

LEARNING FROM OUR PAST: HOW FOUR AUTHORS CONNECT HISTORY TO CONTEMPORARY TIMES THROUGH HISTORICAL FICTION AND HISTORICAL FANTASY



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READERS OF EVERY AGE are drawn to history and historical fiction because stories connect us powerfully to times and places that may feel strange yet oddly familiar. In fact, the most relevant historical fiction helps us to see our current time through a vivid new lens - both the areas of progress we have made and the problems we have yet to solve (Penridge, 2021; Sheffer, 2020). Historical fiction and books that authentically weave historical elements into their narratives allow students to forge personal connections to characters and situations that may, in some way, parallel their own lives. Using literature to teach history can illuminate new ways of seeing the world, as historical fiction adds a humanistic element to learning about past events and time periods, adding relevance to facts and figures (Dwyer & Martin-Chang, 2023; Mintz, 2023). How we share history with students can inform them of causes and effects of behaviors and events, as well as the connections to contemporary times. Historical fiction is a useful tool to teach students how to identify and grapple with social issues that bridge across time.

Authors Jerdine Nolen, James Klise, Elana K. Arnold, and Trang Thanh Tran each wrote novels set in or influenced by a past historical era that explore how elements of the past intrinsically impact society today. Ranging from 1848 through the end of World War II, these authors' novels explore how themes of freedom and identity—critical issues that today's teens explore and experience—affect individuals across time and place, including people in the present day. Strong characters who must make difficult decisions—decisions that inevitably impact who they are and where their lives will go in the fu-

ture—are depicted with all their flaws. These novels lend themselves to critical introspection and discussion, encouraging and challenging readers to consider how, as individuals, we are simultaneously impacted by the past and have ownership of the present. (See Table 1 for a description of each book and related teaching resources.)

This article will first introduce readers to four authors, their recent novels, the settings in which their novels take place, and their rationales for writing their novels. A discussion of the richness and possibilities allowed for by infusing history into fiction is addressed, followed by ways to make connections between the novels and contemporary times. The article concludes with ideas for connecting the novels to their readers, as well as strategies for teaching these novels and highlighting the connections between the past and the present.

Author Interviews

During the 2023 National Council of Teachers of Education (NCTE) Annual Conference, I moderated an author panel titled *Learning from Our Past: Connecting History to Contemporary Times*. Three of the four authors highlighted in this article—Jerdine Nolan, James Klise, and Trang Thanh Tran—participated in this panel. After the conference, the content addressed in the panel resonated with me and I wanted to explore more deeply some key concepts and ideas that were discussed. I reached out to the four authors involved in the panel, as well as one additional author whose recent book had captured my attention, Elana K. Arnold, and asked if they would participate in a written in-

interview with the end goal of publishing a journal article on the topic that highlighted their, and other authors', voices. One author from the NCTE panel declined to participate. The interviews were conducted via email between January 10-21, 2024. Authors were sent a list of questions that pertained to their individual book, such as their inspiration for writing it; how they chose the genre and time period; any personal connections to the book; and, thoughts on take-aways for readers and teachers. (See Appendix for a list of individual interview questions.) All author quotes come directly from their written interview answers obtained via email communication.

The Authors, the Novels, and their Foundations

Jerdine Nolen—*Hope's Path to Glory: The Story of a Family's Journey on the Overland Trail (set in 1848-1849)*

Educator and award-winning author Jerdine Nolen's newest book, *Hope's Path to Glory: The Story of a Family's Journey on the Overland Trail* (2023), is a historical adventure that challenges the United States' bygone idea of Manifest

Destiny, the belief that the United States of America was destined to expand westward and grow its borders and economic capital. Told in a journal format, set during the Gold Rush in the mid-19th century, *Hope's Path to Glory* depicts a slaveholder in financial trouble who heads west in the hope of finding gold and financial freedom to save his family's legacy. The slaveholder selects three of his family's enslaved people to accompany him, including twelve-year-old Hope and her parents, and all four characters are forced and/or inspired to consider their own freedom. The novel begins in Alexandria, Virginia, and follows the foursome through Independence, Missouri, and across the United States on the Overland Trail to California.

According to Jerdine, Hope's story needed to be told. As she researched historical events and time periods for her other books, including *Eliza's Freedom Road: An Underground Railroad Diary* (2011), *Calico Girl* (2017), and *Thunder Rose* (2003), she found herself wondering about the time periods, "what was this like for an enslaved person—an enslaved child?" During her research for *Thunder Rose*, for example, she learned that some enslaved people traveled

Table 1

BOOK DESCRIPTIONS AND TEACHER RESOURCES

AUTHOR	TITLE	SUMMARY	TEACHING RESOURCES
Jerdine Nolan	<i>Hope's Path to Glory: The Story of a Family's Journey on the Overland Trail</i>	Set during the Gold Rush in the mid-19th century, <i>Hope's Path to Glory</i> depicts a slaveholder in financial trouble, along with three of his family's enslaved persons, who head west in the hope of finding gold and financial freedom to save his family's legacy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading Group Guide • Overland Trail Game: A Lesson Plan • Traveling on the Overland Trails
James Klise	<i>I'll Take Everything You Have</i>	In this queer coming-of-age novel, sixteen-year-old Joe leaves his small town and heads to Chicago to earn money for his family in 1934 during the Great Depression. When Joe gets involved in a criminal scheme, he must make choices that will impact his life forever.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gangsters during the Depression • Making Chicago's Boystown Interactive Map • From Boom to Dust
Elana K. Arnold	<i>The Blood Years</i>	Based on her grandmother's experiences living as a Jewish person in Romania before and during World War II, this novel chronicles the complicated life of Frederieke and her family before and during the war.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harper Stacks Book Club Guide • US Holocaust Memorial Museum Online Teaching Guide • Life in Nazi Controlled Europe - Romania
Trang Thanh Tran	<i>She is a Haunting</i>	Set in contemporary Vietnam, Jade must spend the summer with her father, pretending to be straight, Vietnamese, and American. The French Colonial house her father is restoring begins to haunt her with characters, memories, and dreams of 1920s Vietnam. Jade's family's past impacts her present as Tran explores the effects of intergenerational trauma.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading Group Choices Discussion Questions • Digital History: The French in Indochina • Intergenerational Trauma

West instead of North. She noted that while there were other books for children and young adults on the subject of the Overland Trail and the Gold Rush, there were none that focused on the experiences of enslaved people, and specifically, enslaved children. To Jerdine, these children deserved to have their stories told. The late 1840s was a rich time period to explore, as it allowed for discussion of not just issues of slavery in the American South, but also the difficulties of the wagon train journey West, interactions with indigenous peoples during the Gold Rush, and the idea of Manifest Destiny. In addition, aspects of freedom were ripe to be unpacked, freedom from slavery and Hope's freedom toward determining her own path and sense of belonging.

James Klise - *I'll Take Everything You Have* (set in 1934)

I'll Take Everything You Have (2023) is Stonewall and Edgar Award-winning author and educator James Klise's newest novel. Set in Chicago during 1934, amidst the Great Depression, this novel is a queer coming-of-age story that explores hiding who you are from outside pressures and expectations. Elements of the gangster era are portrayed as sixteen-year-old Joe leaves his small-town farming community to head to the big city of Chicago with the goal of earning money to help his family get out of debt. Authentic details of 1930s queer Chicago are seen through Joe's eyes as he explores things unfamiliar to him, including "cute fellows." After Joe gets sucked into a criminal scheme by his shady cousin, he must discover who he is and what and who are most important to him, questions readers are invited to ask themselves.

James's love for the city of Chicago and its rich culture and history led him to use it as his novel's setting, and the year 1934 opened up a wonder of possibilities. When asked what drew him to 1930s Chicago, he mentioned a variety of significant events that allowed for the richness of time and place to build an authentic world. The Great Depression hit Midwestern farmers hard, and the summer of 1934 brought record heat, drought, and insect blight causing people to head to big cities like Chicago to look for work (Public Broadcasting Service [PBS], n.d.). It was the summer of the Century of Progress World's Fair, held in Chicago (Encyclopedia of Chicago, 2004). 1934 also saw the murders of many well-known gangsters, such as John Dillinger, influencing criminal activities, especially in big cities (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI.gov], n.d.; John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY, 2023). And, for James's purposes:

1934 was most important because it was the summer before the city's mayor, Edward Kelly, began his battle against the queer community. Kelly was a powerful mayor, and toward the end of 1934, he and his cronies shut down all the queer taverns and cafes they could find; he instructed the cops to patrol the parks and the lakefront, everywhere queer people discreetly met up. That was when queer life across America truly went underground—until the late 1960s and Stonewall. The summer of 1934 was the last year when Chicago's queer community was vibrant and might be visible to a young visitor like Joe. So that's where I began.

Elana K. Arnold—*The Blood Years* (set in 1939-1945)

National Book Award honoree and Michael L. Printz honor winner Elana K. Arnold recently won both the Sydney Taylor Award and the National Book Award for her novel *The Blood Years* (2023) based on her grandmother's experiences living as a Jewish person in Romania before and during World War II. This novel chronicles the complicated life of Frederieke (Rieke), beginning with her childhood in which her father left them; her mother—who needed a man for her self-worth—spun into depression; her Opa (grandfather) took in Rieke and her sister in to provide them with a stable life; and, her experiences through the war years. Antisemitism was always a part of life in Czernowitz, Romania (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2019), where the author's grandmother grew up, but it intensified after the war started. The book explores Rieke's complicated relationships with her Opa, who does whatever he can to protect her yet still follows the old ways; her sister, who begins pulling away when she finds a man of her own; her sister's husband, who both takes away her sister yet works to save her family; and, her family "friend" whose help comes at an awful price, the trading of sexual favors for food and safety. The encroaching horrors of the Holocaust impact Rieke and her family, and they must make difficult choices to ensure their survival. Ultimately this is a story of family, hope, and freedom.

Elana grew up hearing her grandmother's stories and knew she needed to honor her by writing the story of her life. This was a labor of love, as family history inevitably impacts who a person is and how they came to be. She wanted to capture the richness and complexities of her grandmother's life, including the funny, the horrible, and everything in between,

and to “do my very best to bear witness to what I knew of my Nana’s childhood and teenage years, and to bear witness to the thousands of other Jewish Czernowitzers, and to the millions of other Jews in Eastern Europe.”

Every human being is unique and flawed, yet there are some universal experiences. Elana seeks to ask and attempt to answer questions that appear in her life in her writing. Although *The Blood Years* took place in Eastern Europe during 1939-1945, certain themes and issues are timeless. Questions Elana sought to “untangle” include:

What do we owe our family members? Who owns our bodies and gets access to them, and under what circumstances? What is it, to be a girl/a woman in this world? (Note: though I firmly hold the truth that trans women are also women, my work reflects my experience as a cis woman.) What do I believe about the idea of God, and how do reverence and awe exist outside of a traditional religious structure?

These questions can be universal and exploring them through the lens of history can lead to contemporary discussions and discoveries.

Trang Thanh Tran—*She is a Haunting* (set in 1920s/2020s)

In *She is a Haunting* (2023), debut author and Morris Award finalist Trang Thanh Tran takes readers on a fantastical journey to contemporary Vietnam with wisps of 1920s French colonial history seeping through. In this gothic horror novel, seventeen-year-old Jade has one goal—to survive five weeks with her estranged father pretending to be straight enough, Vietnamese enough, and American enough to get the college money she’s been promised. There is one big problem. The French colonial home her father is restoring has other plans. It takes the idea of a haunted house to a whole new level and becomes a character. Jade experiences strange happenings, sleep paralysis, noises, and visions. She interacts with the house and its history through memory, dreams, and characters from 1920s Vietnam. The house and its angry spirits are warning her. On the surface the novel is a tale of horror—a haunted house ghost story that explores the concepts of colonialism and its lasting effects on people and places. Underneath the surface is a novel of an individual bridging multiple cultures, the exploration of how a person is shaped by both their family history and their present experiences. Aspects of 1920s and contemporary Vietnam run through the novel,

most notably in the restoration of the villa, which is a part of an ongoing restoration project in Vietnam to save degrading historical houses (Congar & AFP, 2022).

Trang noted that they wrote *She is a Haunting* due to their passion for horror, a way to explore intergenerational trauma, and for their “need to see a Vietnamese American teenager as the Final Girl.” French Indochina played a role in their family’s history and inevitably influenced the way they grew up and the stories they heard as a child of refugee parents. Trang wanted to explore questions of “Who gets to be remembered in history? Who is allowed a legacy? What buildings are torn down while others are protected?”, grounded both in contemporary and past influences and places. They crafted their main character, Jade, as a representation of a child of refugees and wanted to depict a realistic view of how “Jade’s experience of the world is shaped by how these colonizers indirectly and directly displayed her family.” Integrating historical elements into a contemporary story showed how the past and present are connected, through family history, geographical history, and cultural history.

Connecting to Social Issues

All four authors shared aspects of the how and why of their work, and although all four had different entry points into writing historical texts, ultimately their reasons all aligned with the idea that people need a connection to time and place. Stories have impact over our lives, and we are all inherently shaped by our experiences and the ways they have shaped our past. James Klise wrote, “We’re all products of the times we live in, the places we live in, the mindsets we’re raised with,” yet contemporary issues are inevitably impacted by past events. Elana K. Arnold built on this by sharing, “All stories...are truly about the time they are written.” An author must infuse their own beliefs and value systems into their work, as their way of viewing the world is impacted by their personal experiences. It is by grappling with the present that a story of the past can emerge. Crafting a historical novel from the viewpoint of contemporary times allows for significant parallels to take shape—parallels that invite comparison and exploration.

Historical novels allow us to engage not only with history, but also to make connections to the ways social issues have occurred in the past yet remain threaded through time and into present day and can add “context to modern day problems and social issues” (J. Nolan). For Trang Thanh

Tran, the genre of horror adds an additional element. They wrote, “Horror can be a lens to meaningfully engage with this history because it is—ironically—a safe space. Teens get to confront monstrosities on the page but also close the book if they’re not ready.” Sometimes tackling tough issues takes scaffolding, time, and support. Literature allows for readers to take a step back and to consider characters’ choices and experiences as proxies for choices and experiences they might be having in their own lives (Adams, 2020).

Events in the past inevitably impact contemporary times, yet we, as humans, often do not learn from our mistakes. Novels with historical content allow us to compare time periods and make connections between issues from the past that still plague our world today. One challenge we, as teachers, have in contemporary times is the uptick in censorship and educational gag orders (PEN America, 2023, 2024), something that makes exposure to and the opportunity to discuss literature even more important. These four authors and their novels tackle complex and contemporary problems: the division and polarization of America today, identity politics, racism, attacks against individuals that identify as LGBTQ+, antisemitism, and immigration/refugee experiences.

America today is politically polarized, with identity politics playing a large role in the public psyche (Dimock & Wike, 2020; Gonzales, 2020). Conservatives and liberals are divided on how to teach many topics, including American history and issues of race. Concerns about the teaching of “woke” ideologies, including systemic racism, LGBTQ+ rights, and social justice are increasing (Gross, 2022; Walker, 2023). Immigration issues are a focus of news articles and political pressure, including not only concerns about the U.S./Mexico border but also about allowing entrance to refugees (Sullivan, 2023). Antisemitism is on the rise, as well as comparisons to fascism and Hitler (Anti-Defamation League, 2023; Karl, 2023). Significantly, instances of censorship are rapidly increasing (Meehan et al., 2023), impacting the books that might get into the hands of our nation’s teens. Books are seen as threats; books encourage people to think critically, obtain facts, and come to their own conclusions (Zwiers & Crawford, 2023).

Hope’s Path to Glory tackles issues of slavery, causing readers to consider a human’s rights to freedom from enslavement and oppression. The Civil Rights Movement fought for equality, yet historical precedents die hard. Systemic oppression continues to impact society, and current legislative pol-

icies are challenging teachers’ rights to teach authentic history, especially regarding race relations in America (Alexander, 2023). *Hope’s Path to Glory* is set before the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and offers teachers and students the opportunity to compare life then to life now. How does historical racism impact contemporary economics, policies, and opportunities for Black and Brown people in America today? Although Hope and her family are ultimately set free, they have many challenges and face discrimination both leading up to and after earning their freedom. According to Jerdine Nolen, “I think one of the tenets of our Constitution tells us it is incumbent upon each of us to realize liberty -- that each individual, each living thing matters and to live life to the fullest whatever that means and how we decide.” How can Hope’s story inspire all individuals to realize liberty and be their true selves, even in the midst of societal challenges?

Discriminatory practices are still in play today, against not just Black people but other marginalized groups as well, including people who identify as LGBTQ+. In *I’ll Take Everything You Have*, Joe exists in 1934 Chicago, a period of time in the 1920s and 1930s where gay culture thrived, especially in the city of Chicago (Fleeson, 2007). However, the tide quickly changed. Just as The Civil Rights Movement was a significant moment in history, so too was the 1969 Stonewall Uprising—riots against the criminalization and mistreatment of LGBTQ+ identifying individuals that directly impacted their lives and rights. Stonewall became “a symbol of resistance to social and political discrimination that would inspire solidarity among homosexual groups for decades” (Britannica, 2023, para. 6). Although the Gay Rights Movement was not a direct result of the Stonewall Riots, it did present a catalyst for political activism and the Pride movement (Blake-more, 2023). Before the riots, many LGBTQ+ identifying individuals had to hide their true selves and were made invisible. For James Klise, he wrote this novel because he had a story set in an intriguing period of Chicago history to tell. He did not know:

that it would be published during a time of unprecedented efforts to make queer people (especially young people) invisible again. Book removals, and muzzles on class curriculum, legislation to ban treatment for trans kids—that’s all come as a terrible surprise to those of us who have lived for decades, watching things getting better.

Students who identify as LGBTQ+ may see themselves reflected in Joe from *I'll Take Everything You Had*, or Jade in *She is a Haunting*. They may feel the mounting discrimination happening in contemporary society. Characters like Joe and Jade can inspire readers to consider their own identities and the similarities and differences to their right to be themselves in different periods of history.

Antisemitic attacks are increasing in contemporary society, evoking feelings of fear and connection to The Holocaust in Jewish people and their allies (American Jewish Committee, 2024). Links to Hitler have been made in news based on recent rhetoric by presidential candidates and politicians (Egan, 2023). Being Jewish in Eastern Europe during World War II was challenging, and it is not easy in the U.S. or the greater world today. Elana K. Arnold reflected that she was writing *The Blood Years* “throughout the Trump years.... I remember when he was running for president; Nana was horrified. She recognized many of his slogans and talking points as echoes of Adolf Hitler. She told me the writing was on the wall.” How powerful that someone who lived through The Holocaust was seeing similar signs in political and responsive speech and actions. Although novels about The Holocaust are not new, the realities of the characters and the events can be extrapolated to events happening today.

A final social issue tackled in this novel set is intergenerational trauma and the experiences of being a refugee in America. There is currently a refugee crisis in America. A significant number of people are trying to emigrate to the United States from Central and Southern America, leading to a border crisis (Davis, 2023). Numerous wars across the world, such as those in Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine, have led individuals to flee their homes in the hope of finding a safer life in the U.S. (Concern Worldwide U.S., 2023). Inevitably, new immigrants in the U.S. face issues of belonging, cultural changes, and family dynamics. What are the challenges people newly arrived in the U.S. face? And significantly, how do children of refugees, both new and old, adapt to life straddling two cultures? In *She is a Haunting*, Jade is the descendent of refugees from Vietnam and she grew up hearing the stories and the fears of her grandmother and parents. Those family experiences put expectations on Jade, and she internalized a need to behave a certain way and be a certain type of person. What pressures are put on today's refugees, immigrants, or their family members?

Connecting to Readers

Once an author releases a book into the world it is no longer their book, but the world's. Meaning comes through the interaction between a reader and a text, as readers bring their personal experiences with them when reading (Rosenblatt, 1994). An author may have a message or take-away goal in mind, or something they hope will resonate with readers, but ultimately it is the reader who will decide based on their individual experiences. However, an author can still share wishes and ideas of ways readers will connect with their books. This section allows Jerdine Nolen, James Klise, Elana K. Arnold, and Trang Thanh Tran to share what they hope readers will wonder and think about after reading their books.

First and foremost, all four authors hope readers enjoyed the story. A book exists through its readers, and authors want their readers to be entertained and motivated “to start with page 1 and read to the end (J. Klise).” What good is a book if it goes unread? The interest to the story is ultimately what will connect a reader to a book, its time and place, and its personal meaning.

The authors also hope that readers walk away with questions—questions not only about the story but also to and about themselves. Books offer opportunities for readers to challenge themselves and the way they view the world. They can help build empathy and understanding, and through reading, “if we allow ourselves, we can grow in awareness, intelligence, and empathy for others thereby becoming more and more of ourselves (J. Nolan).” Although these authors wrote books either set in or influenced by history, their readers live in the present time. What questions might readers have about their own identities in comparison to identities of people from the past? For example, James Klise poses questions to his students. He asks them “to imagine what it might have been like to live when queer people and trans people were expected to hide their identity. We talk about the cost of invisibility.” What makes teens feel invisible today? Elana K. Arnold wants her readers to ask questions not only about the historical time presented, but also its connection to what is happening in the world today as well as to each individual reader's world. She “would be thrilled if readers leave *The Blood Years* brimming with questions: about Czernowitz and the Holocaust, yes, but also questions about their own present time and place, about their own assumptions, fears, and passions; about their own families, too.”

Books have the power to evoke emotion and promote change. James Klise hopes that books inspire advocacy, for

readers to see an injustice in the world and be motivated to confront and do something about it. For example, in relation to the events that happened in *I'll Take Everything You Have* and the parallels to contemporary attacks against people who identify as LGBTQ+, James wrote:

I hope the story raises questions about what happens when some politicians and community groups are suddenly fired up to make queer narratives and queer identities invisible again. It's happened before, right here in Chicago, and it can happen again—and will, unless all of us together fight back and say: No way. Never again.

Advocacy can also emerge in the fight against racism, antisemitism, and any form of discrimination and oppression. Trang Thanh Tran acknowledges again that individuals are products of their time but also pieces of history. And as such,

We also make history—right now—through our choices: which books we teach in schools, which monuments we preserve and ideologies we uphold, how we treat the colonized people of the world, and who we as a collective identify as the oppressor. We write the narrative.

James Klise sums it up: “If we don't pay attention to the recent past, we're much more likely to return to those hard times.”

Lastly, and most importantly, authors hope that their books can validate their readers, who are complex human beings grappling with their place in the world. Trang hopes that LGBTQ+ teen readers “walk away knowing that they are always enough—no matter where they are in their journey and coming out.” This sentiment was echoed by the other three authors, who all noted that they wished their readers discovered their true worth and, as Elana K. Arnold beautifully wrote, “I always hope a reader of any of my books will leave it feeling more in love with being a person alive in this world, and more curious to connect and discover.”

Connecting to Teachers

Historical fiction and books that integrate authentic historical elements are salient venues for exploration in the English Language Arts classroom. In addition to making historical facts and figures come alive, historical fiction allows readers to connect with themselves. The four authors highlighted in this article suggest several ways their novels can effectively be

used in classroom settings as avenues to reading enjoyment, to critically explore literature and examine different perspectives at different points in history, and to consider one's own personal identity.

As Trang Thanh Tran simply puts it, “Let them have fun reading first!” While story and analysis and history are important, so is encouraging a student's love of reading. One way to do that is to give students choice. Having ownership over book selection is a great way for students to engage in a book as they can select something that piques their interest. As a teacher, if your curriculum allows, you can choose a variety of texts related to the time period or topic you wish to teach and allow students to explore what interests them. James Klise suggests, “Let them see all the different lenses we have to explore that specific time in history” and then allow students to teach each other and share the most interesting things that they learned. Unfortunately, one issue from the past that is reemerging in the present is the challenging and banning of books. Text choice may be restricted in today's climate of censorship, and the integration of texts outside of the curriculum might not be a possibility.

Historical fiction can be a unique way to explore literature from an English literary perspective. Educator Jerdine Nolen suggests that historical fiction is a “fine way to begin to critically think, analyze, and discuss English conventions—character, setting, dialogue, language/word choice, plot, character motivations and choices and get an in-depth first-hand look at what life may have been like during that time period.” The connection between literary conventions and social issues is rich with opportunities. The element of character opens up many possibilities related to choices—what choices did characters make and how might you act if presented with a similar choice?

Lastly, how might students connect the literature to themselves? What elements of their personal identities can be explored through the questions that arise from the experiences of the characters in the books? Assignments that require family trees or family histories can be problematic and directly avoided. All students may not have access to their family's stories or extended family members, and some might not have good or healthy relationships. However, most students have an adult in their life of whom they can ask historical questions, an adult who does not have to be a part of their family or home life. Some students may want to dig into their personal family history, perhaps talking to grandparents and other family members, to see how family challenges are passed down. Other stu-

dents might wish to explore the history of someone they know that intrigues them, or be interested in exploring the city, town, or neighborhood in which they live. Looking into others' histories allows us to compare the past to the present and "see *how* they ended up where they are" as the "past is in everything around us and is sometimes responsible for the stuff that just doesn't make sense. Realizing that it's the interaction between environment and people that create the world we live in—that's powerful", says Trang Thanh Tran.

Finally, consider the words of Elana K. Arnold:

I'd love for grown-ups who read my book (including teachers) to remember that what makes a story stay alive—what compelled me to keep my grandmother's story alive—was how vulnerable and honest she was with me. She didn't need to be the hero for her story to be worth sharing to me; she understood that the act of sharing stories is itself heroic. It's like opening your chest, to share vulnerabilities, to admit weaknesses and faults. It's terrifying. It's like writing a book.

We have the power to empower our students. Share literature with them, challenge them to be vulnerable and thoughtful and critical, and encourage them to connect to and learn from the past so that they may become change-makers in the present. •

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Appendix

WRITTEN INTERVIEW QUESTIONS SENT TO EACH AUTHOR

AUTHOR	INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS
Jerdine Nolan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me a little bit about <i>Hope's Path to Glory</i>. Why this book? Why now? • Why were you drawn to writing historical fiction over another genre? How did it impact your writing? Why did you choose to write using a journal format? • How did you use historical fiction to explore contemporary issues? What contemporary issues were you hoping to explore? What connections did you make from the past to the present? • How do you see the principles of Manifest Destiny as applied to contemporary times? • Has your personal definition of freedom changed in the process of writing this book? • Do you connect personally with any of the characters? • What do you hope readers will walk away wondering about after reading your novel? • What is your best advice to teachers who may teach your novel? • Are there any strategies you'd like to promote for teachers that you feel can be used to promote critical discussions around your book on how students might connect the past to the present and make the past relevant to their lives?
James Klise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me a little bit about <i>I'll Take Everything You Have</i>. Why this book? Why now? • Why were you drawn to writing historical fiction/historical noir over another genre? How did it impact your writing? • What drew you to the 1930s and Chicago and why was that history meaningful for you to explore? • How did you use historical fiction/historical noir to explore contemporary issues? What contemporary issues were you hoping to explore? What connections did you make from the past to the present? • Thinking about the characters in your book, how much of yourself is in Joe, Eddie, and Raymond? • How do you think you'd respond if you were in Joe's or another character's position? • How do you think Joe and the supporting characters might have responded if the novel was set in 2023? • What do you hope readers will walk away wondering about after reading your novel? • What is your best advice to teachers who may teach your novel? • Are there any strategies you'd like to promote for teachers that you feel can be used to promote critical discussions around your book on how students might connect the past to the present and make the past relevant to their lives?
Elana K. Arnold	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me a little bit about <i>Blood Years</i>. Why this book? Why now? What about your grandmother's history and your personal story was meaningful for you and inspired you/compelled you to write this book? • Why now, in 2023/4? • How did you use historical fiction to explore contemporary issues? What contemporary issues were you hoping to explore? What connections did you make from the past to the present? • There are a lot of books on The Holocaust. What did you set out to do to make yours different? • The characters in your novel are all flawed making them exceptionally human and, in some ways, relatable. What was the most challenging thing about writing such complex characters? How do you hope today's readers will see themselves in your characters? • What do you hope readers will walk away wondering about after reading your novel? • What is your best advice to teachers who may teach your novel? • Are there any strategies you'd like to promote for teachers that you feel can be used to promote critical discussions around your book on how students might connect the past to the present and make the past relevant to their lives?
Trang Thanh Tran	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me a little bit about <i>She is a Haunting</i>. Why this book? Why now? • Why were you drawn to writing contemporary fiction so infused with a historical element and the horror genre? Why is this how your story had to be told? How did it impact your writing? • How did you use historical elements to explore contemporary issues? What contemporary issues were you hoping to explore? What connections did you make from the past to the present? • How much of yourself and your family's history is infused in this novel? • What led you to make the house a character? • Do you connect personally with any of the characters? • What do you hope readers will walk away wondering about after reading your novel? • What is your best advice to teachers who may teach your novel? • Are there any strategies you'd like to promote for teachers that you feel can be used to promote critical discussions around your book on how students might connect the past to the present and make the past relevant to their lives?