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Connecting to History Through Historical Fiction

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Children can find little meaning in history unless they are helped to attain the point of view of a participant; in other words, unless they are given the chance to climb inside history and look out. --Jean Fritz

Adam interrupted my read-aloud of *Soldier's Heart* by Gary Paulsen in his usual exuberant way, by madly flailing both arms in the air and speaking at the same time. "Wait a minute, wait a minute," he blurted. "Is this Charley dude at the same Gettysburg we just learned about in history class?" I could almost see the light bulb shimmering in the air over his head.

I scanned the room with eyebrows raised, waiting for another student to respond. Zach raised his hand. "Yeah, Adam. Same time, same place, same war."

"So is this dude for real or a made-up guy?" Adam asked.

Zach replied, "Half and half. Remember Mrs. Sliwka told us he was based on a real guy."

What followed was a lively and largely teacher-free class discussion reviewing the elements of historical fiction and how authors pluck various real people to star in their tales. Although Adam had barely skated by all year with a "D" in the class, he was more engaged than I had ever seen him. In that moment, history came alive for him. For the remainder of that unit, Adam read, wrote, and participated with a fervor that was new to him. He threw himself into the study of the Civil War in history class so that he had a foundation for the reading we did in language arts class. Although his newfound academic engagement

and enthusiasm didn't last for the rest of the year, the historical fiction unit was one he could point to with pride as a measure of his success.

Role of Historical Fiction

As a history teacher, I know that helping students make cross-discipline connections lies at the heart of engaging history instruction. As a language arts teacher, I know that finding deeper meaning is a goal often reached through reading and writing. Although I have used many interdisciplinary projects and products, I have found there is no better or more consistently successful vehicle than historical fiction.

By its very nature, history is composed of stories about people who are no longer alive to speak for themselves. Perhaps this is why so many students find it difficult to relate to social studies—the participants seem so far removed from the students' own lives. In order for students' knowledge to grow, an interest in the particular topic must be initiated, and this is where teachers can make a difference. Those silent voices of history can be brought to life through the use of historical fiction in the classroom.

During my years in an eighth-grade classroom teaching both language arts and history, I fine-tuned the use of historical fiction as well as other interdisciplinary ideas. In my current role as a curriculum consultant, I have promoted the use of these ideas and have yet to find a situation in which it is not successful. Of course, not everything works with every student, but incorporating reading and writing in history is a sure-fire way to enrich the instruction. The added bonus, of course, is that students become more proficient in reading and writing in all areas.

Guiding Students to Engage with the Curriculum

Because history textbooks are often perceived as boring or dull, introducing other sources in the classroom not only appeals to students, but these other texts, particularly historical fiction, are more likely to help create connections between students' background knowledge and the concepts. Fiction brings historical figures to life and allows students to make important conceptual connections. By

reading historical fiction and examining a character's actions, students can hear practical advice for their own lives, see how people handle difficult situations, explore diversity and tolerance issues, gain historical intelligence, and become aware of the basis for many of America's values and beliefs. Furthermore, activities with historical literature can nurture creativity and create an environment conducive to the development of higher-order and critical thinking skills, as well as motivate students to discover the past and how it connects to life today.

Opportunities of Historical Fiction

With the proliferation of well-written historical fiction on the shelves today, one can find a tale to connect students to nearly any historical event at any grade level. Reading that type of narrative literature while studying an era of history, students will be able to deepen their comprehension of the texts by getting to know the real or fictional characters in the book and understand why some historical figures acted the way they did.

By observing decisions of characters, students have a basis by which to make decisions in their lives, and they will recognize that people in history are, after all, not that dissimilar from themselves.

An additional benefit to using historical fiction is that students can relate to young historical characters that may be going through similar difficulties. The situations in which historical teens find themselves can entice students to speculate what they would do in similar situations. By observing decisions of characters, students have a basis by which to make decisions in their lives, and they will recognize that people in history are, after all, not that dissimilar from themselves. Students may also learn from the way the author presents the events in the story, critically analyzing the text to determine any evident bias. This analytical skill may carry over to other areas of curriculum, as well as to the student's life outside the classroom. By making the connections visible to the students, a teacher can show students how an author uses the craft of writing to explore issues, present solutions, and offer guidance.

For example, reading about the trials and struggles

of young Civil War soldier Charley Goddard in *Soldier's Heart* enabled Adam and the rest of my eighth-grade students to see the war through Charley's eyes and speculate on the decisions they would have made were they in his shoes. In order to explore their own thought processes I asked the students to write in a journal. Keeping a journal was a great way for them to get their thoughts on paper, and it was an opportunity for them to play with syntax and vocabulary of the time period. By the end of the unit, they saw that even though the Civil War was many years ago, the emotions and decisions faced by the people who lived then were not that different from their own. For example, an entry in the journal (in which they were asked to write as Charley's mother explaining her reaction to her son's joining the army) led to a deep discussion about whether my students would join the service. With the war in Iraq, the situation was similar to Charley's, and students reflected on the possibility of going into combat and their family's reaction to that. Through this examination, these twenty-first century middle schoolers put themselves in fourteen-year-old Charley's place in 1863 and found they were not so different.

Use of Picture Books

Making connections to history can be achieved through more than historical fiction novels. A literary sub-group that is often overlooked with older students is the picture book. Often concepts in history or other areas of social studies are difficult for students to grasp (e.g., the divisive nature of a civil war or the struggle for women's rights); therefore, the readability, illustrations, and single focus of picture books can make a complex topic more understandable—mainly because a more experienced person, the author, has worked to transform the historical experience for a younger audience.

Many picture books today are written with an older audience in mind, and there are exceptionally well-written and illustrated historical fiction titles covering a multitude of periods. For example, *Pink and Say* by Patricia Polacco addresses the friendship between two very young Civil War soldiers, one white and one black; *Runaway Jack* by Stewart Lees tells the story of an escaped slave; *Amelia and Eleanor Go for a Ride* by Pam Munoz Ryan recounts an evening when Amelia Earhart and Eleanor Roosevelt defied the

norms for women of the times; and *Baseball Saved Us* by Ken Mochizuki provides a story of the Japanese interment camps during World War II.

Using a variety of picture books related to the same theme or unit of study can present multiple perspectives on given topics. An especially helpful activity to guide students to understand the genre of historical fiction is to divide the class into groups of four or five students, provide each group with a different picture book on a given time period or topic, and have them identify the setting, plot, and characters to prove it is indeed historical fiction, then share their findings and perspectives with the rest of the class. This activity may lead students to begin visualizing the time period and topic also.

Today's student may have difficulty constructing an appropriate visual image of an historical era. The illustrations in a picture book can remedy that by providing a perspective on the particular action, character or setting. In addition, students examine the images to find clues to an author's sub-text. By examining a picture book, students can imagine themselves in that time period or situation. For example, in *Baseball Saved Us*, the starkness and harsh reality of the barren nature of the interment camps here in the United States is illustrated. Students who are used to lounging on the couch with a video game controller in hand are able to see and understand the conditions the Japanese-Americans endured.

Picture books also provide an ideal way to accommodate struggling or reluctant readers. While these books do not necessarily have a lower reading level, the lack of massive blocks of text tends to be more palatable to students with difficulty reading, particularly as these students expand their knowledge of strategies and become more skilled at using them. Picture books are more likely to deal with a single topic and explore it, making these books easier to understand. In a classroom that encourages and provides picture books, any stigma or imagined condescension is removed, freeing students of all ability levels to pick up, read and interpret a picture book.

As part of a social studies unit, picture books and other examples of historical fiction are useful and important for students to learn history, to construct written responses, and to develop as readers. In the language arts classroom,

the use of picture books can deepen study that is going on in the other content areas as well as serve as an introduction to genre study. Reading a picture book about a particular topic can prompt a student to seek out a novel pertaining to the same topic. They can also be excellent springboards into other activities. Using picture books is an ideal way to get students used to the idea of literature circles and provides easy practice of selected strategies before moving into novels. For example, comparing and contrasting picture books relating to the same topic offers opportunities for critical thinking and recognizing multiple perspectives. Reading picture books can provide prior knowledge before moving on to a novel or even the textbook, providing a strong base for text-to-text connections.

After reading a collection of picture books, students can be encouraged to create their own, which gives them the opportunity of examining an historical topic or concept and deciding how to write it for a younger or more inexperienced audience. Using a historical fiction novel as the basis for writing and illustrating a picture book or writing an historical fiction short story can do this. Practically any piece of narrative writing that students have done (e.g., a memoir, fable, or a science fiction tale) can be rewritten as a picture book, leading students into a study of how to select important events, tell a story through pictures, determine precise word choice, and revise for a different audience. Furthermore, picture books encourage students to look for the main ideas and concepts of a time period or event and to choose concise words to make the story come to life.

Some Sample Activities that Focus on Historical Events

People Fair

One way to help students get in the head of the characters is to encourage them to become the character. A "people fair" is a great way to accomplish this. After reading a self-selected historical fiction novel or biography, students collect artifacts that represent ideas, objects, or other people that were important to the historical figure. For example, Harriet Tubman might have a map to guide her way north, a bird whistle to signal slaves that it is time to leave, and a well-worn pair of boots. Stonewall Jackson would have a

Bible to signify his religious fervor, a lemon (he was known for sucking them while planning), and a military medal or ribbon. Benjamin Franklin could be depicted wearing bifocals and holding a copy of *Poor Richard's Almanac* with a kite at his feet. Students catalog the items and write an annotation, then display the items at the fair. Included in each student's display are a summary of the book, a book review, and a portrait of the person. The highlight of the fair is dressing up as the character and delivering a monologue in the voice of that person. They can get quite creative and make a 'button' for passers-by to push, thus triggering the animation of the character delivering his/her speech.

Historical Newspaper

This works especially well for literature circles or in conjunction with a social studies teacher. After reading a historical fiction novel, students design and write a newspaper that might have been printed at the time the book takes place. They write a news story of an actual event that is depicted in the book, a feature article on a person or event, an editorial on some issue in the book, and various smaller items such as a weather report, an obituary, advice column, want ads, etc. The type of articles depends largely on what is covered in the book. Often research has to be done to supplement the book's description and students get lots of practice at journalistic type writing. Students gain knowledge and understanding of historical figures and events while they are learning to write in a variety of technical ways—a type of writing that is often sadly overlooked.

Puppets

Combining historical fiction with nonfiction accounts is a perfect mix for this activity. It's also easy to differentiate. While reading historical fiction of the Civil War era (or, for example, studying an ancient civilization or Native American tribes), students should keep notes of the soldiers' non-battle life on the march. What did they wear? Eat? Carry? What did they do in their spare time? Supply students with nonfiction articles that address the same issues and direct them to compare the nonfiction reading with the information in their fiction text. This is a perfect opportunity to discuss the different reading strategies employed with fiction and nonfiction texts. They should then write an interview with

a Civil War soldier, asking questions about his or her life on the march.

Once the interview is written (works well as a partner activity), they have to make a puppet to represent the soldier. They are allowed to use anything in the room (with permission) as long as they don't destroy it in the process. I've had students use a globe for a head, take a sock off their own foot to make a puppet, draw on their hands, as well as utilizing the popsicle sticks, construction paper, and Styrofoam balls that I keep in the classroom for this purpose. The only specific requirement is that the puppet be recognizable as either a Union or Confederate soldier. Once the puppet is made, they conduct the interview and must create a voice to go with their puppet. They present the interview in small groups and select the best puppet, voice, and interview to present to the class.

Pen Pals

Corresponding with a fictional pen pal is a way to engage students while working on their writing skills and assessing their understanding of history. I started by creating a profile of various people who likely existed during the Civil War (although other eras work just as well). Students in one class received a card with information on a Union sympathizer including the age, sex, race, state where they lived, and occupation of the person. Students in a different class got similar cards for Confederates. The Confederates then created a description that included name, family, description of house and home life, and a typical day's pattern.

Some research was required. Once the character was fleshed out, each member of the Union class wrote a letter to his or her Southern "cousin," expressing feelings on Lincoln's election, and I randomly delivered the letters to the other class. The person who received the letter was designated as the cousin and a relationship was established; the Southern cousin wrote back and a pattern began. (At least one randomly-paired duo found that one of them was white and the other African-American. This was a wonderful opportunity to discuss how these two people could be 'cousins,' addressing the diversity in our country and developing a feeling of 'we're all in this together' instead of 'us versus them'.) Every couple of days students were instructed to write on a specific topic or event in the form of

a friendly letter to their cousin, and the cousin responded. For example, they wrote about the shortage of food in the South, the draft riots in the North, the Battle of Gettysburg as the turning point of the war, and the surrender. After the surrender, we had a 'big reveal' party where they came face-to-face with their cousins.

This works equally well as a Revolutionary War activity between Americans and British, during Westward Expansion between pioneers and those either left behind or already in the Pacific Northwest.

Conclusion

One of the biggest challenges we face as teachers is to help students understand that the skills and concepts they learn in one class are not restricted to that class. They need to see how everything connects. Nowhere is this truer than in the areas of reading and writing. Recently I was working with a science class about how to revise essays they had written on photosynthesis. One girl volunteered, "I didn't know we had to write, like, good. This isn't language arts class." I assured her that any time she writes, she should, "Write, like good." By adding reading and writing to all classes, and bringing content area concepts into language arts classes, perhaps all students will know they should "write, like good" at all times. In every class there are Adams just waiting to make those connections and see how it all fits together.

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Appendix A

Historical fiction novels set during the Civil War

Across Five Aprils by Irene Hunt

Living in southern Illinois, young Jethro has to decide where he stands on the issues of the Civil War.

Behind Rebel Lines by Seymour Reit

Sarah, a 15-year-old girl from Michigan, runs away from home and disguises herself as a boy so she can join the Union Army. (Based on the same true story as *Girl in Blue*, with more emphasis on Sarah's spy work)

Bull Run by Paul Fleischman

Told in chapters by alternating characters, this describes the events of the first battle of the Civil War.

Girl in Blue by Ann Rinaldi

Sarah, a 15-year-old girl from Michigan, runs away from home and disguises herself as a boy so she can join the Union Army. (Based on the same true story as *Behind Rebel Lines*, with more emphasis on Sarah's time as a soldier.)

In My Father's House by Ann Rinaldi

The first battle of the Civil War occurs near Bull Run, literally in Oscie McLean's front yard. During the war, Oscie butts heads with her stepfather and must decide how she feels about slavery.

The Killer Angels by Michael Shaara

An in-depth look at the Battle of Gettysburg through the eyes of both Confederate and Union generals.

Numbering All the Bones by Ann Rinaldi

A house slave, 13-year-old Eulinda lives only a mile from Andersonville Prison in Georgia, the most notorious prison camp in the south. Eulinda becomes involved in the struggle to help the captured Union soldiers escape the death and disease of the camp.

Rifles for Waite by Harold Keith

The Civil War is addressed from a much different angle than most novels. This book tells the story of the war in the West and the involvement of the Native Americans.

Soldier's Heart by Gary Paulson

Young Charley Goddard wants to see the world and get in the war before it's over, so he leaves his home in Minnesota and discovers what war is all about.

With Every Drop of Blood by James and Christopher Collier

Fourteen-year-old Johnny is attempting to get supplies to a besieged Richmond when he is captured by a young African-American soldier.

Appendix B

Historical fiction picture books

A Place Called Freedom by Scott Sanders

An African-American family freed from slavery in 1832 walks to Indiana to begin a new life.

Amelia and Eleanor go for a Ride by Pam Munoz Ryan

Based on a real event, this tells the story of an adventure that Eleanor Roosevelt and Amelia Earhart had after dinner at the White House.

Baseball Saved Us by Ken Mochizuki

A group of Japanese-Americans in an internment camp during World War II build a baseball diamond to give the internees a way to pass the time and find some pride in themselves.

Cecil's Story by George Ella Lyon

A young boy awaits his injured father's return from the Civil War.

Dandelions by Eve Bunting

A family moves west and the children must try to

help their mother adapt to their new life.

Freedom River by Doreen Rappaport

Based on the true story of John Parker, an African-American businessman who helped slaves escape.

Pink and Say by Patricia Polacco

Two young Union soldiers during the Civil War seek refuge in the South after being wounded.

Red Flower Goes West by Ann Turner

The story of a family who moves west for better opportunities.

Runaway Jack by Stewart Lees

During the 1840's, the slave Jack is sold away from his family and is determined to escape to freedom.

Selina and the Bear Paw Quilt by Barbara Smucker

A Mennonite family decides they must flee to Canada to avoid taking sides during the Civil War.

Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt by Deborah Hopkinson

Clara, a young slave, sews a quilt that shows the way to freedom

Train to Somewhere by Eve Bunting

The story of the Orphan Train, which took orphans from New York on a train west to be adopted.

Virgie goes to school with us boys by Elizabeth Howard

Virgie, the only girl in a family of boys, is determined to go to school with the other freed slaves during Reconstruction.

When Jessie Came Across the Sea by Amy Hest

At the turn of the century, 13-year-old Jessie emigrates from Eastern Europe to New York City and works as a dressmaker to raise money to bring her grandmother over.

About the Author

Carol Sliwka (sliwka@monroe.k12.mi.us) taught eighth grade Language Arts and U.S. History at Cantrick Middle School in Monroe, MI. Working with middle schoolers taught her how to negotiate, motivate, arbitrate, and celebrate, skills that serve her well in her current position as the secondary English consultant for Monroe Public Schools.