about historically significant events. Demonstrate how to write open-ended questions to illicit more information from the person being interviewed. For practice, students can test their questions on classmates. *Seven Brave Women* by Betsy Hearn (New York: Greenwillow

Books, 2006) can also be used to introduce students to writing interview questions for their ancestors.

Writing Signs: In *Freedom on the Menu: The Greensboro Sit-Ins* by Carole Boston Weatherford (New York: Dial, 2004), there are signs all throughout town telling eight-year-old Connie where she can and cannot go. When Connie sees four young men take a stand for equal rights by sitting at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, she realizes that things may soon change. Teachers can use the pervasive signs contributing to this story and appearing in its illustrations to discuss the restrictions placed on African Americans in many states during the pre-Civil Rights South. Then, in order to demonstrate that signs can also be used to promote positive change, students can create their own by sharing words of wisdom from Dr. King and other prominent civil rights leaders. Primary sources such as the 1964 audio interview with Dr. King (King, 1964) can be incorporated into the lesson to expand students' understanding of this era. After reading *Train to Somewhere* (London: Sandpiper, 2000) by Eve Bunting, children may choose to make signs of encouragement for Marianne and the other orphans heading West that could be placed at various stations along the way.

Conclusion

While nonfiction provides content, historical fiction provides a framework for exploring the content (Lamme & Ledbetter, 1990) by revealing insights beyond the factual accounts (McCarty2007). More important than teaching history, historical fiction helps students connect to individuals who lived in different times (Rycik & Rosler, 2009). Such stories excite and enlighten young learners by encasing events from the past with knowledge about the people who lived them. Using historical fiction picture books as a catalyst for classroom writing activities increases literacy skills while deepening children's understanding of our past and increasing their sensitivity towards those who lived it. Most importantly, historical fiction easily dispels the misconception of history as dates and events by replacing this notion with the understanding that history is about the people who lived between the dates and during the events.

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