

SPOTLIGHT ON HISTORICAL FICTION



*Rebekah Bowers, Stacie Garrett,
Lynda Robinson, Fran Wilson*

In this feature column, we created a new forum. We asked a classroom teacher, a student, and teacher educators to share ideas surrounding historical fiction. There are many examples of the portrayal of war in historical fiction. Many teachers use historical fiction as a teaching tool for content relating to war. All of the articles submitted for this issue focus on current issues with war and terrorism. We felt it was relevant to include historical fiction to ensure a balanced view.

HISTORICAL FICTION CAN BE INCORPORATED INTO THE CURRICULUM.

REBEKAH BOWERS – PRESERVICE TEACHER

Historical fiction is a favorite genre of mine. As I plan to teach 2nd, 3rd, or 4th graders, two activities came to mind to use in my future classroom when teaching historical fiction. My first strategy is a fact and opinion T-chart. I would have my students use two books, one that is non-fiction and the other that is historical fiction. Both books will be on the same topic. Students would determine whether information used in the historical fiction book is a fact or opinion based on the information in the non-fiction book. Students would then use a fact or opinion T-chart to distinguish facts and opinions in the two texts. This would allow students to learn about credibility in text. Additionally, this strategy would allow students to learn how to research what they learn in historical fiction to determine what actually occurred in history. For me, as a future educator, it is important for students to be skeptical when reading historical fiction and realize that not all information in it should be taken as fact. Finally, this strategy allows students to distinguish a fact from an opinion in what they have just read. This strategy can increase comprehension and promote higher order thinking skills as students analyze the texts they read.

I also thought another strategy that could be useful is doing a Venn-Diagram, which compares and contrasts historical fiction to actual history. For this strategy, students will use their history textbooks to compare a historical fiction book to a portion of their history books containing events of actual history. This strategy would allow students to see similarities and differences between fiction and history. This

will be a stand-alone strategy for 2nd graders. However, 3rd and 4th graders will use this as a prewriting strategy for writing a research paragraph and essay. This strategy targets a variety of multiple intelligences. It also allows students to learn a strategy that can be useful as they continue with their education. As a strategy, this is a way to increase student interest in history and reading. It will also be a valuable way to increase students' curiosity about different events in history and increase how different people may have recorded events in literature. This strategy will be great to help students who may have trouble distinguishing similarities and differences in texts. Finally, as a future teacher this strategy will be a great way to integrate reading with history in my future classroom.

FRAN WILSON – CLASSROOM TEACHER

Historical fiction is perfect for promoting learning in children. Recently I collaborated with a colleague to assemble a text set on segregation for a social studies unit. I knew that my students had some background knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement from their study of Martin Luther King Jr. in first grade. But did they truly understand how segregation impacted the lives of people? I began the unit by reading aloud *Make a Change* by Rhonda L. Rucker. In this story a young boy, Marvin, experiences discrimination while shopping with his mother at a department store. Marvin convinces his mother to join him in participating in a peaceful demonstration. My students not only connected their background knowledge to the story but they experienced discrimination through the eyes of Marvin as he was scowled at, yelled at, and forced to leave the lunch counter at the store. The story offered students a perspective that is not present in a social studies text while increasing their understanding of segregation. A rich discussion followed the reading with students asking why events like this really happened and how Marvin must have felt. One of my students suggested we write a letter to my colleague's class to tell them about the book. As we engaged in the shared writing of a letter, another student offered that we needed to include the important lessons learned. This prompted an additional conversation in which students critically thought about Marvin's experience. A few of my students delivered the letter along with the book.

Several days later, *New Shoes* by S. L. Meyer, another book my colleague and I had placed in our text set, was brought to my classroom along with a letter about the book written by her students. My students were eager to read their letter as well as the new book, and discuss how this book compared to the one we first read. My students' understanding of the impact of segregation and the need for the Civil Rights Movement increased with the reading of the historical fiction books in the text set. These stories facilitated learning, evoked deep discussions, and led to a spontaneous exchange of letters, which truly allowed our students to gain perspective.

Teacher educators and classroom teachers discussed using historical fiction with children and helping classroom teachers to share this genre with their students.

DR. STACIE GARRETT – TEACHER EDUCATOR

Numerous activities with historical fiction create meaningful experiences for children. One of my favorite activities is students creating newspapers. The primary goal for creating newspapers in the classroom is to allow students to share their understanding on the historical topic being studied.

When studying the Civil War, I found the newspaper to be a great activity for assessing students' understanding. The feature article was a column where the students wrote a brief summary of the information we learned from the history text. Other columns, such as obituaries, horoscopes, and special features were columns where students shared events from the historical fiction text.

Students are able to express themselves through a variety of writing styles. Some ideas for columns within the newspaper include the following: editorials, reports, crossword puzzles, obituaries, cartoons, and advertising. The different column types provide diversity of writing styles. These styles make it possible for all children to contribute to the newspaper through their unique learning style preference. The ideas can be endless when using a newspaper in the classroom.

Reading historical fiction gives a sense of history that is more engaging compared to just reading the information found in most history textbooks.

DR. LYNDA ROBINSON – TEACHER EDUCATOR

Historical fiction is a genre that most children avoid. This is due, I think, to a lack of background knowledge. Children live in the present and have trouble envisioning a world different from the one they live in. Once, I was observing a fifth grade teacher using historical fiction to present a writing prompt. She read an excerpt from a novel about the Revolutionary War & then asked the children to write a letter to a friend as if they were a character in that novel. The child sitting next to me leaned over & asked me if they had cell phones back then. I told him no. A minute later, he leaned over and asked if they had television. I told him that if it plugged in or had batteries, they did not have it. He gave me a shocked look & then just stared at his paper. Another time, a little girl was reading a novel with me where the mother cooked on a wood stove. There was a picture of the mother adding wood to the stove. The little girl asked me why they had wood in their oven! If we are going to expect children to enjoy historical fiction, we must provide a wealth of information about that time period. Just the ability to read the words is not enough for the children to envision that world which is so different from their own.