

A HANDBOOK FOR INTEGRATING HISTORICAL FICTION  
INTO A HIGH SCHOOL  
AMERICAN HISTORY COURSE

MASTER'S PROJECT

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by

John F. Day  
School of Education  
UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON  
Dayton, Ohio  
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~~Official Advisor~~

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

The study of history, perhaps more than any other subject, can help prepare our nation's young people for their futures. While it is impossible to know what shape the world will take twenty-five or fifty years from now, it is safe to assume that patterns and forces which have shaped humankind throughout history will still be at work then. By looking at examples of the past, students can develop a sense of perspective about the forces of change, think critically about society and its affairs, and learn to weigh evidence and think analytically. All these skills are crucial to developing responsible citizens to help the United States face the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Unfortunately, history education at the secondary level seems to be in a period of self-doubt. After more than a decade of studies revealing poor student attitudes and a startling lack of achievement in the subject, teachers find themselves wondering how they can reach their students more effectively. Scholars in the field and even politicians decry the current state of history teaching. Criticism comes both from those who claim that teachers need to "get back to basics" and focus on teaching the facts, and from those who say that the preoccupation with merely teaching facts is the problem; that it has made the study of history lifeless and turned students off the subject. Although there is much interest among adults in historical topics (witness the

popularity of historical novels, Ken Burns' series The Civil War, or movies with historical themes, from Gone With the Wind to JFK and Last of the Mohicans), students report that they are bored in history class and do not understand why they have to study it.

While there are many disagreements about what needs to be done to improve history teaching, there are broad themes upon which most educators agree. Nearly all lament the lack of time dedicated to the study of history. In most schools, only one or two years of history courses is required. This is surely insufficient to convey the knowledge and skills necessary to help people develop the responsibility and judgment needed as active citizens. In addition, most critics feel that most history textbooks and curricula attempt to cover too many topics, resulting in a superficial exposure that stimulates neither understanding nor interest. Teachers, they say, should try to select a smaller number of issues and investigate them in more depth. Another area of consensus is that the predominant methods of teaching history undermine learning and appreciation for the subject. While history itself is full of drama and emotion, conflict and uncertainty, in the classroom history tends to be a stream of dry facts, neatly packaged, but without much substance. Teachers therefore should make efforts to diversify their teaching methods in order to convey the inherent excitement of the subject. (Bennett, 1988; Gagnon, 1988; Loewen, 1995)

In the end, the burden for reforming history teaching will fall most heavily on classroom teachers. Most are already overworked and face budgetary, curricular, and time

constraints which make it difficult to experiment with new teaching methods. Some also work in schools or communities which do not encourage straying from the routine of textbooks, quizzes, and tests.

In the end, however, only the classroom teacher has the ability to make real changes in the way the subject is taught. Fortunately, there are many promising options available to history teachers willing to try new strategies. This project will provide a guide for teachers wanting to use historical fiction in their classes as a way to stimulate student interest, increase knowledge of the past, and develop the skills of the historical method.

Historical fiction has the power to pull even reluctant students into the study of history, allowing them to see the world through others' eyes and helping them to recognize the connections between historical events and their own lives. Books can be found which deal with any historical topic or time period and are available at a wide range of reading levels. Teachers can use them in many ways to develop almost any historical skill or attitude. Although few courses of study suggest the integration of literature into American History classes, it nevertheless can be an important tool in achieving many curricular goals.

The National Standards for United States History (National Center for History in the Schools, 1994) list five types of historical thinking which American History courses should cultivate. The use of historical fiction can help achieve all of them, but it is particularly valuable in supporting these three:

**Historical comprehension**, including the ability to read historical narratives with understanding; to identify the basic elements of the narrative structure (the characters, situation, sequence of events, their causes, and their outcomes); and, to develop historical perspectives -- that is, the ability to describe the past through the eyes and experiences of those who were there as revealed through their literature, art, artifacts, and the like, and to avoid "present-mindedness," judging the past solely in terms of the norms and values of today.

**Historical analysis and interpretation**, including the ability to compare and contrast different experiences, beliefs, motives, traditions, hopes, and fears of people from various groups and backgrounds, and at various times in the past and present; to analyze how these differing motives, interests, beliefs, hopes and fears influenced people's behaviors; to consider multiple perspectives in the records of human experience and multiple causes in analyses of historical events; to challenge arguments of historical inevitability; and, to compare and evaluate competing historical explanations of the past.

**Historical issues-analysis and decision-making**, including the ability to identify problems that confronted people in the past; to analyze the various interests and points of view of people caught up in these situations; to evaluate alternative proposals for dealing with the problem(s); to analyze whether the decisions reached or the actions taken were good and why; and, to bring historical perspectives to bear on informed decision-making in the present. (National Center for History in the Schools, 1994, p. 7)

While historical literature is no panacea for solving the troubling trends of history achievement, it can support the teacher in accomplishing many vital aspects of history education. Educators wishing to make more of an impact on their students and to diversify their teaching are encouraged

to try this method.

### Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project was to develop a handbook which high school history teachers can use to assist them in integrating historical fiction into their United States History classes.

The handbook presented in this Master's Project is divided into four sections. It contains an introduction to the issue of using literature in the history class, guidelines for choosing appropriate books, techniques for implementing literature in the class, and a bibliographies of sources for historical literature on various topics and sources for further research in the area. It also contains a case study of how one book, Willa Cather's O Pioneers! (1913) was used effectively in a United States history course to teach about the settling of the Great Plains.

### Limitations

The handbook was written for a high school history teachers in a United States History course. Therefore, some of the literature and techniques included may not be appropriate at other levels or with other courses. However, most of the ideas could be adapted for use in other history courses and at other levels.

The study also deals primarily with historical fiction and does not investigate other types of literature such as biographies, short stories, poetry, and non-fiction which can play a valuable role in the history class. Even the category



of historical fiction by itself is a broad one, however. It can include such types of work as classic fiction (e.g., Red Badge of Courage), fictionalized accounts of real events in the past (e.g., Killer Angels, Michael Shaara's story of the battle of Gettysburg), and fictionalized accounts of invented people and events set in an earlier time period (To Kill a Mockingbird). Historical literature is sometimes stretched to include any writing set in the past, such as pulp romance novels which may not be specifically historical in content and which presumably have no place in high school history classrooms. While all of these types of writing may fit under the umbrella term of "historical literature," this study will be focusing on fictional books which accurately portray the past.

### Significance of the Project

"Why do we have to learn this?" "This class is boring!"

History teachers across the country face students who see little point in learning about the past and think of it as the memorization of pointless facts which have no relevance to their lives. American History textbooks and the prevalent methods of teaching the subject are frequently unable to convey either the drama or the lessons of history to today's youth. Students therefore leave the class with little understanding of their place in history or the world around them.

There are many methods available for increasing student

interest in and understanding of history. One promising technique is the integration of historical fiction into history classes. There is a need for materials to help both new and veteran teachers who wish to try alternative strategies in their classes.

This writer believes that a handbook showing how to select appropriate historical literature and use it effectively in a high school American History class would benefit educators. It is this writer's hope that history teachers will find this handbook useful and that it will encourage them to try integrating historical fiction into their own classes.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section examines the practices and results of current methods of teaching social studies. This writer felt that it was important to better understand the present state of social studies instruction in order to justify the effort of exploring an alternative method. The literature review begins with a summary of findings in professional journals, scholarly books, and government documents regarding student achievement in American History. The literature review continues with an exploration of student attitudes toward social studies classes and the methods employed by social studies teachers. Finally, the first section concludes with a review of the current instructional practices of social studies teachers to determine which methods are most prevalent.

Once this foundation of research for the current state of social studies education has been established, books and articles on the topic of integration of historical literature into the class will be reviewed. In particular, this review will focus on three questions: 1) What is the rationale for using historical literature in history classes? 2) What criteria should teachers use for selecting literature for their history classes? and 3) What instructional strategies should teachers employ when using historical literature in the social studies classroom?

## The Current State of Social Studies Education

Student achievement in social studies. While educators and critics disagree on the causes of low achievement, few observers of social studies education dispute that student knowledge of American History is poor. The most extensive survey of student knowledge in United States History was conducted by Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn in 1986 and the results were published in What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know? (1987) This test, consisting of multiple choice questions, was administered to 8,000 high school juniors across the country. It revealed that almost one-third of the juniors did not know the purpose of the Declaration of Independence, most could not recognize basic information about the U.S. Constitution, and more than two-thirds did not know the half-century in which the Civil War was fought. Questions covered all periods of United States History and a wide variety of topics, but overall, the average score was 54.5% correct. Only in five out of the sixteen areas polled did students score a "passing grade" of over 60% and the two topics with the highest percentage correct (Maps and Geography and Science and Technology) only had 71.3% answer correctly. A mere 15 of the 141 questions were answered correctly by at least 80% of the students. These results came despite the fact that 78% of the students were enrolled in U.S. History courses at the time of the survey and 97.6% had studied the subject at some point in high school. The authors were clearly alarmed at the results of the survey, predicting

serious consequences for a society in which so many of its citizens lack what they feel is vital cultural knowledge. "Our society is breeding a new strain of cultural barbarian, one who cannot read or write except at the most rudimentary level and who possesses virtually no knowledge except that conveyed through the television set." (Finn & Ravitch, 1987, p. 13)

A follow up study, "The U.S. History Report Card," was conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 1988. It also concluded that student knowledge of American history is deficient. "A large percentage of students approaching high-school graduation -- and a disproportionately large percentage of minority students -- lack a sense of the national heritage. In fact, many appear to have only a surface acquaintance with the history of our nation." (Hammack & Hartoonian, 1990, p. 6) In addition to testing knowledge of facts, the U.S. History Report Card also measured the level of sophistication of students' historical understanding. The four levels of historical understanding developed by the NAEP were:

Level 200	Knows simple historical facts
Level 250	Knows beginning historical information and has rudimentary interpretive skills
Level 300	Understands basic historical terms and relationships
Level 350	Interprets historical information and ideas (Hammack et al., 1990, p. 16)

While students in high school were usually aware of famous historical events and people, their historical understanding was still at a rudimentary level. "Most of the high-school seniors displayed a knowledge of beginning historical

information, but far fewer appeared to understand the interrelationships among historical events, persons, and documents." (Hammack et al., 1990, p. 9) Only 45.9% of students operated at the level of understanding basic historical terms and relationships (Level 300) and a mere 4.6% functioned at the highest level.

Comparing the results of this study with that conducted by the Chester and Finn in 1986, the authors found little improvement in student achievement in American history. "There were no significant changes in eleventh graders' performance on the items measuring knowledge of the chronology of documents, persons, and events." (Hammack et al., 1990, p. 55) There was a slight improvement in the students who correctly responded to questions about two historical periods -- exploration and colonization and rise of modern America and World War I -- but otherwise there were no significant differences. Summarizing their findings, the authors concluded, "the assessment results indicate that across the grades, most students have a limited grasp of U.S. history. (Hammack et al, 1990, p. 10)

John D. Hoge (1991), investigating how students develop their knowledge of time concepts, also found deficiencies in knowledge of American history. Although the purpose of his investigation was not to test historical knowledge per se, he was startled at some of the responses he received. Some high school seniors thought that 1600 was shortly before World War II and that the Old West was in full swing in the sixteenth century. Hoge concluded, "While the results clearly indicate substantial development of historical time knowledge for the

majority of students, a considerable number of students at all grade levels have knowledge deficiencies we would hope would not exist." (Hoge, 1991, p. 22)

One of the most vocal critics of current education is E.D. Hirsch. In his book, Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (1987), Hirsch decried the state of American education because it fails to transmit critical cultural knowledge to students. Relying on the work of other researchers (such as Finn and Ravitch) and his personal experiences teaching at the college level, Hirsch saw a rapid decline in the "cultural literacy" of Americans. "During the period 1970-1985, the amount of shared knowledge that we have been able to take for granted in communication with our fellow citizens has also been declining. More and more of our young people don't know things we used to assume they knew." (Hirsch, 1987, p. 5) Hirsch does not believe that young people are less intelligent than they used to be, but rather that schools have stopped teaching the content of cultural literacy, "the network of information that all competent readers possess."

It is not enough for schools to simply teach skills, he argues. Rather they must purposively set out to ensure that cultural literacy is transmitted to the young. Hirsch even goes so far as to develop a list of terms, people, dates, sayings, titles, and places to serve as a guideline for "What Literate Americans Know." His list begins with six dates (1066, 1492, 1776, 1861-1865, 1914-1918, 1939-1945) then proceeds to name some 4,500 items, beginning with abbreviation, abolitionism, and abominable snowman and ending



with Emile Zola, zoning and Zurich. According to Cultural Literacy, from the earliest grades students need to learn the content of literacy, as well as its skills, not by memorizing a list of definitions (although Hirsch criticizes our schools' severe reluctance to expect any memorization), but through creative methods and materials. Hirsch argues that only when this happens will students acquire the vital information needed for communication and social progress.

Not all educators and scholars agree that students have slid dramatically in their achievement, nor do they subscribe to the view that teaching a prescribed list of facts is the answer to improving knowledge and skills in social studies. In his article, "What Have 17-Year-Olds Known in the Past?" (1991) Dale Whittington challenged the conclusion that there has been a steep decline in students' knowledge of American history. Comparing the results of Finn and Ravitch's (1987) study with those from assessments administered from the 1930s to the 1960s, Whittington found that "for the most part, students of the 1980s are not demonstrably different from students in their parents' or grandparents' generation in terms of the knowledge of American history." (Whittington, 1991, p. 776) While the test administered by Finn and Ravitch was different from the earlier ones, Whittington demonstrates that earlier students performed at about the same level of achievement as students today. In fact, contends Whittington, it could be argued that students today know more than earlier students, because of the lower dropout rate and "less elitist composition" of the students taking standardized tests today. Furthermore, he calls in to



question the methodology employed by Finn and Ravitch (only a multiple-choice test of factual information). Whittington believes that such assessments measure too narrowly and recommends a search for alternative methods that could assess a broader range of accomplishments.

Tarter and Christenbury (1989) criticize Hirsch's idea that teachers need to be teaching more facts to students. Although they agree that "the evidence (is) so clear that something is wrong" in the American history achievement of students, they challenge those who believe that teaching should focus on making sure that students learn more facts. Lecture, note taking, worksheets, quizzes, and tests -- techniques best suited for teaching facts -- are already the staple of most social studies classes. "What we often see is nothing but attempts to drill content into students," leading to a situation where "There is little to distinguish in students' minds one fact from another." (Tarter & Christenbury, 1989, p. 16) Although E.D. Hirsch explicitly encourages more creative teaching, Tarter and Christenbury argue that, in practice, a push to increase specific content knowledge will undoubtedly result in less creativity and more drill. Instead, they conclude, "our students need fewer facts and better teaching...teachers who know more than content -- who learn how to present it, pace it and ask questions about it -- can truly guide their students into cultural literacy." (Tarter and Christenbury, 1989, 20)

Student Attitudes Towards Social Studies Not only have most studies of student achievement in the social studies been disappointing, so, too, have been the results of attitude surveys. Such studies have found that students generally do not enjoy social studies courses and social studies tends to fall near the bottom students are asked what their favorite class is, following such subjects as math and English. On the brighter side, it is generally not among the most disliked of classes either (Math and English take this honor as well). In their review of two decades of attitude studies, Joan M. Shaughnessy and Thomas M. Haladyna (1985) found that research findings have been "consistently negative regarding social studies attitudes." (p. 693) Citing studies from 1965-1982, they concluded that "Most students in the United States, at all grade levels, find social studies to be one of the least interesting, most irrelevant subjects in the school curriculum. (p. 694)

John Goodlad's "Study of Schooling" described in A Place Called School (1984) found similar results in his massive analysis of thirty-eight schools (including twelve senior high schools.

Secondary students, for their part, considered the social studies to be less important than English/language arts, mathematics, and vocational education, about as important as science, and more important than foreign languages, the arts, and physical education. Junior and senior high students viewed the social studies to be among the least useful subjects in relation to their present and future needs. (Goodlad, 1984, p. 210)

Thomas McGowan (1984) in a survey of 305 high school students

found that "student attitudes toward the social studies ranged from the apathetic to the negative," especially when compared to attitudes toward other classes or to school in general. (30) In fact, attitudes were consistently poor regardless of whether teachers taught in traditional or "advocated" style. Traditional methodology was characterized by "stability, content emphasis, factual orientation, and academicism," while advocated teaching consisted of "flexibility, child-centeredness, conceptual orientation, and activism." (25) Neither approach significantly affected student attitudes.

The instructional approach utilized by a social studies teacher (whether an advocated or a traditional approach) did not influence attitudes toward social studies of this student sample...These findings seem to contradict the assumption of social studies revisionists that the adoption of a particular set of social studies instructional practices will markedly and rapidly improve student attitudes toward the social studies." (McGowan, 1984, p. 30)

If anything, McGowan found that high school students have a slight preference for the traditional approach (while elementary students seemed to lean toward the advocated approach.

There are a number of reasons that many students are dissatisfied with Social Studies. Schug, Todd and Beery (1984) interviewed a sample of 6th and 12 graders and found that the most common complaint was that it is "boring" (44% of students mentioned this) followed by "redundant subject matter (18%), "complex subject matter" (16%), "difficult tests" (15%), "routine teaching methods" (13%), "dislike of

history" (13%), "memorization of facts" (13%), "emphasis on trivial details" (12%), and "subject matter is easily forgotten" (7%). (386) The authors then asked those students who proffered other classes why their favorite course was more interesting than social studies. Thirty-five percent of students said "more opportunity for active learning (experiments, activities, independent work). Other common responses were "success in the other subject" (30%), "more variety" (17%), "more opportunity to be imaginative, creative" (11%), "information is of immediate use" (11%), "applies to future career" (7%), and "challenging subject" (7%). (p. 386)

Haladyna and Shaughnessy (1982), looking for correlates of attitudes toward social studies found that a number of variables, ranging from the life-view of students to learning environment impact on attitudes toward social studies. Students who are more fatalistic tend to have more negative attitudes while those who have more self-confidence are generally more positive. Many of the findings seem obvious: Belief in the importance of social studies is positively correlated with positive attitudes as is teacher's enthusiasm for the subject, willingness to help students at a personal level, use of praise and reinforcement, fairness, and commitment to helping students learn. Students' enjoyment of their classmates, amount of friction in the class, difficulty of class, and goal direction all significantly affected attitudes. (21)

Attempting to reach a deeper understanding of the sources of negative attitudes toward the social studies,

Fernandez, Massey, and Dornbusch (1976) administered questionnaires to 1436 from 11 high schools. Their findings indicate that students see social studies as having relatively little importance in terms of future jobs. When compared with math or English, only about half as many thought it important to learn social studies for entering or performing their future occupation. Only about two-thirds as many considered their grades in social studies to be as important as math or English for future employment. Students perceived that their parents, friends, and even guidance counselors regarded social studies as being less important than these other subjects. The authors also report that a high proportion of students responded that "if they did 'poor work' in social studies they would not receive a 'poor grade.'" Indeed a higher percentage of students did receive A's and B's in Social studies class than they did in English and Math (except for Black students). The study concludes that "it would appear from our findings that teachers of social studies have serious problems. Students do not consider the content of social studies to be as important as the skills they learn in other courses..." (Fernandez, et al, 1976, p. 56)

Another factor in negative attitudes toward social studies classes may be students attitudes towards their textbooks, the primary instructional material. While discussions by historians and educators of the nature and quality of history textbooks are numerous (and will be discussed below in the Instructional Characteristics section), research into student opinion of history texts is

very limited. The only study this writer was able to find was conducted by Terrie L. Epstein (1994). This study interviewed fifteen students who had used Daniel Boorstin and Mather Kelley's *A History of the United States*, a widely used and critically acclaimed textbook. While educators who reviewed the text generally found it was well written, appealing, and clearly explained historical events and significance, students reviewers were not as impressed. Seventy-one percent of the students thought the text tended to present a parade of facts without sufficient explanation of causes and consequences of events. The student readers found the book "boring, hard, or difficult to understand." They also felt that the book needed more information on the role of common people in the making of the United States. When asked how the text could be improved, students suggested making the prose easier to read, eliminate the "endless stream of details," and "improve their explanations of the causes and significance of events." (p. 42) Although it would be premature to draw conclusions from a single study, initial findings indicate that students may have negative attitudes towards their textbooks which may contribute to their poor attitudes toward the class in general.

While the vast majority of studies have found that students have negative attitudes towards social studies classes, a few studies supply contradictory evidence, at least under specialized circumstances. A 1988 Gallop Poll commissioned by the National Geographic Society surveyed 1,611 Americans aged eighteen and older to determine their knowledge of geography and their attitudes towards various



classes they took in high school. The results of this survey are reviewed in James B. M. Schick's "What Do Students Really Think of History?" (1991). When asked what their "Least Favorite" subject in middle and high school 4% of respondents said Social Studies and 12% said history. This compares favorably to math (32%) and English (22%), and in the same range as Science (10%). Interestingly, just 4% rated Social Studies as their "Most Favorite" subject, but 19% listed History as most favorite, the second highest subject (behind math with 27%). Furthermore, respondents also viewed their history (results for social studies are not reported for these questions) classes as interesting and useful. Seventy-four percent thought that history was "very" or "somewhat" interesting -- higher than any other subject. When asked "How useful was this subject as you look back on your schooling?" the same percentage (74%) said that history was "very" or "somewhat" useful, a score topped only by math and tied with science.

The results of this poll are touted by Schick as evidence that attitudes towards history are much better than is generally believed. However, the methodology of this study has a crucial difference from most others. It questioned adults looking back on their high school experiences, not students currently enrolled in the classes. Thus the results could be construed in a number of ways. Perhaps the respondents class experiences were considerably better than those of students today or maybe they are looking back with rose-colored glasses and imagining they liked history more than they really did while in high school. It

is also possible that many people gain a richer appreciation for the subject as they get older. Schick interprets the findings to mean that most people have an intrinsically positive attitude towards history (which he distinguishes from Social Studies), but because of widespread poor teaching often have negative attitudes towards the history classes that they happen to be taking at the time:

Perhaps what this poll reveals is not so much retrospective falsification as a gradual and proper divorcement of the message from the messenger. Students from school systems which de-emphasize history in favor of social studies or which entrust these young minds to those whose primary interests involve activities pursued sweatily after the final school bell, to teachers poorly prepared by schools of education to teach history, or to those attracted to school teaching by the job security and pay scale, might just be saying they found history boring or "just not my thing" because they have been taught to poorly. (Schick, 1991, p. 341)

Whether or not one accepts Schick's indictment of history teaching, his article does point out that perhaps things are not as bad as they seem, that there is some additional hope that students can be motivated to learn history.

Another study contradicting the general tide of negative reports about student attitudes towards social studies looked specifically at students attitudes in social studies classes which stressed higher-order thinking (Stevenson, 1990). In-depth interviews were conducted with forty-five high school students of varying ability levels from five selected high schools who were enrolled in higher-order thinking (HOT) social studies classes. These were classes which asked students to "interpret, analyze, or manipulate information,



or apply acquired knowledge and skills to novel problems or new situations." rather than focusing on learning facts or mechanically applying formulas. The study found that for the students interviewed social studies was the most interesting. Forty-two percent ranked social studies as the most interesting and worthwhile, well ahead of the second place finisher, English (19%). This came despite the fact that more students (35%) rated it their most challenging class than any other (Science -- 21%, Math -- 19%). Stevenson's study gives credence to the theory that the problem of motivation in Social Studies may lie with the ways that it is usually taught, rather than something inherent in the subject matter. If students spent more time on cognitively-challenging tasks, he concludes, they would have higher levels of satisfaction in class. Stevenson goes on to challenge school reforms which rely on more difficult grading:

These findings suggest that many recent proposals for 'reform' of US schools are unlikely to enhance student engagement, especially such policies as more stringent graduation requirements and tougher grading practices which focus on extrinsic motivation. If the conditions for student engagement are to be established, then intrinsic forms of motivation must be utilized: that is, the subject matter just be made interesting, the process of instruction must involve active student participation, and academic tasks must be cognitively challenging (so that mastery of intended learning outcomes can be perceived as developing a sense of competence). (Stevenson, 1990, p. 340)

While Steven's results are not surprising, it does give hope that negative attitudes towards social studies can be

overcome.

Similar results were discovered in Jeffrey T. Fouts' "High School Social Studies Classroom Environments and Attitudes: A Cluster Analysis Approach." (1987) Students have more positive attitudes when their teachers use a variety of teaching strategies, vary routines, allow considerable student involvement, and conduct a task oriented, orderly class. In classes where these characteristics are absent attitudes tend to be worse. These findings are hardly surprising (although they seem to directly contradict McGowan's 1989 study, reported above). Grant and Napier in "Comparing an aesthetic and a political approach to teaching world history" (1981) likewise found that course content and teacher methodology can affect student attitudes toward social studies. Students exposed to art, music, and poetry in world history classes reported slightly more favorable attitudes than those who focused solely on political history while at the same time learning more overall.

Thus, despite the preponderance of negative findings about attitudes towards social studies, it is important to keep in mind that a minority of studies find that attitudes might not be as negative as is generally believed and that teacher behaviors and strategies can positively influence student attitudes.

Characteristics of Social Studies Instruction. When researchers study how social studies is generally taught in the classroom, they find again and again that the dominant

methods are lecture, recitation, worksheets, and tests, with the major classroom material being the textbook. For most teachers there is generally little variation in this instructional cycle which has remained largely unchanged since at least the 1950s. Shaver, Davis, and Helburn (1979), reviewing three massive studies commissioned by the National Science Foundation on the state of high school social studies, science, and mathematics education confirmed the pattern of instruction. Among the conclusions they reached are:

The dominate modes of instruction continue to be large group, teacher-controlled recitation and lecture, based primarily on the textbook.

The dominant instructional tool continues to be the conventional textbook, and longtime bestsellers continue to dominate the market.

The "knowing" expected of students is largely information-oriented. For students to demonstrate learning acceptably in discussion and on tests they often have to reproduce not only the content but the language of the text. Experienced-based curricula are rare, as is "inquiry teaching."

The materials from the federally-funded New Social Studies projects of the 1960's and 1970's are not being selected for classroom use.

Teachers tend to rely on external motivation. Students are not expected to learn because of their own interests, but for grades, for approval, because doing one's lessons is the thing that is done at school.

Affective objectives are rarely an explicit part of the curriculum. Implicitly, content and classroom interactions are typically used to teach students to accept authority and to have them learn "important truths" about our history and government. (Shaver et al, 1979, p. 151)

Shaver et al. report that teachers are aware and concerned

that students show little interest in social studies, but "teachers generally do not make the possible connection between the lack of motivation on their students' part and their own reliance on textbook/content based, teacher dominated instruction." (Shaver et al., 1979, p. 152)

Morrissett, Hawke and Superka (1980) likewise found that the predominant methods of instruction in social studies are lecture and discussion/recitation based on conventional textbooks. "Little social studies instruction employs a variety of materials or engages students in active experiences, and most instruction in social studies occurs in large group settings." (Morrissett et al, 1980, p. 563)

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (Hammack, et al, 1990), not only tested knowledge of American History, but also asked students to describe how often various educational activities occurred in their history classes. The results of student reporting echo other research regarding classroom practices. Following are the results of the survey:

	Daily	2-3 times a week	once a week	less than once a week	never
1. Lecture	73.4%	16.5%	4.7%	2.5%	2.9%
2. Use Textbook	59.6	21.0	8.5	6.2	4.7
3. Read historical stories, biographies, articles	16.9	19.1	20.6	26.3	17.1
4. Memorize information	22.6	18.9	22.3	18.9	17.3
5. Discuss/analyze historical events in small groups	11.7	10.2	11.4	23.7	43.1

	Once a week	Once a month	Few times a year	Never
6. Work on individual or group projects	16.5%	22.9%	19.7%	40.8%
7. Write reports over 5 typed pages long	2.3	9.2	20.5	68.0
8. Visit museums & exhibits	1.2	1.7	4.1	93.0
9. Watch movies or listen to oral history	33.1	29.8	21.3	15.8
10. Use documents of other original sources	12.1	20.6	22.8	44.5
11. Take tests	71.4	20.6	5.8	2.2

(Finn and Ravitch, 1987, pp. 188-194)

These results confirm the persistence of traditional teacher-centered modes of instruction in most social studies classrooms.

John Goodlad also reports in A Place Called School (1984) that classes in general are teacher-centered and involve little active participation on the part of students. Students in most classes spend most of their time listening to lectures, doing worksheets and preparing for assignments. These practices become increasingly dominant as students progress through school and most teachers do little to vary the routine. "On the whole, teachers at all levels apparently did not know how to vary their instructional procedures, did not want to, or had some kind of difficulty doing so." (Goodlad, 1984, p. 106) These characteristics were found throughout schools, but Goodlad found them especially true in the social studies. While social studies offers rich opportunity for intellectually challenging projects, group problem solving, etc., instead the traditional lecture-textbook-worksheet-test cycle dominates classroom practice:

I conclude by noting the preponderance of classroom activity involving listening, reading textbooks, completing workbooks and worksheets, and taking quizzes--in contrast to a paucity of activities requiring problem solving, the achievement of group goals, students' planning and executing a project, and the like...It appears that we cannot assume the cultivation of goals most appropriate to the social sciences even when social studies courses appear in the curriculum. (Goodlad, 1984, p. 213)

One of the most frequent criticisms of history in particular is the nature of history textbooks. In "Literary Lackluster: The Unhappy State of American History Textbooks," (1988) Gilbert Sewall reviews some of the most popular texts and reaches these conclusions:

1. The physical size and weight of textbooks discourage enthusiasm for their contents.
2. The prose style of most textbooks is bland and voiceless.
3. Excessive coverage makes textbooks boring.
4. Group consciousness (the attempt to satisfy every interest group) contributes to flawed textbook writing.
5. Textbook format and graphics diminish the style and coherence of the running text. (Sewall, 1988, p. 35)

Sewall blames increasing demands from special interest groups to make textbook content conform to their diverse political and social agendas for the "stream of facts" nature of most textbooks. Publishers try to "please everyone while offending no one" resulting in texts that steer clear of controversy. "Texts repeatedly present facts without explaining their meaning. No publisher dares risk giving offense by offering candid accounts that highlight social



tensions." (Sewall, 1988a, p. 556) These weaknesses are compounded, argues Sewall, when texts are subjected to "readability formulas" which "break up complex sentences, shorten paragraphs, and excise stylistic flourishes...The result is, at its best, straightforward -- and, at its worst, choppy monotonic metallic prose." (Sewall, 1988a, p. 555) Sewall feels that history textbooks should learn from popular historical fiction and nonfiction work, such as the John Jakes novels or Bruce Catton's Civil War histories. By concentrating on telling the moving stories that fill American history and using colorful language, textbooks could actually increase student interest in history, rather than turn them away.

Research bears out Sewall's contention that applying "readability formulas" to history texts does not necessarily make them easily understood. In fact, a large number of students still have difficulty comprehending their textbooks. Five percent of the high school seniors taking the U.S. History Report Card assessment reported that they had a "lot of difficulty" understanding their textbooks and 36% had "some difficulty." Altogether, two-fifths of students are not fully understanding their textbooks, despite the use of readability formulas. (Hammack et al, 1990, p. 88)

Harriet Tyson-Bernstein makes similar criticisms in "A Conspiracy of Good Intentions: America's Textbook Fiasco." (1988) Publishers have often made sure only of "the presence of the required material, not its depth or clarity." Trying to satisfy diverse adoption committees, publishers try to pack ever increasing numbers of facts while steering clear of

any controversy, resulting in what she calls the "mentioning problem."

"The context necessary to make facts meaningful has been edited out to make room for still more facts. The vignettes and even the adjectives that would make history readable and enjoyable have lost out to more to more names, dates, and terms. The large ideas that make sense out of scientific data have been sacrificed to make room for more parts and components. Because the books try to contain too much, they usually have no discernible theme."  
(Tyson-Bernstein, 1988, p. 9)

Similar criticisms of are made by almost every scholar who looks at history textbooks. In High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America (1983), Ernest Boyer writes, "Most textbooks present students with a highly simplified view of reality and practically no insight into the methods by which the information has been gathered and facts distilled." (Boyer, 1983, p. 143) Boyer advocates using more primary sources to allow students to "meet authors personally and discover events first hand," (p. 143) rather than simply being concerned with "covering the material." Paul Gagnon's article "Why study history?" (1988) criticizes the tendency of texts toward "presentism" -- in which people and actions of the past are judged by today's fashions rather than by the different circumstances and prevailing ideas of their time." (p. 46) Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong, by James W. Loewen (1995,) provides a blistering attack on textbooks which he claims are boring, avoid controversy, distort the past, and are overly nationalistic. They try to satisfy all constituencies therefore end up too long and weighed down by



hundreds of "main ideas," "key facts," and vocabulary terms which are memorized for the next text, then promptly forgotten. Little effort is made to help students see the big picture or understand historical processes.

"None of the facts is remembered, because they are presented simply as one damn thing after another. While textbook authors tend to include most of the trees and all too many twigs, they neglect to give readers even a glimpse of what they might find memorable: the forests. Textbooks stifle meaning by suppressing causation. Students exit history textbooks without having developed the ability to think coherently about social life." (Loewen, 1995, p. 4)

The end result, says Loewen, is that students -- especially African-American, Native American and Hispanic students -- promptly forget the information which they memorize for the tests and students are given "no reason to love or appreciate the subject." Loewen, 1995, p. 304)

The evidence presented in the literature gives a bleak view of the current state of the social studies in American schools. The main techniques used by teachers are the lecture, textbook, worksheet, and test. Most students do not enjoy social studies and don't see the relevance of its study to their lives. Students' knowledge of history is weak. Given this state of affairs it seems reasonable that social studies teachers attempt to manipulate the factor over which they have most control, teaching methodology. While there are many techniques to explore, one area of promise is the use of historical fiction in the classroom.

### Using Literature in the history classroom

Justifications for using historical literature. Using historical literature in the social studies classroom requires teachers to change some aspects of what and how they teach. Before teachers make this effort, it would be reasonable for them to have a good idea of why taking such a course might be beneficial. Some of the reasons are obviously suggested by the research described above: Most students are bored with social studies and see little relevance in the class for their own lives; conventional teaching methods used in social studies apparently do not interest students nor do they result in high achievement. On initial inspection, therefore, there might be cause for teachers to begin trying new teaching strategies. But why historical literature?

Using literature to teach history is not a new idea. In his 1925 work Teaching of History in Elementary and Secondary Schools (cited in McGowan and Guzzetti, 1991), Henry Johnson argued that literary sources encourage greater historical understanding. Over the years a minority of history teachers have believed in the efficacy of literature and have used it in their classrooms. Despite this long tradition, however, very few experiments have been conducted to specifically measure the value of this instructional strategy. Most of the studies have been conducted have limitations which make generalizations difficult. Many have been done at the elementary or middle school levels. One such study showed that sixth graders taught with historical literature showed a significant gain in achievement and had a more positive

attitude toward the learning than did the group taught with a textbook. (Jones and Coombs, 1994) Another study, this time at the high school level, compared traditional teaching with instruction using aesthetic materials (literature, music, art, etc.). (Epstein, 1989, unpublished dissertation cited in Eisner, 1991) This study did not measure achievement, but interviews revealed that students preferred and felt that they learned more from the aesthetic approach than from conventional practices. Students reported that the aesthetic approach gave them a much better feel for the topic they were studying (slavery) than they could have gotten from a textbook.

A study by Grant and Napier (1981) compared one world history class which incorporated aesthetics into their study of world history with another class which concentrated on political content. Both classes relied on the lecture-discussion method to teach the bulk of the material, but while the control class then studied their politically-oriented textbooks, the experimental class analyzed "how representative art, music, and literature reflected the historical periods under consideration." (Grant & Napier, 1981, p. 372) As reported above, students in the aesthetic class had slightly better attitudes toward their class than students in the other class. Not surprisingly, the aesthetic class outperformed the political class on the aesthetic achievement test. In addition, however, in tests of common and political knowledge the two classes attained similar scores despite the fact that previous to the study the aesthetic class had "performed more poorly on unit tests and

evidenced much less motivation than the subjects in the political group." (Grant & Napier, 1981, p. 374) Thus, this study, though limited in its scope and utilizing a general aesthetic approach (and not just literature) gives some indication that such an alternative approach may provide gains in attitude and achievement.

A third experiment in this area was conducted by Cunningham and Gall, and reported in "The effects of expository and narrative prose on student achievement and attitudes toward textbooks." (1990) This study, involving 440 ninth grade history students, required students to read either a traditional expository version of a text, or one written in a narrative format. Both versions were written using the same instructional objectives (content coverage, concept load, and new vocabulary). Pre- and post-tests were administered to the students which revealed that there were no significant differences in achievement in history, nor in attitudes toward the textbook version which they used. (p. 171) However, when they were able to examine the version of the text which they had not used, 80% preferred the narrative version, regardless of which one they had studied. This study gives some support to the notion that students might have more interest in learning from narrative prose than from expository prose. However, this interest did not result in higher achievement in this study. It must be pointed out that this study did not involve historical literature, but rather a narrative version of a textbook, and thus it may have limited applicability to the question of using literature.

A final study (Smith, Monson, and Dobson, 1992) sought to measure the learning of students who studied social studies through historical literature without any textbook, and to compare those results with students in another school who used standard social studies textbooks. Although this study dealt with fifth graders, and thus may not be generalizable to high school students, the result were dramatic. In an open-ended interview at the end of the year, students in the experimental classroom were able to recall 60% more information than students in the control classroom. Asked such questions as "What can you tell me about the Civil War? Who was in it? What were they fighting about? What personal feelings do you have about the Civil War?" students who had studied using historical literature were able to recall significantly more main ideas and details of the topics which they had studied. On the pretest both groups recalled similar amounts of information (the control group averaged 6.7 items, the experimental group 7.01). At the end of the year, however, control students averaged 11.4 items while experimental students averaged 18.3. Students also reported that they preferred learning social studies using literature to learning with basal texts. Again, it is not known whether these results are generalizable to high school students, but it does indicate that positive results in achievement and attitude are possible.

While experimental data on the efficacy of using literature in the history classroom is limited, there is no shortage of educators who support the practice. History teachers who use literature maintain that historical

literature can transmit the same concepts as the textbook version of events, but with the advantage of being much more interesting for students. As Gallo and Barksdale point out in "Using Fiction in American History" (1983), "Well-written historical novels are far livelier than history textbooks. Students who may not be motivated to read their history text with much enthusiasm or comprehension are more likely to read a novel which deals with the same events and concepts, even if there are more pages in the novel than in the textbook." (Gallo and Barksdale, 1983, p. 286) Levstik (1981), McGowan and Guzzetti (1991), and nearly every other advocate of historical literature claim that student interest in history is increased when students read historical literature.

Tomlinson, Tunnell and Richgels (1993) compare both the content and writing of textbooks and historical literature. They claim that textbooks cover broadly and shallowly with an emphasis on facts, names and dates. The writing is primarily expository and is frequently subjected to a readability formula which actually reduces overall interest, clarity, and connectedness. By contrast, Tomlinson et al. assert, historical literature is able to investigate deeply human motives, solving problems, and the consequences of action. Furthermore, it is written in a more cohesive manner with rich and varied styles and perspectives which make it more memorable and interesting to students.

Teachers who use literature argue that narrative fiction, by its nature, tends to draw the reader into the story much more than expository writing, resulting in increased learning. Students are able to identify with the



characters, feel the emotions they feel, while at the same time learning important concepts and absorbing a sense of the time and place. Literature stimulates the reader to feel empathy for the characters about whom they read. "Students react to the circumstances and conflicts which the characters undergo. In this way they are able to put themselves in the situations of the characters." (Brown & Abel, 1982, p. 279) With well-written historical literature, adolescents may feel that they are living vicariously through the characters, particularly when the protagonist is also young. (Hunt; McGowan and Guzzetti)

Because their interest is heightened and they have identified with the characters in the book, students unconsciously absorb both the factual and affective content of the book. Students who might be bored with a traditional textbook and who would resist learning its facts and concepts, readily learn from literature as the author provides details of speech, clothing, food, housing, social relations, etc. As Guy Vanderhaeghe explains, "Literature, in an immediate and sensual way, provides some notion of the texture of life in the past. A novel can convey graphically to a student how men and women of a previous time worshipped, fought, dined, traded, married, died...It puts flesh on the historical skeleton, supplies missing pieces to the bewildering historical puzzle." (Vanderhaeghe, 1987, p. 126) Instead of memorizing a few dry concepts and disembodied facts from a textbook, students learn a wealth of background information and details that make the overarching concepts make sense. Historical figures are no longer cardboard

cutouts, but are real, living, feeling human beings who faced challenges and had to make difficult decisions just as we do today. (Berard, 1983) "By reading historical fiction in conjunction with the textbook, students may yet come to see history as the story of real people with feelings, values, needs to which they themselves can relate, based on their own experiences and interests." (Howard, 1988, p. xii) This in turn may have the effect of making history seem more relevant to students. They may then have more motivation to study events in greater depth, using nonfictional sources of history. (Brandhorst, 1988)

Some authors went so far as to assert that exposing social studies classes to the textbook version of history alone actually deceives students. Reading the condensed and generalized history of textbooks, students may assume that people of other eras were very similar to people today in feelings and attitudes, but merely led quaint lives without television or space shuttles. (Vanderhaeghe, 1987) Vanderhaeghe argues that good historical fiction also reveals to students that while there may be some universals, people are different today from those of the past. "Literature," he asserts, "can be springboard assisting us to make this imaginative leap" (Vanderhaeghe, 1987, p. 126), a leap which is critical to arriving at a deeper understanding of historical reality.

Elliot Eisner, advocating a broad aesthetic approach to teaching, also feels that students are misled when they are only exposed to the textbook. Because it is almost impossible for a textbook to convey the emotional content of



an event or a time period, students in a conventional class are therefore prevented from having a more complete understanding of history:

(Various aesthetic historical sources) are all relevant sources for enlarging understanding. They are relevant because each form tells a different tale, each provides a different kind of content and engenders a different kind of engagement. Text, particularly the text of textbooks as contrasted with literary history, is often so eviscerated of affect that the feel of the period cannot be experienced. A lifeless text about a difficult and painful period in American history is a kind of lie. In this sense, many of the textbooks provided in school lie.... When social studies carries its messages to students mainly or solely through textbooks, it inevitably and severely limits what students are able to learn. (Eisner, 1991, p. 553)

Textbooks, in their attempt to be non-controversial and satisfy a diverse audience sometimes gloss over difficult events and avoid taking a distinct perspective on history. Good historical literature is not constrained in these regards, but instead often focuses on controversy and is written from a particular historical perspective. Literature thus provides an alternative historical view from the textbook. Dixie Lee Spiegel (1987) sees this as a crucial role for literature. Students are no longer reliant on a single source for information -- a source which they see as the "Truth." Instead, the inevitable conflicts between the textbook version and other versions of events force students to take a more active role in history. They must develop critical reading and interpretive skills and make up their own minds.

In "Historical Fiction and Historical Interpretation"

(1983) Joel Taxel argues that teachers should use literature as a springboard for dealing with the critical historical issue of historiography -- the variety of possible interpretations for any given historical event. Taxel advocates assigning more than one book about a historical period so that students can explicitly compare the different views. In doing so, students not only learn more about the original historical events, but they also learn more about the historical process and the period in which the literature itself was written. Berard (1983) also claims that the motivation provided by reading literature can be a powerful catalyst for developing broader historical skills. Among the important understandings fostered by historical literature, are cause and effect and a heightened sense of chronology. (Heinly and Hilton, 1982)

Michael Salevouris (1989) argues that historical writing -- whether fiction or nonfiction -- can provide an important corrective for idealized popular images that persist in our culture. Salevouris is particularly concerned with images which often glorify war. Because textbooks are not likely to delve into the more graphic and horrific aspects of war, literature might be the only way that young people can be made aware of what war is really like.

As popular images of war become more and more unrealistic, it is increasingly important for teachers of history and the humanities to provide a necessary corrective. They must teach war as it is, not as the romanticized cult films portray it. Since relatively few Americans have experienced war first hand, the next best thing is the vicarious experience that history (and literature) can provide. (p. 343)

Reading quality historical literature might not only "turn on" a student to history, it may also turn him or her on to reading, argue Heinly and Milton. (1982) There are many young people who do little or no reading except what they are forced to do read in their textbooks for school. If they can get caught up in the story of history, they may get hooked on reading and become lifelong readers. For poor readers textbooks can be not only boring, but incomprehensible. In most content area classrooms there is a range of approximately five grade levels in reading ability. Finding a textbook appropriate for that range is unlikely, so often less capable readers are left behind. With historical literature, however, books can be assigned which match the reading level of the student. Reluctant readers can be exposed to the same content as more advanced readers in books that they can understand and which capture their interest. (McGowan and Guzzetti, 1991)

Regardless of reading level, literature appeals to other aptitudes than do textbooks. Elliot Eisner (1991) arguing for an aesthetic approach to teaching social studies, points out that teachers who rely exclusively on textbooks exclude students who learn best from non-expository modes.

Social studies programs that constrain what they teach through a restricted array of tasks and highly limited forms of representation are unfair to those whose aptitudes reside in areas neglected by the curriculum...The provision of an array of forms through which students can come to know and understand a period in history or their own contemporary culture not only contributes to the meanings that they have an opportunity to construct, it contributes to the equitable

distribution of opportunities to learn in school."  
(Eisner, p. 553)

For a variety of reason, therefore, using historical fiction in the classroom can benefit students. While the research base is limited, the experience of educators reveals that literature can provide an important supplement to the social studies class.

Selecting literature for a social studies class. Once a teacher has decided to use historical literature in the social studies classroom, he or she must select books that are appropriate for the students being taught and the instructional goals of the class. As mentioned in the introduction, there is a great array of books that could fall under the rubric of historical literature, but not all of them deserve a place in the classroom.

According to Connet (1989) and Lawson and Barnes (1991), the first step in selecting historical literature is to examine the instructional goals of the class. Before choosing a book the teacher should have the course's themes, key concepts, and time periods firmly in mind. Then the teacher should search for books which meet these goals. This will ensure that the book chosen complements the goals of the class, rather than sacrificing course objectives to fit the book. Along the same lines, McGowan and Guzzetti (1991) stress the importance of selecting books that vividly present social studies concepts and issues, rather than just being an entertaining book set in a given time period.

Secondly, the book chosen must match the reading

abilities of the students who will be using it. (Howard, 1988) Clearly, if a student cannot understand a book or if it is too simplistic it will have little benefit. Anthologies of historical literature often include information on approximate reading level, so that teachers can find books that match their students' needs. Particularly when considering pre-modern literature, teachers should be aware that archaic language and literary conventions may alienate readers who cannot understand them. (Vanderhaeghe, 1987) This is not to say that such works should be ruled out. In fact, Vanderhaeghe argues that it is "better to allow the past to speak for itself whenever possible, in its own accents. In this way a truer picture is gained." (Vanderhaeghe, 1987, p. 126) Berard also argues convincingly that using literary works from the time period being studied gives insights which are not available from modern works. Not only are there less likely to be historical inaccuracies, but they are uniquely able to convey the values, prejudices, hopes and fears of the time being studied. However, given the fact that style of older works is often more difficult for students to read, the teacher needs to consider the tradeoffs inherent in choosing such a book.

Teachers need to keep in mind not only the reading level, but also the maturity and level of understanding of their students. (Silverblank, 1992) War and Peace may be a great historical novel, but some of its themes would probably not be comprehensible to younger students. Presumably, the teacher's instructional goals will help to steer the

selection towards literature which includes appropriate themes.

After satisfying these basic standards (instructional goals, and reading and understanding levels), the two criteria most often cited in the literature are historical accuracy and literary merit. Historical accuracy is vital students are to learn history from the book. It must be well researched and avoid caricatures (McGowan and Guzzetti, 1991), as well as accurately portray a time and place using historical facts (Silverblank, 1992; Norton, 1991). If a book incorporates actual historical events, those must be portrayed as they actually happened. Not only must characters' dress, speech, and conduct must be appropriate for the time period, but also their thoughts. As Vanderhaeghe (1987) points out, good historical literature must be true to the psychological reality of the era, as well as the physical reality. Bad historical literature transports contemporary characters with contemporary convictions into the remote past, for example, "advocating equal rights for women in an age which would have dismissed the idea as lunatic." (Vanderhaeghe, 1987, p. 127) This might make modern readers more sympathetic to the character, but it does a disservice to their historical awareness. In short, Robert Berard (1983) argues, the test when selecting historical literature should be "its ability to make its reader feel that he or she understands what it was like to live and think and act in a context other than our own." (Berard, 1983, p. 513)

Teachers must also be on the lookout for stereotyped



portrayals of nations, ethnic groups, women, etc. (Kornfeld p. 281) Books containing them should be avoided or at least used in such a way that students are made aware of the stereotypes and why they present a problem.

Finally, the teacher selecting historical literature for the social studies class must find books which are well written. (Berard, 1983; McGowan and Guzzetti, 1991) Books must contain accurate historical details, but they should be "integrated into the story so they do not overwhelm the reader or detract from the story " (Norton, 1991). The author must portray fundamental human themes and characters with whom the reader can identify while at the same time making the historical people, places, and events come alive for the reader. (Silverblank, 1992). Quality historical literature must be true to its name, presenting history accurately while also possessing literary power.

Several general anthologies to help teachers select historical fiction are listed below. In addition the ALAN Review and Social Education's annual "Notable Children's Tradebooks" issue may also be helpful.

Gillespie, J. T. (Ed.) (1991). Best books for senior high readers. New Providence, NJ: R.R. Bowker.

Howard, E. (1988). America as story: Historical fiction for secondary schools. Chicago: American Library Association.

Immel, M. (Ed.) (1992). The young adult reader's advisor. Vol. II: The best in social studies and history, science and health. New Providence, NJ: R.R. Bowker.

Morris, P. and Berry, M. (1993). Historical fiction: Activities and booklists for grades 6-12. West Nyack, NY: The Center for Applied Research in Education.

Silverblank F. (1992). An annotated bibliography of historical fiction for the social studies. Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies.

Tunnell, M. and Hudson, C. (1993). "American historical literature for young readers: An annotated bibliography" in Tunnell, M. and Ammon, R. (Ed.) (1993) The story of ourselves: Teaching history through children's literature. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

### Strategies for Incorporating Fiction into the Social Studies Class.

There is extensive writing in the literature on strategies for using historical literature in the classroom. These range from the traditional (worksheets and discussion) to the creative (role playing and artwork), allowing the teacher to design lesson plans which meet the needs, interests, and abilities of the class. However, as Brophy and Allman (1991) point out, in the fun of reading from an entertaining work of historical fiction it is sometimes easy for teachers to lose sight of their social studies goals and objectives. She gives the example of a class which carved pumpkins to look like the early American presidents which they had just read about as case where the meaning of the reading had been lost. Therefore, Brophy and Allman stress, whatever instructional strategies are chosen by the teacher, social studies goals, rather than entertainment should be the focus. Wooster (1993) likewise argues that teachers must have a firm idea of the concepts and skills which students are to get from their reading. (p. 105)

One of the first decisions which the social studies teacher must face is how much time to dedicate to using

literature. In textbooks, details have been eliminated and facts and concepts are condensed to fit in a short space, allow classes to cover topics relatively quickly (though superficially). Reading literature is much more time consuming and thus, a class reading historical fiction will have to spend proportionately less time doing other topics. This will probably mean that some topics which are usually covered in textbook-based instruction may have to be dropped. However, the greater depth of coverage resulting from reading a historical novel will probably be more beneficial in building students' historical understanding and skills than simply covering an additional topic or two. Where time for literature is very limited, Robert Berard (1983) advises using short works or excerpts from longer works. While this may not allow students the same measure of emotional involvement as a longer piece, given the time constraints many teachers face, it may be the only alternative at times.

At the other extreme, some educators advocate developing an integrated humanities approach combining history and English into a single course. M. Baer (1986) and Congdon and Milan (1984) describe such courses in which the study of each period and location relies on both traditional historical sources and information and the reading of literature about that period. For example, Baer cites examples of reading A Tale of Two Cities while studying the French Revolution or contrasting the works of Thomas Hardy and Oscar Wilde to illuminate the history of the Victorian Age. Congdon and Milan's unit on images of Native Americans included

Bradford's "The Pilgrims Meet the Indian," Smith's "Captain Smith among the Indians," Bartum's "Observations on the Creek and Cherokee Indians," and selections from The Deerslayer, Moby Dick, and "Hiawatha." This integrated approach would involve considerable effort on the part of teachers and modifications in the curriculum, but could be highly valuable for students.

Another important decision teachers must make is whether students should read the literature at the beginning of the unit, before being exposed to background information on the topic, or at the end of the unit after they have some knowledge and understanding of the issues. Berard (1983) and Howard (1988) both advocate the former approach. As Howard points out, by the time they are in high school many students have an immediate negative reaction to history and view it is little more than a series of memorization tasks. If, however, students begin learning history through literature, they may begin to think of history first of all as an exciting story. Once they become caught up in the story and identify with the characters, it will be easier for the teacher to interest them in the "hard data" of the textbook and other sources. The textbook facts will have a significance that they are unlikely to have without the student's emotional involvement in the story. This in turn will lead to greater participation and learning throughout the unit.

Brandhorst (1988) concedes that reading the literature first will likely boost motivation to study other materials later, but it may also have the effect of limiting students'

objectivity. Teachers may have a more difficult time getting students to overcome the emotionally involving perspective of events portrayed in the literature. Teaching the bulk of the unit before reading the literature will allow students to learn background information that may increase learning and appreciation of the literature. (Brandhorst, 1988; McGowan and Guzzetti, 1991) It may also help them be objective and analytical as they read the literature. Brandhorst speculates that both sequences have value and teachers might try each and decide for themselves which they prefer for their own classes.

Obviously, the teaching sequence does not have to be an either-or situation. Instruction about the topic can continue concurrently with the reading of the literature. Another alternative is suggested by R. Mills (1987). When teaching the Great Depression using Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath, Mills advises teachers to have their students put together a time line and fact sheet about the period, using textbooks and other resource books. Thus, while reading Grapes of Wrath students would learn about the extent of unemployment, the nature of the Dust Bowl, government responses to the crisis, and other information which would increase their appreciation of Steinbeck's novel. In a similar vein, Linda Gober (1987) advises showing students maps and familiarizing students with the geography of the setting before or during reading.

In addition to determining the sequence of instruction, teachers must also decide whether to have the entire class read the same book, or give a choice of several works on the

same topic. A single class set of books allows all students to have the same knowledge when participating in class discussions. It is probably more efficient since the instructor would not have to divide his or her time and energies between different groups. On the other hand finding a single book to satisfy the interests and abilities of all students can be difficult. Some authors (Gallo and Barksdale, 1983; Brown and Abel, 1982; McGowan and Guzzetti, 1991) recommend giving students a choice of literature on the same general topic, at least some of the time. This not only allows students to read books most appropriate to their reading level and interests, but it can stimulate interesting discussions as students compare and contrast the themes and perspectives of their books. Students within a class reading the same book could also meet in small groups for discussion, assignments, or projects, encouraging more active participation by all. (McGowan and Guzzetti)

While students are reading, teachers may want to assign activities to increase student understanding and retention of important information in the textbook. Depending on the abilities of the students, these activities can include completing worksheets (Bathgate and Connelly, 1991), making time lines or maps of events in the book (Lawson and Barnes, 1991), or completing conceptual webs or other structured overviews of the book's key ideas. (Wooster, 1993) There is at least one activity book on the market especially designed for use with historical fiction, Morris and Berry's Historical fiction: Activities and booklists for grades 6-12. (1993) It contains dozens of exercises and projects to go



along with reading. (McGowan and Guzzetti, 1991) Two authors recommend having students keep a reading journal consisting of questions, comments, and reactions that come to them as they read. (Levstik, 1981; Moore, 1992) This encourages students to be more active readers while at the same time clarifying their comprehension needs and interests. Teachers wishing to do further content reinforcement could organize a trivia contest based on the literature. (Spiegel, p. 163) For students with very low reading levels or with learning disabilities, it might be necessary to provide reading guides, story summaries, or audio tapes of the books.

One of the most frequently recommended activities to accompany reading is class discussion. (Spiegel, 1987; Hammer, 1987; Berard, 1983; Zarnowski, 1993) While some students are often reluctant to participate in discussions about historical issues, they are much more likely to become involved in discussions centered on their reading in historical literature, say many educators. The issues are no longer seem abstract and irrelevant, but instead are tied to a story in which the students have become emotionally involved. (Levstik, 1981) Teachers should use discussions to emphasize broad historical and social science themes and concepts rather than concentrating on literary elements. (McGowan and Guzzetti, 1991; Zarnowski, 1993)

Variations on the discussion in which students defend or act out the positions of the characters can also promote thinking about the issues as well as more active learning. Levstik and Norton recommend organizing debates in which students prepare briefs and argue positions based on the

characters and conflicts in the story. (Levstik; Norton, 1991) Several articles recommend role playing activities based on a central conflict or problem in the story. (Levstik; Lawson and Barnes, 1991; McGowan and Guzzetti) Another possibility would be to organize a "talk show" in which students portray characters from the books they have read. (Gallagher, 1993) All of these activities would involve considerable advance preparation so that students can accurately represent the ideas and personalities of their characters, as well as the reality of the historical time and place.

Nearly all articles reviewed for this chapter stress the importance of using literature to develop awareness and skills of the historical method. As Linda Levstik (1981) explains, historical literature provides a wonderful opportunity because "an alert teacher can guide emotion and intellect into inquiry." (Levstik, p. 174) Because much of the historical literature used in classrooms is fiction, however, the potential exists for students to be inadvertently misled about the past. Particularly when students have not yet learned anything about the topic, they can mistake the partial reality of the book for the "Truth." Students caught up in the drama of the story may not want to analyze it as a historical source. Teachers must be sure to stress the fictive nature of the reading so that students realize that what they are reading is invented and represents only one of many possible interpretation of events. (Berard, p. 514)

In addition to simply telling the class of the

limitations of the fiction, teachers can involve students in actively evaluating the work's accuracy and perspectives. One way to accomplish this is to assign several books dealing with the same topic or time period to expose students to different viewpoints. (Berard, 1983; Moore, 1992; Taxel, 1983; Spiegel, 1987) The comparison of perspectives will help students to a greater awareness of the period being studied, the historical process, and perhaps even the time the works were written. Joel Taxel, in "Historical Fiction and Historical Interpretation," describes such an exercise with novels dealing with the American Revolution. Students can read Johnny Tremain (Forbes, 1943), a traditional, good American-bad British version of the Revolution, which was written as Americans battled to defeat fascism around the world and see the values of 1940s popular culture reinforced. But reading My Brother Sam is Dead (Collier, 1974), (written as America's bitter involvement in Vietnam came to a close) students are confronted with a much more ambivalent vision. There is hypocrisy and duplicity on both sides in the American Revolution and after learning that his father has died in British prison ship, the protagonist decides to sit the war out. Another possibility would be for students who have read fictional accounts of historical events to then read a biography of a principal actor in the events. (Levstik, 1981) Students who read these books -- or others with conflicting interpretations -- will learn that there is usually no right answer and that they, as historians, must weigh the evidence and make up their minds for themselves.

The literature offers suggestions for other ways to

develop analytical skills from reading historical fiction. Berard (1983) recommends comparing descriptions in historical literature with accounts from witnesses of the actual event. (also Levstik, 1981) Do Stephen Crane's portrayals of Civil War battles in Red Badge of Courage match those in diaries of soldiers who fought in the Civil War? Is a fictional account of the early Twentieth Century suffragettes borne out descriptions of events in primary sources? Classes can use primary sources in a variety of media -- print material, audio or video tapes, photographs, oral histories, etc. (Gober, 1987; Eisner, 1991). Davis and Hunter (1990) go even further, recommending an extensive a six-step student research project about a specific aspect of a historical novel, culminating in a research paper. The authors assert that students frequently find anachronisms (historical inaccuracies) in historical fiction. He gives the example of a group of middle school students who discovered that the Vermont Shaker community described in the novel A Day No Pigs Would Die (Peck, 1972) did not in fact exist at the time the story took place. Such an exercise not only increases students' knowledge, but also increases their understanding off the process that historians must go through and empowers them to see themselves as historians. Similar comparative activities are possible with the literary work and the textbook (Norton, 1991) or with an encyclopedia (Spiegel, 1987). Students might even want to write the author to pose questions raised by their research. (Bathgate and Connelly, 1991) Besides being a valuable historical exercise in understanding the past, it may give students a better

realization of the strengths and limitations of these other common sources of information.

Another way to use literature in the social studies classroom is to have students respond creatively to the work to further develop their understanding of the story's issues and characters, as well as the historical method. Several authors suggested having students assume the perspective characters in the book and write a diary, poems, or letters from that view point. (Hammer, 1987; McGowan and Guzzetti, 1991; Lawson and Barnes, 1991) Another activity to encourage students to look at events from the point of view of characters would be to have them rewrite events in the story from the perspective of various characters. (Spiegel, 1987) For example, how would the story of Howard Fast's April Morning (1961) be different if it were told from the point of view of a British soldier marching to Lexington, or the wife of Minuteman, or a slave? Levstik (1991) and others (Lawson and Barnes; Spiegel) recommend having students write alternate endings or sequels for books. This writing -- as with any historical writing undertaken by students -- should make every effort to portray events, beliefs, and life-styles accurately. (Levstik)

Responses to historical literature can also be artistic. Students can try to authentically reproduce crafts, food, clothing, music, or recreation from period. (Lawson and Barnes) They can illustrate scenes (McGowan and Guzzetti), make murals, political cartoons, (Lawson and Barnes), or make models of buildings, towns, or other structures described in the reading (Hammer, 1987). All these activities could

incorporate outside research to help students more accurately portray the scenes.

Finally, literature can be the springboard for a class project involve students outside of the school. In "Adopting Exit 109: Literature Promotes Action," (1993) Vicki Weiss describes how a class which had read a book about the interaction of humans and their environments decided to "adopt" a small local wetland. Since most historical literature incorporates themes with rich connection to the contemporary world, a wide variety of possibilities exist for such projects.

The education literature provides a rich variety of strategies for incorporating historical fiction and other literature into the social studies classroom. These range from the conventional to the innovative and are adaptable to a wide range of books, students and courses.



## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This project came about in response to this writer's dissatisfaction with traditional social studies teaching techniques based on the textbook. While internally motivated students might learn a considerable amount about United States history, they often ended the course with a somewhat superficial and incomplete picture of our nation's past. Even these dedicated students saw little connection between the past and their own lives. Students without such motivation merely memorized facts for the tests in order to pass the course, or worse, did not even make that effort. Conversations with less successful students revealed that they were bored with the material and felt like they were being asked to memorize useless facts about "ancient history." For students who had an inherent love for the subject it was obvious why they studied history, but for others, it was irrelevant and pointless. Clearly the purpose of learning history (not to mention its lessons) was not coming across to many students. It was apparent to this writer that the status quo was not working for most students.

Frustration with this state of affairs eventually led to investigation of other instructional strategies and experiment with methods beyond the textbook. Many techniques were used, but one in particular had great appeal, the use of historical fiction. Fiction can be found on almost every

topic and period and can be tailored to suit the abilities and interests any group of students. Furthermore, such books would likely be more engaging than the dryly written textbooks. However, before trying historical fiction it was first necessary to find out how to use it effectively.

### Research Procedure

Curious about whether other social studies teachers were experiencing similar difficulties reaching their students and never having tried integrating literature into history classes, this writer began a review of the literature. The research was divided into two main areas. First, to find out the current state of social studies teaching in the United States. How much were students learning, how did high school students feel about history class, and what were the most common teaching practices? Secondly, the literature review would focus on the use of literature in history classes. Specifically, had the method been widely tried and was it effective in increasing achievement and improving attitudes? How should a teacher go about choosing fiction for a history class? How could those books be used to promote greater learning?

Most of the research for this project was conducted at university libraries with additional sources being found at public libraries and bookstores. Education journals in the fields of social studies, history, and reading provided the bulk of the background information. ERIC documents, government publications, historical literature guides, and

books about education reform and teaching history also were helpful.

While the research in the education literature confirmed that there was widespread dissatisfaction with the way history was taught and the achievement level of students, there was much disagreement about how to solve the problems. Whatever their specific suggestions for teachers, however, most authors agreed that it was necessary for teachers to cover fewer topics but to investigate them more thoroughly. Many sources also stressed the importance of teaching through the dramatic stories that make up history. Both of these themes seemed supportive of the idea of using fiction to supplement textbooks in class. The literature also revealed that using literature in history classes has many advocates and a long, if not widespread tradition. Unfortunately, most of the quantitative research on the topic of the effectiveness of the use of historical fiction dealt with elementary and middle schools, not high school students, so definitive evidence of its efficacy was lacking.

Eventually, through research in journals and books and through conversations with other educators this writer felt prepared to try out the use of historical literature himself. Since that first trial, experience using literature in United States History, World History, and Humanities classes has clarified and reinforced many of the points in the research and has suggested additional strategies.

Eventually, the research and classroom experience led this writer to undertake the creation of a handbook to assist other history teachers in using literature in their classes.

Based on lessons learned from the educational literature as well as classroom experience, this writer designed "A Handbook For Integrating Historical Fiction Into a High School American History Course." In order to be most helpful, the handbook needed to address several issues: 1) Why should a history teacher use historical fiction in their classes? 2) How could the teacher select appropriate literature for their classes? and 3) What strategies would be most effective in integrating the books into their lessons? Because there are literally dozens of techniques available, this writer decided it would be most helpful if they were arranged by the type of curricular goal the activity most fostered. Therefore the handbook contains a sections containing strategies for strengthening plot comprehension, building skills of the historian, etc. In order to illustrate how a teacher might go about the process of selecting and using a work of fiction in his or her American history class a case study was undertaken with Willa Cather's O Pioneers! The handbook traces step-by-step how a teacher might select and teach this novel as the centerpiece for a study of the settling of the Great Plains in the late 1800s. Finally, the handbook provides teachers with two bibliographies, one listing resources for locating appropriate historical fiction and another for educators wishing to pursue further research in the area.

This handbook provides an easy to use and flexible guide for teachers who want to try historical literature in their classes.

CHAPTER IV

THE HANDBOOK

**INTEGRATING HISTORICAL FICTION  
INTO A HIGH SCHOOL  
AMERICAN HISTORY COURSE**

by

**John F. Day**

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## INTRODUCTION

### Why Historical Literature?

As high school history teachers we are well aware of the difficulty of getting students interested in history class. Despite the importance of an understanding of history to making sense of our rapidly changing world, all too frequently we hear, "Do we have to know that?" or "This is boring." Students just don't seem to appreciate history or see its relevance to today's world or to their lives. Often the most a teacher can expect is that a student will memorize the content until the next test.

Surveys of student attitude and achievement bear this out. Most students cannot identify when the Civil War took place and cannot recognize basic information about the Constitution. At least half don't know Joseph Stalin or Winston Churchill. Students also tend to rank history near the bottom of their classes in terms of interest, importance, and relevance to their lives. Apparently, neither the drama nor the lessons of history are getting across.

The increasing challenges of our modern world -- changing economies, politics, communications, etc. -- make it imperative that we impart to our students a sense of perspective and the ability to think critically about the forces of change in the world today and in the future. They need to understand how their actions can make a difference in

maintaining a healthy democratic society. These are surely ideals to be learned from the study of history.

But how can history class compete with the demands of students' part time jobs and their home responsibilities, the distractions of cars, MTV, and peers, the dangers of drugs, gangs, and sexually transmitted diseases (not to mention the requirements of their other classes)? At the very time when history's lessons are most desperately needed, it is becoming harder and harder to convey them. Part of the problem lies in the way history has been taught. In most classrooms, lecture, recitation, worksheets and tests are the prevalent methods of instruction and the dominant classroom resource is the textbook. While all of these have an important role in learning, when they come to dominate class time to the exclusion of other techniques students become bored and are less likely to retain care or learn about history.

Fortunately, there are many alternatives available to history teachers wishing to diversify their classroom strategies. Investigating primary sources, role-playing, exploring cross-curricular connections, and conducting oral histories are just a few of many possibilities. One method with a long tradition is the integration of literature, in particular historical fiction, into history classes. Historical literature can be found on almost any topic or time period and is available in a wide range of reading levels. The great advantage to historical fiction is that it is much more interesting than the textbook. Rather than being something that students **have** to read, it is something that they **want** to read. The writing style is much livelier

and students are able to identify with the characters, all the while learning historical facts and absorbing a sense of the time and place. This in turn helps the teacher to convey the drama of history and communicate the overarching concepts of the course. Students will see that history is more than dead people, dust, and cobwebs, and that the issues of the the past have relevance to life today.

Although historical literature provides the teacher with a valuable resource, it is not without its drawbacks. Most importantly, it takes time. Teachers using historical fiction will need to make difficult decisions about which material they can afford not to teach. While this is a sacrifice in some respects, it is one that is encouraged by most experts. Even the Curriculum Standards for Social Studies advise teachers not to cover so many topics that learning becomes superficial. Rather, they should "select for emphasis the most useful landmark locations, the most representative case studies, the most inspiring models, the truly precedent-setting events, and the concepts and principles that their students must know and be able to apply in their lives outside of school." (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994, p. 163) Another potential difficulty with historical fiction is that, used by itself, students may come to confuse it with historical reality. Teachers need to make sure that they point out the fictive nature of the work and include activities which provide alternate historical perspectives to give a more balanced view.

Throughout this handbook I will be providing an extended case study of how one book -- Willa Cather's O Pioneers! --

might be used in the context of studying about the settling of the Great Plains in the late 1800s. The case study will follow step-by-step the procedures described in the handbook to give teachers concrete examples of how they might introduce historical fiction in their own American history classes.

It is hoped that this handbook will provide teachers with the tools to get started on using historical literature in the classroom. Every teacher and every class is different, so not all these activities will work with all groups. Use your experience and knowledge in conjunction with the ideas and strategies included in this guide to add a vital new strategy for teaching history.

## Selecting the Right Book

The first step in the successful integration of literature into a history classroom is finding the best book (or books) for your class. To do this you must first decide what instructional goals you have for the experience. What are the course objectives, themes, key concepts, and events and people which you want students to learn from the book? Once you have determined these priorities use one of the anthologies of historical fiction or consult with other teachers to choose a few titles dealing your topic. Most of the anthologies of historical literature are arranged by time period and provide a short plot description, the number of pages, and an estimated reading level to assist in making the best selection. Some of the best are listed below:

### ANTHOLOGIES OF HISTORICAL FICTION

Gillespie, J. T. (Ed.) (1991). Best books for senior high readers. New Providence, NJ: R.R. Bowker.

Howard, E. F. (1988). America as story: Historical fiction for secondary schools. Chicago: American Library Association.

Immel, M. (Ed.) (1992). The young adult reader's advisor. Vol II: The best in social studies and history, science and health. New Providence, NJ: R.R. Bowker.

Morris, P. & Berry, M. (1993). Historical fiction: Activities and booklists for Grades 6-12. West Nyack, NY: The Center for Applied Research in Education.

Silverblank, F. (1992). An annotated bibliography of historical fiction for the social studies. Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies.

Tunnell, M. & Hudson, C. (1993). American historical literature for young readers: An annotated bibliography. In M. Tunnell & R. Ammon (Eds.) (1993). The history of ourselves: Teaching history through children's literature. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

One decision the teacher will need to make is whether to have the entire class read the same book or to provide a choice of several titles for the students to choose from. The advantage of all reading the same work is that the students all share the same information base in discussions and it facilitates many whole-class activities and simplifies coordination and timing. On the other hand, having groups of students read different books exposes the class to multiple historical perspectives and allows more tailoring to student interests and reading abilities. Either course can be valuable; it is up to the teacher to decide which is most appropriate for his or her particular class.

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## Case Study -- O Pioneers!

### Part 1 -- Finding a Book

I was looking for a book dealing with the settlement of the American Great Plains in the late 1800s for my United States History class (made up of sophomores and juniors). The relevant course objectives were to: 1) "Trace and recognize events leading to the organization of farmers in the late 1800s;" and 2) "Compare the contrasting attitudes, beliefs, and values of social change as it affected urban and rural living in the United States." In addition, I had personal goals of my students getting an understanding of the forces driving settlement of the Great Plains, the nature of the lifestyle there, and the impact of technology. Most of the students in my classes were fairly good readers, but time was limited, so a short book was needed.



A search of the historical fiction anthologies revealed four books which matched these instructional needs. I consulted with one of my fellow teachers in the English department. She was unfamiliar with three of the titles, but said that the fourth, Willa Cather's O Pioneers! is sometimes regarded as a classic. Furthermore, she thought that it would be available at a reasonable price. I checked the book out from the library and read it over to see whether it would meet the needs of the class.

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Next, find out if the books you are considering are available in sufficient numbers. Some great historical fiction is out of print. If you have students with special needs you might prefer books which are available in condensed, braille, large print or audio tape versions. Once you have narrowed the choices to a few titles, buy or borrow those books. If you are deciding between several books, skim over them to determine which have a reading level and content that match your goals.

You may have a choice between modern works and ones that were written in an earlier time period. For example, a search for books on the topics of early colonial life and the Puritans might reveal both Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 classic, The Scarlet Letter, and Norma Farber's Mercy Short, A Winter Journal, North Boston, 1692-1693 (written in 1982). Older books have the advantage of revealing much about the values and prejudices of the era which can be an important teaching lesson. However, the writing style of these works is often more difficult for students to read and understand. The teacher needs to weigh these tradeoffs when choosing a book.

When you have tentatively decided on a particular book, read it thoroughly, from cover to cover. This is vital not only to make sure you know the plot well, but also to check for any content which may be inappropriate. As you read the book, consider the following issues:

- Does the book convey the content, themes, and concepts which you are teaching (and not just take place in the right time period)?
- Is the reading level appropriate for the students who will read it?
- Does the understanding level of the book match that of your students?
- Is there content which your students, school, or community will find objectionable?
- Is the book historically accurate, in terms of events, setting, and the psychological reality of people at the time?
- Does the book contain stereotypes of nationalities, ethnic groups, genders, etc.?
- Does the work have literary merit? Is it interesting and fun to read?

Some of the criteria listed above are make-or-break items. If the book is boring, inaccurate, unrelated to instructional goals, or at the wrong reading level, then it makes little sense to use it in class. However, few books are perfect, and sometimes minor imperfections can be used as springboards to greater learning. For example, many older books contain stereotyped descriptions of ethnic groups. Teachers can have students search for the stereotypes and use them as a basis for a discussion of how they came about or

how stereotyping persists in our society today. Or teachers can assign students topics in the book to research in order to discover inaccuracies. Such an exercise can be an important lesson in being critical about accepting sources and can encourage students to see themselves as historians. In any case, it is important for the teacher to be aware of the limitations in the work and to develop strategies to compensate for them.

Once a book has been chosen which meets the needs of the class, order enough for the class. Make sure you plan far enough in advance so that the books arrive before the class reaches that point in the curriculum. When the books arrive, label and number them as needed. Then decide how to use them most effectively in your class. This topic will be explored in the next section.

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## Case Study -- O Pioneers!

### Part 2 -- Evaluating the Book

I read O Pioneers!. It was suitable for the instructional objectives I had and the reading and understanding levels seemed appropriate. Also, the book was about the right length. I had decided to use one title to facilitate class discussions. There was an audio tape version available, as well as Cliff Notes, for students who might have difficulty with the reading level. The book had no content which seemed objectionable, and it appeared very accurate. After all, Willa Cather had grown up on the Nebraska prairie where her novel takes place.

O Pioneers! was not without its drawbacks, however. It was written in 1913 and the writing style reflected it. The pacing was slower than most modern fiction and I was concerned that students would have difficulty with this. In addition, the book was full of references to stereotypes of the various European nationalities who settled the Plains. On the positive side, the book gave a great account of the challenges and beauty of the prairie and the development of "civilization" there. Furthermore, the independent and capable protagonist, Alexandra, would be a good corrective to the stereotyped (or unseen) pioneer woman many people picture.

In the end, I decided to use it. I felt that once the students were into the story the writing style would not be a problem. I decided to use the stereotypes as a learning experience by having students collect references to various nationalities in the book. We would then use them as a springboard for discussion and other activities on immigration, stereotypes, and prejudice. Finally, the book was available in paperback for \$4.95 in a three-novel collection (which I might share with the English department), Three Classics by American Women (New York: Bantam Books, 1990). I ordered a class set of the books.

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## **A Checklist for Selecting Historical Literature**

**Meets instructional objectives?**

**One title for the whole class or several choices?**

**Enough books available?**

**Length appropriate to the time available?**

**Audio, large print, braille, or condensed versions available?**

**New or old literature?**

**Appropriate reading level?**

**Appropriate understanding level?**

**Appropriate content?**

**Historically accurate?**

**Stereotypes of nationalities, genders, etc.?**

**Interesting and fun to read?**

# Strategies for Using Historical Fiction in the Classroom

Once you have selected a book (or books) for the class, the next step is to decide how to use it to get the most benefit from it. There are literally dozens of methods for using literature in the history classroom, allowing teachers to tailor the book to the needs of their class. The overarching goal should be to use strategies that achieve the objectives of the course. Although reading historical fiction is fun and students should enjoy the books, they should also be learning important historical concepts and skills. Also, keep in mind that this is not an English class. It is the historical aspects of the work, not the literary ones that should be the primary focus. The following are a list of six general goals which teachers will likely have when reading historical fiction:

- Comprehension of the plot of the book
- Understanding the major events and conflicts of the era
- Understanding of the different attitudes, institutions, and conditions of people living at the time and place of the book
- Appreciation for the circumstances, viewpoints, and choices of the characters (both real and fictional) in the book and the role their actions played in shaping events
- Development of the skills of the historical method
- Understanding of the connections between conditions, events and choices in the book and those in today's world



The nature of the specific activities you choose will depend partially on how much time is available. If time is limited a shorter work is preferable and the number of activities will have to be reduced. On the other hand, with ample time, teachers may decide to expand the unit. The pacing of reading assignments will depend on the capabilities of the students and the time available.

Before beginning the unit, it is important to decide when to have students read the book. Should it come first, before any background study on the topic? This strategy has the benefit of getting the class motivated to find out more about the time period. Instead of the knee-jerk reaction, "This is boring!" students will become caught up in the story and will want to know more. On the other hand, starting off with the book may limit students' objectivity about the historical issues involved. The first impression might prevent them from accepting alternative viewpoints or contradicting information from other other sources. In fact, it is important that the teacher remind students that the work they are reading is fiction. The book will be historically accurate in many respects, but some aspects have been invented by an author with his or her own perspective, values, and prejudices.

Reading the fiction after the bulk of the unit is finished may increase student objectivity and understanding of the events in the work. However, the motivational force of the book may not be as strong if read afterwards. Obviously, the teaching sequence does not need to be an

"either-or" choice. Another alternative is to read the book concurrently with the more academic study of the topic, combining strengths of both sequences. The order you choose should depend on the needs of your class.

Before beginning reading, determine what modifications might be required for students with special needs. Are there visually impaired students who might need large print, braille, or audio tape books? If the class contains students with learning disabilities or other deficiencies, it may be necessary to provide reading guides, story summaries, or audio tapes to help them understand the story. Make sure these preparations are complete before beginning the book. Also, don't forget to write down the students' book numbers so you can keep track of which have been returned when the unit is finished.

Once all these decisions and preparations are made, it is time to determine which activities to use to achieve the instructional goals. The guideline below provides numerous strategies for using historical literature. For further information consult the bibliography located at the end of this handbook. The list of techniques below is arranged by curricular goal.

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### Case Study -- O Pioneers!

#### **Part 3 -- Starting the Book**

While reading O Pioneers!, I looked for ways to reinforce the learning of the content objectives which I had set out for the class. Cather's work seemed particularly appropriate for developing a sense of the land, the hardships of living on the Great Plains, and the rapid transformation of life there from about 1880 (when the book starts) until the early 1900s. The students already had some background information which

would be helpful; they had learned about the Native Americans who formerly inhabited the area, the wagon trains of the Oregon Trail, the Homestead Act, and the growth of railroads across the country. I decided to build on this knowledge by continuing the more academic portion of our activities **at the same time** we read O Pioneers!.

Before distributing the book to the class I asked them to identify where the Great Plains are located and which states make up that region. Students were able to name several of the states, but were not aware of how extensive they really are. Next, I asked them to brainstorm words or characteristics which they associated with the Great Plains. They suggested such words as “flat,” “farming,” “boring,” “corn,” and “conservative.” We then turned to a description of the region in the “Focus on Geography” section of their textbooks (The Americans: A History. Evanston, IL: McDougal, Littell & Co., 1994). The section’s map showed how immense the Plains really are. The text described the major physical characteristics of the area: dry climate, flat landscape, rich grassland soils, extreme temperatures, and few trees. I had the class speculate on how these conditions would have effected the early non-native settlers of the region. They predicted what adaptations might have been required.

Finally we began reading O Pioneers! We read aloud the opening paragraph of the book which describes the bleakness of the land in winter and the tenuous hold which early settlement had made upon it. After discussing the section, I gave the students their reading assignments for the whole book, about twenty pages per night.

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## **A. Strategies for strengthening plot comprehension:**

Clearly any book your class reads will be of little value if students don't understand it. Therefore, it is vital that teachers reinforce plot comprehension. Try the ideas below to make sure students understand what they are reading.

1. Conduct class discussions focusing on major events, characters, and story line.
2. Give students comprehension worksheets to help them focus on important aspects of the book.
3. Hold a trivia contest about events, characters, etc. in the book.
4. To reinforce student understanding of the setting and chronology, construct a time lines of events or maps of episodes and locations described in the story.
5. Have students construct or fill in conceptual webs and structured overviews of key events, characters, and ideas.
6. Have students keep a reading journal containing unfamiliar vocabulary, questions, comments, reactions, etc.

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### Case Study -- O Pioneers!

#### **Part 4 -- Strengthening Plot Comprehension**

The opening chapters of O Pioneers! introduce quite a few characters, so I wanted to be sure that my students clearly understood who they were and how they were related to each other. Since most of the characters were in the Bergson family, I had them construct a family tree and explain what we know about each member of the family from the first section. We also looked at other significant characters in the story, Carl, Marie, and Ivar. As we progressed through the book, I made sure the class was aware of how these characters were changing.

Since a crucial part of the story is the evolution of settlement on the

prairie, I spent some time discussing the setting, the nature of the land and the relationship between the people and the land. I pointed out an important omission in O Pioneers!, the lack of any mention of the original human inhabitants of the land who had probably been forcibly removed or killed a few short years before the story takes place. Based on the opening chapters of the book I had them draw a map of the town of Hanover and the surrounding countryside where the story takes place. I had students show off their maps and describe why they made them the way they did. Later in the book, after the land had become largely tamed and was much more thickly settled, we repeated the exercise and compared the before and after maps.

Finally, I had the students keep reading journals. At the beginning of class each day we would take ten minutes to go over some of the questions and comments. This gave students a chance to clarify confusing parts of the story and gave me a better idea of their reactions to the book. Sometimes I assigned specific topics for them to respond to and other times I allowed them to choose.

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**B. Strategies to build understanding of the historical period:**

Historical fiction is a great motivating force for studying the past. To make the experience even more helpful, however, it is important increase students' knowledge of events and trends of the historical period. Lectures, discussions, readings, videos and other sources can provide additional information to deepen the learning experience.

1. Have students read in the textbook or give them other sources of information about events which were taking place at the time of the book.
2. Assign topics to individuals or groups which they will then research and report to the class.
3. Construct a time line with events in the book on one side and real life on the other.
4. Construct a map showing locations of events in the book as well as those of real life events.

**Case Study -- O Pioneers!**

**Part 5 -- Understanding the Historical Period**

O Pioneers! provides considerable insight into how families left their comfortable homes in the East or in Europe to make a living in Nebraska. This is an important topic for class discussion. However, the book does not provide much information on the historical events or the underlying economic, social, and technological forces which prompted the migration and which transformed life on the Plains. For this, the class needed to look at other sources.

We began with the textbook. The "Farmers Tame the Frontier" section gave a good general overview of the settlement of the Great Plains. It described various sources of settlers and the main reasons why they came. The importance of railroads for providing the transportation of people and goods which made settlement of the region feasible was also discussed. The textbook also explained the role of



banks, government policy and technology in “taming the West.” Later sections provided information about the Grange movement, the rise of the Populist Party, the impact of the national economy on farmers. All of this was important background information for understanding O Pioneers!.

I divided the class into groups of three and allowed them to pick research topics from a predetermined list, with one group per item. Topics ranged from the Grange and agricultural inventions to prairie ecology and sod houses. Each group was responsible for researching the topic and making a 5-7 minute presentation to the class. We used the resources available in the school library supplemented by books which I had borrowed from the public library. The class had two class periods in which to prepare. Their presentation had to cover both the subject in general and the role of that issue played in O Pioneers!. Other students were responsible for taking notes on the topics and were later quizzed over the material.

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**C. Strategies for building an understanding of the conditions of life in the past:**

It is difficult for most people to really understand how dissimilar life was in the past. We tend to wear blinders which make it difficult to see that the way people lived a century ago was remarkably different from life today and that the attitudes most people held would also be very unfamiliar. Unless we recognize these facts it will not be possible to truly understand the choices made by historical figures or to judge their lives fairly.

1. Have students keep a journal of dialogue, descriptions, terms, etc. that reveal differences between attitudes and conditions then and now.
2. Have students research topics related to the conditions of life at the time.
3. Pick several of the most important or revealing differences and have a class discussion about them.
4. Try to find photographs, drawings, or first person accounts that reinforce the differences in lifestyles, values, etc.
5. Try to authentically recreate food, crafts, clothing, music, etc. of the time and setting of the book.

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**Case Study -- O Pioneers!**

**Part 6 -- Understanding Conditions of Life in the Past**

As mentioned above, I had asked my students to keep a reading journal. One ongoing assignment was to find examples of differences in lifestyle and attitudes between then and now. We then discussed these in class, focusing on tracing the changes that took place over the course of the twenty-five years covered by O Pioneers! and also how the people of that time experienced life differently from the way we do. Additional information came from some of the group presentations (described in

Part 6) which dealt with this type of issue. For example one group reported on life in a sod house and another described typical food habits of the time. As a final source of information in this area, I distributed a packet of photographs and first person accounts which revealed even more about life on the Great Plains.

Since Willa Cather created a strong female protagonist for the story, I also was eager to have students look for information on gender roles and attitudes at the time. I assigned each student a section of three or four pages in which they had to find references to gender expectations. We then made a master list of chores, careers, behaviors, and attitudes which males and females were expected to have, according to O Pioneers!. We discussed how Alexandra, the protagonist, differed from the expected role and why Cather might have portrayed her in that way. The class debated whether Alexandra could be termed a feminist and what that term meant anyway. We also looked at ways that Alexandra -- and Cather -- were very traditional in their attitudes towards men and women.

Even in my first reading of O Pioneers! I had been struck by the prevalence of national stereotypes. All the characters are identified by their ancestry (mostly Scandinavian, German, Bohemian, or French) and the book abounds with characterizations of various ethnic groups. I asked my students to make a list of these in their reading journals. We then discussed their use in the book. Was Cather stereotyping? Why did she use the characterizations so much? To what extent did various nationalities maintain their traditional identities in the new country? Do we still characterize people in this way and is it a problem?

To add a festive element to our exploration of nineteenth century life on the Great Plains, I gave students an option of recreating some aspect of the culture for extra credit. Several students took advantage of this opportunity and brought in food, wore clothing, or played music which would have been a part of the life on the Great Plains in the late nineteenth century.

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**D. Strategies for building an understanding of the characters' choices.**

One of the goals of studying history is to observe the circumstances, perspectives, and motivations of people in the past in order to understand why they made certain choices. This in turn helps clarify the outcomes of history as we see the impacts made by their choices. Whether made by great leaders or ordinary men and women, individual choices can have great repercussions. It is vital that this message is conveyed to students so that they see the importance of thinking about their values and of taking resolute, responsible decisions based upon them.

1. Organize a debate in which students argue positions based on the characters and conflicts in the story.
2. Organize a role playing exercise in which students assume the identity of characters in the story facing a central conflict or problem in the story.
3. Organize a "talk show" in which the characters appear to discuss their actions, opinions, and choices.
4. If several books on the same topic/period were read by groups, hold a discussion in which viewpoints from different works are shared.
5. Assign an essay in which students must describe and defend what they would have done if they faced the same situation as characters in the story.
6. Have students take on the role of one of the characters in the book and write a diary, letter, or poem from that perspective. Or have them create an artwork, political cartoon, or mural depicting that viewpoint.
7. Rewrite the ending of the story (or another appropriate section) or create a sequel from an alternative perspective -- another character in the story or a real person involved in the events.

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## Case Study -- O Pioneers!

### Part 7 -- Understanding the Characters' Choices

A central theme of O Pioneers! is how to act when the expectations of society conflict with the wants of the individual. Characters face hard decisions of when to conform to tradition and group expectations and when to follow what they think is right, even if it means pain and difficulty. The issues of the needs of the individual versus the needs of society and the importance of standing up for what you believe in are important for young people to think about and discuss. I decided to organize a "talk show" in which students would represent various characters from O Pioneers!, a talk show host, and the audience. Students playing characters were responsible for knowing their character thoroughly and had to remain "in character" throughout the exercise. The host developed a series of topics and questions (with my help) which he would ask the guests. Finally, the audience members also had to think of a new character for themselves (a city housewife, the town priest, a tramp, etc.) and be ready for the host's questions. After giving them the night to review the book and prepare, we set up the room as realistically as possible and conducted the talk show. Afterwards we discussed the results. The exercise did a good job of exposing the views of various characters and of forcing students to "walk in the shoes" of others.

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**E. Strategies for developing the skills of the historical method:**

Using historical fiction is an excellent opportunity to help students develop the skills used by historians. While students tend to think of history as something that other people do, it is important that they understand that they can also be historians, too. While all of the strategies discussed in this handbook contribute to the skills of the historian, this section will focus especially on those which deal with the evaluation of sources and evidence. Students should be aware that all sources have limitations and that authors consciously or unconsciously include certain facts and omit others, all of which effect their theories. History is not cut and dried, but very much a complex and tentative business, which requires careful weighing of evidence and critical analysis of sources before reaching conclusions.

1. If the book was written in an earlier era, examine it to see what values, prejudices, and assumptions the author believed in.
2. Read non-fictional accounts in primary and secondary sources of the same event, or read a biography of a real life character in the story to reveal alternative interpretations and viewpoints.
3. Use various sources -- encyclopedia, biographies, first person accounts, etc. -- to check the accuracy of descriptions in the fiction (and in the other sources).
4. Look for anachronisms in the fiction.
5. If possible, have the class write the author in order to pose questions about how he or she wrote the book, what sources were used, etc.



6. If the events took place in modern times, have students conduct interviews of people who lived through the events described in the fiction. Compile an oral history.
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## Case Study -- O Pioneers!

### Part 8 -- Developing Skills of the Historical Method

One lesson I frequently try to convey to my students is the limitations of any single historical source. The upbringing of most students has led them to unconsciously accept what a textbook (or teacher) says as TRUTH. So part of our study of O Pioneers! involved examining other sources to see what each could add to our understanding of life on the Great Plains and to what degree the sources disagreed. I brought in a wide variety of primary and secondary sources about life on the prairie and had students compare the evidence found in these new sources with that in their textbook and in O Pioneers!. I pointed out that differences could be disagreements between the sources or omissions (intentional or unintentional). In order to illustrate the process, I read from one of my favorite sources for this topic, Otto Bettmann's The Good Old Days -- They Were Terrible (New York: Random House, 1974). The descriptions of polluted wells, horrible insect infestations, and widespread vagrancy revealed another side to our sometimes idyllic notions of the countryside as described by Cather. The class speculated about why these topics were not included in either O Pioneers! or the textbook and whether such details were important to know. I then asked students to make a list of differences between their sources, speculate on why these differences exist, and decide which source they thought was most reliable and why.

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**F. Strategies for building an understanding of the connections between the book and today's world:**

Ultimately, the goal of history class is to help students understand the world today. What lessons can the events, circumstances, and choices of people in the past provide us to make life better now and in the future? A well chosen work of historical fiction should provide insights into the present as well as to the past and it is important that the teacher make these clear. Through discussions, essays, individual or class projects, students should be aware of the significance of the study of the past for their own lives.

1. In class discussions be sure to include explorations of the connections between then and now. Which of the problems have been resolved in the intervening years? Which remain or have gotten worse? How do the people, the government, or other institutions today respond to those same situations? Should more be done?
2. Undertake a class project (or individual projects) relating to a central issue of the book. This can involve individual research, local history explorations, exhibitions or presentations, or community service.

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**Case Study -- © Pioneers!**

**Part 9 -- Understanding the Connections to the Present**

In class discussions I tried to bring out some of the major points of connection between the book and modern day life. Some of the themes we explored were gender roles, the immigrant experience, and stereotyping and prejudice. These discussions reinforced student awareness of these enduring topics in American society.

As a final project, I decided to have the class do an oral history. After

reading about life in a nineteenth century farming community, I thought it would be interesting to see how much life had changed. Since our small town school is surrounded by farmland, I decided to have students interview area farmers or long-time residents as to what the agricultural life is like now and how the experience has changed over their lifetimes. I thought that this would be a valuable exercise because most of the students have no idea what farming involves, even though they drive by the farms every day and depend on the food they grow for their survival. We had worked on interviewing skills before, so students were familiar with how to prepare, arrange, and tape an interview. Working in pairs this time, students developed questions for their interviewee. The assignment was given early enough so that they would have time to arrange the interview, tape it, and fill out a self-evaluation. As with previous interviews they had conducted, at first students complained about having to go outside the normal homework routine, but in the end they brought in wonderful interviews and learned a tremendous amount from the experience. It was a great conclusion to the experience of reading O Pioneers!.

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## EVALUATING THE EXPERIENCE

When the class has finished with the book, be sure to evaluate the experience with your students. How did they like learning from historical fiction? Was the book itself a good choice? Did they gain a greater appreciation for the historical period than they would have using traditional methods? Which strategies worked and which didn't? What would they like to do differently next time? This evaluation can be oral or written, but should provide a helpful guide for future use of literature in history class.

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### Case Study -- O Pioneers!

#### **Part 10 -- Evaluating the Experience**

After we had finished O Pioneers! I held a class discussion in which I asked students to share their thoughts and feelings about what they got out of the book. Although there were a number of different viewpoints, overall they felt that they learned more from O Pioneers! than they would otherwise. In particular they seemed to appreciate finding out about the lifestyle of ordinary people and what the experience of living back then was like. As I had anticipated, a few students complained that the book moved too slowly, and some said that it felt like English class, but overall the experience was a positive one. I plan to use the book again in the future.

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## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The introduction of this Master's Project began with a discussion of some of challenges facing history teachers today, especially the gap between the goals of history education and the reality of student achievement. It explained the appropriateness of integrating historical literature into history classes as one method for helping students to reach those goals. The introduction also stated that the Master's Project would culminate in a handbook which high school teachers could use to help them use historical fiction effectively in the history classroom.

Chapter Two consisted of a review of the literature. It was divided into two sections. The first dealt with the current state of social studies education, focusing on student achievement, student attitudes, and characteristics of teaching in the social studies. The second section dealt specifically with integrating literature into history classes. It reviewed studies which had measured the effectiveness of this technique, then went on to describe how to select appropriate titles and methods for using the books in the context of a social studies class, according to the educational literature.

An explanation of the methodology employed by this writer in researching this topic was provided in Chapter Three. The chapter also explained the origin of the project and discussed how the handbook was designed.

Chapter Four consisted of the handbook itself. It is a

self-contained unit which provides an introduction to the topic, a guideline for selecting appropriate books, suggestions for strategies for using historical literature to support course goals, and a case study of how one book might be used. Finally, a list of widely available annotated bibliographies of historical fiction and a bibliography of sources for further research were also included

### Implications for Practice

It is hoped that this project will provide educators with an easy-to-use resource which will help them increase their students' achievement and appreciation for history. While the textbook will probably continue to be the backbone of most United States History courses, the handbook will give them a tool for diversifying teaching strategies.

The handbook is designed especially for high school American history teachers whether beginners or veterans, but others could probably benefit, as well. Teachers of other history classes should find it useful, and it may be helpful to teachers of other subjects or at other levels. The handbook could be valuable in a social studies methods course where it is so important for education students to be exposed to a wide array of teaching techniques. Finally, parents and librarians looking for ways to stimulate students in the study of history may find the project useful.

In the effort to educate responsible citizens for a democratic society, the development of an understanding of

history is vital. It is hoped that educators will use this handbook to stimulate students to learn about the past, develop the skills of the historical method, and investigate their place in history.

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