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PEOPLE, PLACES, AND PURPOSES: FINDING OUR WAY THROUGH HISTORY

Pamela Gates-Duffield

George Santayana, a twentieth century poet and philosopher, is credited with saying that "*those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.*" That phrase has been a guiding force on my thinking and teaching of multicultural literature for children and young adults over the past several years. The power of its implications for me as a teacher is sometimes daunting because it is laden with implications of ethics and social justice incarnate. I have come to believe that a necessary component of this work is to facilitate a learning environment where students come to develop a knowledge about and understanding of the history of racism and prejudice in our country. Further, I believe it can provide a link that is essential if we are to change the negative practices that still permeate our society.

I often teach a course at my university titled "Cultural Pluralism in Young Adult and Children's Literature." I introduce the study of multicultural literature each semester with historical fiction because it has been a successful way to engage my students at the clearly emotional level that I believe is an essential part of learning. By beginning with historical fiction, we become engaged with and can come to understand the past in ways that force us to see people and places in human terms and not just a series of dates or events. Authors of historical fiction allow us to do that when they make us laugh and cry with the characters whose stories they

tell. Multicultural historical fiction provides a window or portal by which to enter into time periods by engaging students in the lives of the people from the past. By doing this, we provide them with an opportunity to feel a part of a culture that may not be theirs, to feel a part of a time period that is not theirs, and to witness the pain and horrors of discrimination that African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans experienced. It allows us to experience through literature the "places" of our shared history as a country and come to a deeper understanding of the importance of Santayana's plea.

Anyone who has read *Ajeemah and His Son* by James Berry (1991) will never again be able to think about slavery without feeling the pain of Ajeemah and Atu, separated from family, from each other, and from their life in Africa. Likewise, those who have read Laurence Yep's *Dragon's Gate* (1993) will be forever changed by the power of discrimination and hatred experienced by Otter and his Chinese co-workers as they worked to build the trans-continental railroad in America. Other books, such as Shirley Sterling's *My Name is Seepeetza* (1992), provide us with information about the racism and hardships of Native American boarding school experiences, while Sherry Garland's *Indio* (1995) shows us the horrors that Native people experienced at the hands of the Spanish conquistadors in areas now known as Mexico and the southwest regions

of the United States. In each of these texts, and in the titles contained in the following bibliography, the sense of place—place in history, place in geography, place in culture—is delineated in ways that bring the reader into the experiences of the characters.

By examining the history of racism and prejudice for cultural groups through the eyes of strong characters who face incredible challenges, we, and those we teach, may be able to understand better how it continues to impact us as a society. As teachers, we must find opportunities to tell everyone's history in ways that are authentic and supplement the texts we are required to use. The selections included here are intended to provide accurate and sometimes new information for young readers without the stereotypes that have often misrepresented whole groups of people. I do not suggest that the selections provided are the only multicultural representations of place in historical fiction; there are many more texts available for use in classrooms. The annotated texts listed below are popular choices with teachers and students and provide excellent discussions about historical events and time periods. These discussions have promoted an open examination of the history, the underlying forces of racism and prejudice, and the hope and dignity of people. The order in which the annotated selections are reviewed offers an historical perspective of the events that have affected African Americans and provides a foundation on which to build a curricular approach. Aligning particular historical periods to our social studies and language arts frameworks provides us the opportunity to integrate historical fiction into our curriculum sensibly and for real purposes.

Historical fiction allows us to see and feel emotionally connected to events and people of the past. It provides young people with an opportunity to connect the historical data to the human side of history. Authors who engage us in the lives and events of the past through the stories they create weave the fabric of our own freedom quilt. Integrating multicultural historical fiction into our programs helps students to understand the landscape—

the importance of place—of where we've been with the hope of assuring that we don't lose our way again.

If properly planned, historical fictions will be both informative and exciting for the teacher and his/her students. Remember that not all picture books and novels portray accurate events. The elements of the stories used should be congruent and authentic based upon the time period that the class is studying. The histories of these groups are tragic and sensitive in nature. Therefore, a teacher should plan to take time before and after reading historical fiction selections to prepare students to the sometimes harsh realities of our country.

African American Historical Fiction: Placing it in the Curriculum

Stories of Slavery and the Slave Trade.

Introducing young people to the horrors of the slave trade and the lives of those enslaved is no easy or pleasant task for teachers of history and literature. There are, however, many fine novels that provide information situated in strong characters and believable settings. The following titles are a few examples of those that will engage students in purposeful discussions about this sad period of our history.

Berry, James. *Ajeemah and his Son*. New York: Harper Collins, 1991.

Berry draws us into the lives of a father and son who were ripped from their homeland in Africa and sold into slavery in what is now Jamaica. Kidnapped on the way to the home of his bride to be, Atu and his father Ajeemah find themselves on the other side of the world—a place where they are separated and sold into slavery

Hanson, Joyce. *The Captive*. New York: Scholastic, 1994.

This story is based on Olaudah Equiano, an Ashanti prince who was captured and sold into slavery in 1755. Hansen names her character Kofi and sets the story in Massachusetts rather than the West

Indies where the real Equino was enslaved. Like Equino, though, Kofi learns to read, gains his freedom, and ultimately writes his own story. Kofi displays an incredible level of personal fortitude, refusing to acknowledge any bondage to those who would own him.

McKissack, Patricia, and Fredrick McKissack. *Christmas in the Big House, Christmas in the Quarters*. New York: Scholastic, 1994.

In *Christmas in the Big House, Christmas in the Quarters* the plantation slaves tend to the needs of the household while they attempt to learn more about John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. The McKissacks give readers a sense of urgency and tension as we observe the work behind the scenes—the abolitionist movement in the midst of Christmas preparations.

Lyons, Mary. *Letters from a Slave Girl: The Story of Harriet Jacobs*. New York: Scribners, 1992.

Mary Lyons also shows her readers a harsh picture of what life for a slave woman was like in *Letters from a Slave Girl: The Story of Harriet Jacobs* (1992). Lyons weaves a story in the form of journal excerpts of Harriet Jacobs, a slave woman who hid in an attic crawl space for seven years to escape the attentions of the man who owned her. Unable to bear the thought of leaving her children completely, she hides away and watches them grow. After seven years, Harriet does finally escape to the North, only to live in fear of being hunted down and returned to the South. Her story is emotionally gripping and illustrates the risks some slaves took to free themselves from the indignities thrust upon them by those who sought to hold them captive.

The Underground Railroad.

Students in the Midwest are often fascinated by the stories about the Underground Railroad. Many communities in Michigan were active links in this movement, and the following titles offer students narratives about the people and places of these events. Told in picture book and novel for-

mats, these stories illustrate the heroic efforts of those people who risked their lives for the sake of freedom.

Winter, Jeanette. *Follow the Drinking Gourd*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1988.

In *Follow the Drinking Gourd*, the tale of Peg Leg Joe, an old sailor who helped slaves escape to freedom, is told. In this picture book, Peg Leg Joe hires himself out to plantation owners as a cover to teach a seemingly harmless song to the slaves. The song tells of following the drinking gourd—the Big Dipper and North Star—secretly telling the way to freedom. Through the lyrics, the journey is charted through the fields, woods, and rivers to the Ohio River where Peg Leg Joe waits to ferry the runaways to the North where white sympathizers would hide and feed them on their dangerous journey to Canada.

Hopkinson, D. *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1993.

In another picture book presentation, Clara is taken from her mother and forced to work as a field hand. When her adopted aunt teaches her to sew, Clara moves to the Big House to work and discovers information about the Underground Railroad. With hoarded pieces of fabric scraps, Clara creates a quilt that maps the journey to the North for those willing to risk the trek. Once she finishes the quilt, Clara and Jack, a field hand she loves, decide to run away, leaving the quilt behind for those who wish to follow them to freedom.

Patterson, Katherine. *Jip: His Story*. New York: Lodestar, 1996.

In Patterson's novel for older readers, *Jip: His Story* (1996), we find Jip as a pre-teen working on the county farm for the poor. As a toddler, he fell off a wagon and was left behind. Jip's hope is that his family will come back in search of him, but that doesn't happen. Jip works for his keep on a county work farm that takes in orphaned children, widows and their children, and people

whom we might consider mentally challenged. It quickly becomes obvious to the reader that this is a place where the people are treated poorly and without respect. When it is discovered quite by chance that Jip's mother was a runaway slave, his sense of "place in the world" changes abruptly as he suddenly finds himself hunted by the man who owned his mother. Jip is dependent upon the Underground Railroad for his escape. Readers will find Jip's struggles suspenseful.

Lasky, Kathryn. *True North*. New York: Scholastic, 1996.

Another novel that depicts the work of the Underground Railroad is *True North* by Kathryn Lasky. The protagonists in this novel are two young women—a female slave who is running away and traveling north and the young woman who discovers her, befriends her, and travels with her as they make their way to Canada. Fraught with the dangers and restrictions faced by young women of this time period, this story provides insight into the abolitionist movement.

Stories of the Civil War.

There are many excellent novels that help young people to understand the conflicts that led to the Civil War. Though many deal with events of the war itself, there are some that address the tensions slaves faced on the plantations.

Pinkney, Andrea. *Silent Thunder: A Civil War Story*. New York: Hyperion, 1999.

This story is told through the alternating chapters of a brother and sister—Rosco and Summer—slaves fathered by the plantation owner, Gideon Parnell. The story describes their lives and relationships with the household and the lure of learning to read. When the fall of 1862 brings news of the impending Emancipation Proclamation, the plantation is rocked by the hope of freedom. The story is full of rich description that makes the characters and events fully believable and engaging for older readers.

Forrester, Sandra. *Sound the Jubilee*. New York: Puffin, 1995.

The settlement of Roanoke Island with runaway slaves is the "place" of this novel. Set in the period of the Civil War, readers are introduced to Maddie, an eleven-year-old slave, and her family who find themselves relocated to the Roanoke settlement. Their story of survival, loss, and personal dignity will stir the emotions of readers of all ages.

Polacco, Patricia. *Pink and Say*. New York: Philomel, 1994.

One of the few picture book depictions of the Civil War and its horror is found in Polacco's *Pink and Say* (1994). This finely illustrated picture book tells the story of two union soldiers—one black and one white—who become friends. Caught behind enemy lines, the tragic outcome is a poignant example of the cruelty of war. Polacco retells the event through the voice of her grandfather—a story passed down from generation to generation.

Early 1900s through the Depression Era.

Another time period that has been captured well in literature for young people is the early part of the 20th century. Through books written by Mildred Taylor and others, students become aware of the tremendous struggles faced by African Americans following the Civil War.

Taylor, Mildred. *The Well*. New York: Puffin, 1995.

Mildred Taylor has consistently provided stories of people, places, and events that have added a wealth of information about the early years of the 20th century through her stories about the Logan family. Set in the early 1900s, *The Well* introduces young readers to David Logan, Big Ma, and the Simms family. In this introduction to the Logan family, we are able to see the foundations of hatred that influences Taylor's other novels—*Song of the Trees* (1975), *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976), *Let the Circle be Unbroken* (1981), *Mississippi Bridge* (1990), and *Road to Memphis* (1990). Beginning with *The Well* and continuing throughout all

of her stories, we are able to see examples of hatred and prejudice that existed in our country. Readers are provided insight into the lives of African Americans after the Civil War and prior to the Civil Rights movement. These stories can help students to understand that the end of slavery did not mean the end to discrimination—quite the contrary.

Curtis, Christopher Paul. *Bud, not Buddy*. New York: Delacorte, 1999.

Another recent addition to this time period is the 2000 Newbery Award winner, *Bud, not Buddy*, by Christopher Paul Curtis (1999). Whereas Taylor's work is set in the South, this story is set in Michigan. Beginning in Flint, Michigan during the early 1930s, we are introduced to Bud, not Buddy, a young boy whose mother died four years earlier, leaving him in the care of orphanages and foster care homes. Curtis provides a poignant commentary on the state of poverty during the depression era through descriptions of food lines and Hooverville shantytowns. With determination, Bud, not Buddy goes in search of his father—ready to walk across the state if necessary. Curtis weaves a story of hardship, humor, and healing.

English, K. *Francie*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999.

Another novel set in the era of the Great Depression is *Francie* by English (1999). The “place” of this story is Noble, Alabama where thirteen-year-old Francie Weaver works day jobs cleaning with her mother while they wait for the return of her father who has gone to Chicago to work as a Pullman porter. The story richly details the daily struggles of dealing with small town gossips and bullies where, although slavery is abolished, the social organization still reflects segregation.

Civil Rights.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s is another era that is ripe for student discovery of the continued historical struggle for African Americans.

Curtis, Christopher Paul. *The Watsons go to Birmingham—1963*. New York: Delacorte, 1995.

Young readers are provided with an emotional connection to Kenny and his family as they travel to Birmingham, Alabama, the heart of the Civil Rights movement and the site of the church bombing that killed six children. To understand the “place” of the Civil Rights movement is to understand the pain of racism and prejudice as it affected ordinary people. The Watson family helps readers to see all facets of family life in the context of the violence that touched so many lives.

Davis, Ossie. *Just Like Martin*. New York: Puffin, 1992.

Ossie Davis gives readers another fictionalized account of the Civil Rights movement and its impact on the young people of the time in *Just Like Martin* (1992). In this story, we see the commitment and personal struggle of a young man to emulate his hero, Martin Luther King, Jr. This novel addresses the difficulties Stone, the fourteen-year-old protagonist, has in trying to live up to his commitment of non-violence in the face of the bombing deaths of his friends. Set in Alabama in the summer and fall of 1963, Davis's novel clearly engages his readers at a level that can't be ignored and helps us to understand the importance of this historical time and place.

While the narratives above provide an example of a sequential presentation of African American experience through historical fiction, the list is certainly not exhaustive. The bibliography that follows presents many other titles that also are excellent choices. Whether you choose to study a culture, a time period, or a set of experiences, historical fiction provides us with a portal into other eras. By discovering the significance of place in literature, we are often closer to understanding the significance of all human experiences. Multicultural historical fiction expands that significance by emphasizing the struggles and the dignity of all people; it offers us the opportunity to indeed “remember a past” so we are not “condemned to repeat it.”

African American Historical Fiction

- Berry, J. *Ajeemah and his Son*. New York: Harper Collins, 1991.
- Cameron, A. *The Kidnapped Prince: the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.
- Collier, J., and C. Collier. *Jump Ship to Freedom*. New York: Delacorte, 1981.
- Curtis, C. P. *The Watsons Go To Birmingham—1963*. New York: Delacorte, 1995.
- Curtis, C. P. *Bud, not Buddy*. New York: Delacorte, 1999.
- Davis, O. *Just Like Martin*. New York: Puffin, 1992.
- English, K. *Francie*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999.
- Forrester, S. *Sound of Jubilee*. New York: Puffin, 1995.
- Hansen, J. *The Captive*. New York: Scholastic, 1994.
- Hopkinson, D. *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1993.
- Houston, G. *Bright Freedom's Song: A Story of the Underground Railroad*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998.
- Lasky, K. *True North*. New York: Scholastic, 1996.
- Lyons, M. *Letters from a Slave Girl: The Story of Harriet Jacobs*. New York: Scribners, 1992.
- McKissack, P. M., and F. McKissack. *Christmas at the Big House, Christmas in the Quarters*. New York: Scholastic, 1994.
- Patterson, K. *Jip: His Story*. New York: Lodestar, 1996.
- Paulsen, G. *Nightjohn*. New York: Delacorte, 1993.
- Paulsen, G. *Sarny*. New York: Delacorte, 1997.
- Pinkney, A. D. *Silent Thunder: A Civil War Story*. New York: Hyperion, 1999.
- Polacco, P. *Pink and Say*. New York: Philomel, 1994.
- Stolz, M. *Cezanne Pinto*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1994.
- Taylor, M. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. New York: Dial, 1976.
- Taylor, M. *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*. New York: Dial, 1981.

Taylor, M. *The Mississippi Bridge*. New York: Dial, 1990.

Taylor, M. *The Well*. New York: Dial, 1995.

Taylor, M. *Song of the Tree*. New York: Dial, 1975.

Taylor, M. *Road to Memphis*. New York: Dial, 1992.

Winter, J. *Follow the Drinking Gourd*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1988.

Asian American Historical Fiction

- Choi, S. N. *Year of the Impossible Goodbyes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991.
- Choi, S. N. *Echoes of the White Giraffe*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.
- Garland, S. *Song of the Buffalo Boy*. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Goldin, B. *Red Means Good Fortune: A Story of San Francisco's Chinatown*. New York: Viking, 1994.
- Ho, M. *The Clay Marble*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1991.
- Houston, J. W. *Farewell to Manzanar*. San Francisco: Bantam, 1973.
- Mochizuki, K. *Baseball Saved Us*. New York: Scholastic, 1993.
- Mochizuki, K. *Heroes*. New York: Scholastic, 1995.
- Salisbury, G. *Under the Blood Red Sun*. New York: Yearling, 1994.
- Uchida, Y. *The Bracelet*. New York: Philomel, 1993.
- Uchida, Y. *A Jar of Dreams*. New York: Macmillan, 1981.
- Uchida, Y. *Journey to Topaz*. San Francisco: Creative Arts, 1971.
- Whelan, G. *Goodbye, Vietnam*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1992.
- Yep, L. *Dragonwings*. New York: Harper, 1975.
- Yep, L. *The Star Fisher*. New York: Morrow, 1991.
- Yep, L. *Dragon's Gate*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

Latino/Hispanic American Historical Fiction

- Fleisschman, S. *Bandit's Moon*. Illustrated by J.A. Smith. Greenwillow, 1998.
- Garland, S. *Indio*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995.
- Krumgold, J. *And Now Miguel*. Crowell, 1953.
- Mohr, N. *Nilda*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.
- O'Dell, S. *The Amethyst Ring*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983.
- O'Dell, S. *The Captive*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979.
- O'Dell, S. *Carlotta*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.

- O'Dell, S. *The Feathered Serpent*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
- O'Dell, S. *The King's Fifth*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966.
- Santiago, E. *When I was Puerto Rican*. New York: Vintage, 1993.

Native American Historical Fiction

- Bruchac, J. *The Arrow over the Door*. Ill. by J. Watling. New York: Dial, 1998.
- Bruchac, J. *Children of the Longhouse*. New York: Puffin, 1996.
- Burks, B. *Runs With Horses*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995.
- Culleton, B. *In Search of April Raintree*. Winnipeg: Pemmican, 1984.
- Dorris, M. *Morning Girl*. New York: Hyperion, 1992.
- Dorris, M. *Guests*. New York: Hyperion, 1994.
- Dorris, M. *Sees Behind Trees*. New York: Hyperion, 1996.

- Erdrich, L. *The Birchbark House*. New York: Hyperion, 1999.
- Hudson, J. *Sweetgrass*. New York: Scholastic, 1984.
- O'Dell, S. *Sing down the Moon*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970.
- O'Dell, S., and E. Hall. *Thunder Rolling in the Mountain*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992.
- Slipperjack, R. *Honour the Sun*. Winnipeg: Pemmican, 1987.
- Sterling, S. *My Name is Seepeetza*. Vancouver: Groundwood Press, 1992.
- Wallis, V. *Bird Girl*. New York: Harper Collins, 1996.

About the Author

Pam Gates-Duffield teaches literature for children and young adults at Central Michigan University. An MCTE and NCTE member, she is a frequent conference presenter.