

# Why & How I Teach with Historical Fiction

## By Tarry Lindquist

Here's the story on historical fiction in my classroom: It illuminates time periods, helps me integrate the curriculum, and enriches social studies. Just take Amy's word for it. At the end of our westward-expansion unit, while modeling her journal entry after a fictional account we'd read, this fifth grader wrote: "Dear Diary, July 30, 1852: This journey has been heart-wrenching, thirst-quenching, and most of all, an adventure I will never forget." Blending stories into a study of history turns the past into a dynamic place.

Of course, historical fiction doesn't stand alone in my instructional program; even the best literature cannot address skills and processes unique to social studies that kids must learn. I have students balance fiction with fact, validate historical hypotheses with research. Historical fiction is the spice.

### Seven Reasons I Teach With Historical Fiction

1. It piques kids' curiosity. Although I sometimes begin units with chapter books, more often I start with picture books because they're engaging and full of information. Before I read aloud, we make a class list of what students already know about the topic, and then I say: "When I finish reading, I'd like each of you to ask a question related to the story. The only rule is, no question can be asked twice." Afterward, I launch investigations, saying, "Now that we've looked at what happened to one pioneer family, let's find out if their experience was typical or unusual."
2. It levels the playing field. Some kids come to class with a deep background knowledge to draw upon, while others have just shallow reservoirs. Reading historical fiction promotes academic equity because comparing books from one unit to the next provides kids with equal opportunities to develop historical analogies. I ask, "How is the story we read for this unit similar to and different from the one we read last month?"
3. It hammers home everyday details. Picture books today provide visual and contextual clues to how people lived, what their speech was like, how they dressed, and so on. When accurately portrayed, these details are like a savings account that students can draw on and supplement — each deposit of information provides a richer understanding of the period.
4. It puts people back into history. Social studies texts are often devoted to coverage rather than depth. Too often, individuals — no matter how famous or important — are reduced to a few sentences. Children have difficulty converting these cryptic descriptions and snapshots into complex individuals who often had difficult choices to make, so myths and stereotypes flourish. Good historical fiction presents individuals as they are, neither all good nor all bad.

5. It presents the complexity of issues. If you were to draw a topographical map of an issue, there would be hills and valleys, because most issues are multifaceted. Yet traditionally, historical issues have been presented to children as flat, one-dimensional, or single-sided. Historical fiction restores the landscape of history, warts and all, so children can discover that dilemmas are age-old. My kids often make lists of the costs and benefits of historical decisions. For example, they draw two posters — one encouraging American colonists to join the Patriots, the other urging them to stay loyal to King George. They also write 35- to 45-second infomercials for each side.
6. It promotes multiple perspectives. It's important for students to share their perspectives, while respecting the opinions of others. Historical fiction introduces children to characters who have different points of view and offers examples of how people deal differently with problems. It also informs students about the interpretive nature of history, showing how authors and illustrators deal with an issue in different ways.
7. It connects social studies learning to the rest of our school day. Historical fiction, while enhancing understanding of the past, can help you integrate social studies across the curriculum.

### **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.

#### **Reliable Resources**

*Notable Children's Trade Books in the Field of Social Studies*, compiled annually since 1972 by the Children's Book Council in cooperation with the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). This is the most reliable list I've found. Careful attention is paid to authenticity and historical accuracy. Single copies cost \$2. Send a check and a self-addressed, stamped (3 oz.) 6-by-9-inch envelope to the Children's Book Council, 568 Broadway, Suite 404, New York, NY 10012.

*Social Studies and the Young Learner*, a quarterly magazine published by NCSS, features a regular column on books appropriate for elementary social studies and suggestions for use. To subscribe (\$15/year), contact the National Council for the Social Studies, 3501 Newark St. NW, Washington, DC 20016; (202) 966-7840.

*An Annotated Bibliography of Historical Fiction for the Social Studies, Grades 5–12*, by Fran Silverblank, published by Kendall/Hunt for the National Council for the Social Studies, \$14.95; (800) 228-0810.

## Is Pocahontas Real?

### Discovering Where History Stops and the Story Starts

It's easy to discern fact from fantasy in a Disney movie — just wait until the animals break into song. Less than obvious is what's historically accurate and what isn't. Our students are faced with the same dilemma when we teach with historical fiction. How can we help them differentiate between make-believe and history, and recognize the interpretive nature of historical reporting? Here's what I do.

- **Raise students' awareness.** I alert kids that historical fiction and written accounts of history are different genres. I tell them: As you are reading throughout the year, see if you can find differences between these two kinds of books.
- **Bring in resource people.** Invite experts into your classroom so kids have an opportunity to discuss their observations and explore questions. Remember, an expert can be a grandmother who was interned, an uncle who has traveled extensively, or a local lawyer who can tell your kids how trials really work.
- **Integrate skills across the disciplines.** I fold reading practice — such as distinguishing between fact and opinion, and fiction and nonfiction — into social studies.
- **Investigate sources.** When I read a book aloud to my class, I model how to examine the sources of information used by the author and illustrator. Author's notes are particularly valuable. When kids read independently, we frequently conference about the sources used. It's also critical to read more than one kind of resource so students have the opportunity to discover multiple perspectives.
- **Facilitate access to resources.** To aid in student inquiry, I enlist the help of our public librarians who make an "all call" on books throughout the county. Given a couple of weeks notice, they frequently gather 30 to 40 books that I can keep for up to three weeks. In three years of using this resource, we haven't lost a book yet!
- **Observe illustrations.** When possible, find photographs to compare with illustrations. Look for incongruities as well as confirmations, what's been included and/or left out, and so on.

- **Consult primary documents.** I photocopy primary documents and we analyze them for reliability. We develop questions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of various sources, and identify possible biases and inaccuracies. We also talk about what distinguishes primary documents (written by the actual person) from secondary accounts (written by a historian interpreting events) from historical fiction (written by an author dramatizing the historian's interpretation).
- **Develop criteria.** Help students create their own criteria for evaluating informational books and historical fiction. Also have students identify and compare specific characteristics. For example, the order of events can't change in biographies or history books, but made-up events can be inserted in historical fiction.
- **Test generalizations.** Be alert for inaccurate assumptions your students make, such as "Kids in the past had it easier than we do today." Give these generalizations a litmus test: "Is Jeri's statement absolutely always true, absolutely always false, or somewhere in between? What evidence do you have?"
- **Encourage questions.** Develop a classroom environment where no one knows all the answers and let's find out are the three words you say most frequently. Get kids comfortable with ambiguity so they know it's okay to have questions. For too many years we packaged social studies with a fancy wrapper, which has led to oversimplification.
- **Use graphic organizers.** Help students analyze assumptions, scrutinize facts, and discern patterns through graphic organizers. Lists, diagrams, wheels, and charts help students assimilate information from diverse resources and encourage critical thinking.

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The above was excerpted from the following website:  
<http://teacher.scholastic.com/lessonrepro/lessonplans/instructor/social1.htm>

4. History teaches a working understanding of change. It goes without saying that change can be a difficult concept to understand. Each of us has a different experience with the rest of the world — an experience shaped by societal norms, cultural differences, personal experiences, and more. We know when we as individuals crave change and why. History helps us better understand how, when, and why change occurs (or should be sought) on a larger scale. 5. History gives us the tools we need to be decent citizens. Everything you like about your favorite movies, television shows, and fiction novels is yours to experience right here in reality when you study history. Explore the possibilities today and step into a whole new world that will change who you are forever. As history teachers, we are skilled in getting students to analyze sources and connect source analysis to historical context. I like to use the phrase analyze data with my students because it gets them out of repeating what I say in a lecture and turns them into historians conducting what they feel is real historical research. For example, many of my students learned that states legalized Jim Crow laws during the same time period that many Civil War memorials were built. The use of the scientific method to teach history is an adaptable, replicable approach. Because it engages students in critical thinking and assessment, the method reinforces the fact that the end result of a history class should not be what can be remembered, but rather what can be done. Historical fiction transports readers to another time and place, either real or imagined. Writing historical fiction requires a balance of research and creativity, and while it often includes real people and events, the genre offers a fiction writer many opportunities to tell a wholly unique story. Learn how the author of *The Handmaid's Tale* crafts vivid prose and hooks readers with her timeless approach to storytelling. Explore the Class.