

Teaching With Historical Fiction

“The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go.” — Dr. Seuss, *I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!*

When reading historical fiction, students enter into the historical setting and experience the lives of the characters. They are able to empathize with the characters by feeling what the characters feel. Name and events are given a background setting and context and students are introduced to the understanding of history; they are provided with more than knowledge (Levstik, 1990; Nawrot, 1996).

Reasons for Using Historical Fiction to Teach History

- It piques the curiosity of students because a story is more easily understood than is expository text (being aesthetic or efferent – Rosenblatt, 1982).
- The story “presents history in a subjective form that is closer to the way young children explain themselves and understand the world” (Meek et al., in Freeman & Levstik, 1988, 330).
- In reading the story, students form lasting impressions; they may forget the details but retain a knowledge of life in the period (Brodine, 1988).
- Indelible impressions are formed when students become emotionally involved in the events of the story (Nawrot, 1996).
- Historical fiction provides a schema that the reader then applies to the factual information (Anderson, 1984).
- Historical fiction focuses on human consequences of events and on the implications of human behavior, it leads students into an examination of cause and effect, gives them the opportunity to explore human problems and human relationships, makes students more aware that outside events force personal choices, and provides them with a safe context to explore extremes of human behavior (Nawrot, 1996).

Tips for Choosing Good Historical Fiction

There's an abundance of historical fiction in libraries, catalogs, and bookstores. To help select the best, use the following criteria and check out the resources listed below.

Criteria □ The historical fiction you choose should:

- present a well-told story that doesn't conflict with historical records,
- portray characters realistically,
- present authentic settings,
- artfully fold in historical facts,
- provide accurate information through illustrations, and
- avoid stereotypes and myths.

Teaching with Historical Fiction Resources

This is by no means the end-all-be-all list of resources:

Websites:

- NCSS Notable Tradebooks - <https://www.socialstudies.org/publications/notables>
- Young Adult Library Services Association - <http://booklists.yalsa.net>
- Booklist Online - <https://www.booklistonline.com>
- Historical Novel Review - <https://iapwe.org/the-subgenres-of-historical-fiction/>
- The Book Report Network - <https://www.teenreads.com/reviews>
- *Our Story* (Smithsonian) Book Finder - <http://amhistory.si.edu/ourstory/bibliography/>
- PBS Historical Fiction (4th and 5th grades) - <http://thepbs.org/pages/4thhistfic.html>
- National Center for Literacy Education - <http://www.ncte.org/ncl>
- Bibliotherapy for Teens (Psychology) - <http://www.slj.com/2014/11/teens-ya/bibliotherapy-for-teens-helpful-tips-and-recommended-fiction/#>
- NoveList - This is a database that many libraries may have access to. More information can be found at <https://www.ebscohost.com/novelist>
- Teacher Vision - appropriate for 1-8 grades <https://www.teachervision.com/subjects/reading-literature/historical-fiction>
- Goodreads - A free website for book lovers. Reviews of books, blogs, and discussion groups are available. <https://www.goodreads.com>

Author Websites (these include lesson plans and/or resources):

Avi - <http://www.avi-writer.com>

Chris Crowe - <http://chriscrowe.com>

L.M. Elliott - <http://www.lmelliott.com/teachers-librarians>

Sharon Draper - <http://sharondraper.com>

Laurie Halse Anderson - <http://madwomanintheforest.com>

Walter Dean Myers - <http://walterdeanmyers.net>

Donna Jo Napoli - <http://www.donnajonapoli.com>

Joseph Bruchac - <http://josephbruchac.com>

Kekla Magoon - <http://keklamagoon.com>

Francisco Jiménez - <https://www.scu.edu/fjimenez/>

Christopher Paul Curtis - <http://www.nobodybutcurtis.com>

Books:

Crew, H. S. (2014). *Experiencing America's story through fiction*. Chicago: American Library Association.

Johnson, S. L. (2005). *Historical Fiction: a guide to the genre*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

Genres of Historical Fiction

Adventures - Novels that are known for their heroic protagonists, fast pace, and well-realized settings. Daring heroes and heroines travel far and wide in their quest to find treasure, capture pirates, discover new lands, seek justice, fight the enemy on and on sea, or face off against nature (p. 357).

Example: Horatio Hornblower Series (C. S. Forester)

Alternate Histories - Novels that ask the “What if” question. These novels examine other possible outcomes for past events. The plots hinge on one particular event and follow, in detail, exploring how history might have changed as a result (p. 583).

Example: Small Change Series (Jo Walton)

Christian - Novels that place historical or fictional characters in conflicts that reflect the Christian worldview of the authors. The characters struggle to understand God’s message for them, since knowing this will guide them in major life decisions (p. 501).

Example: *Brigid of Ireland* (Cindy Thomson)

Fantasy - Novels that are set firmly in a historical period and reflect the customs of the time, but accuracy is not an absolute requirement. The plots tend to revolve around a battle between good and evil (light and dark). The roles of light and dark tend to be based on the cultures or religions of the historical period in question, but which one is “good” and which is “evil” can vary (p. 595).

Example: Avalon Series (Marion Zimmer Bradley and Diana Paxon)

Historical Romance - Novels that involve readers emotionally with engaging stories that celebrate the love between two people. Romances set in the past let readers live vicariously through the experiences of lovers from earlier periods of history. While being entertained, readers can see how the political atmosphere, social factors, and everyday life of the time influences the actions of the characters (p.109).

Example: Highlander Series (Monica McCarty)

Historical Western - Novels that defined not only by a time period and place but also by several overarching themes: freedom, opportunity, and strength of character, all of which symbolize the American Western experience. These novels highlight civilization and its effects, for they demonstrate the impact that settlement and exploration has had on the lands of the Western frontier and their native peoples (p. 217).

Example: *O Pioneers!* (Willa Cather)

Literary - Novels that use historical settings, eloquent language and multi-layered plotlines to convey contemporary themes. The use of language is important and the writing styles used in these novels can be described as elegant, poetic, or lyrical. In addition to providing a detailed portrait of life during earlier times, authors of literary historical fiction use the past as a vehicle to express a universal or modern theme (p. 429).

Example: *Beautiful Dreamer* (Christopher Bigsby)

Multi-Period Epics - Novels that form a series of chronological snapshots, which demonstrate how characters in a number of different time periods react to the eras in which they live; they provide a comprehensive picture of a civilization or geographic area, showing how the land and its people have changed over time (p. 103).

Example: Outlander Series (Diana Gabaldon)

Mysteries - Novels that present readers with a puzzle to solve - most typically, figuring out who committed a murder or murders. Readers combine their interest in time past with an intellectual challenge, one in which they can try to figure out “whodunit” by delving through clues along with the protagonist (p. 261).

Example: Musketeers Mysteries (Sarah D’Almeida)

Sagas- Novels that focus on characters’ domestic lives and family relationships over time. Most sagas follow several generations of one family or of multiple families, revolving around a matriarchal or, less frequently, a patriarchal figure who serves as a dominant and guide forces in the lives of family members. Sagas may also follow a group of friends from their younger days through middle or old age (p. 183).

Example: *Roots* (Alex Haley)

Thrillers - Novels that are suspenseful stories set in the past that feature intelligent protagonist who find themselves in perilous situations. Because the exact form that the enemy will take is almost always unknown, the heroes or heroines use all of their resources, intellectual and emotional as well as physical, to extricate themselves from danger (p. 395).

Example: *The Dark Lantern* (Gerri Brightwell)

Time-Travel - Novels that allow readers to imagine that slipping from one time period to another is indeed possible. Through these novels readers will experience the strong pull that the past exerts on characters living in later times (p. 569).

Example: Time and Again Series (Jack Finney)

Traditional - Novels that portray a story with a twofold purpose: to portray a historical period as realistically as possible and to entertain. The novels have protagonists readers can root for and strong plotlines that keep readers glued to the pages to find out what happens next. Their appeal lies in the authors’ ability to make historical figures and events come alive (p. 19).

Example: *Copper Sun* (Sharon Draper)

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Source: Johnson, S. L. (2005). *Historical Fiction: a guide to the genre*. Westport, CT:Libraries Unlimited.