



Using Historical Fiction in the History Classroom

Curriculum Unit 81.ch.10
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What is historical fiction? British historical fiction writer Jill Paton Walsh says, “a novel is a historical novel when it wholly or partly about the public events and social conditions which are the material of history, regardless of the time at which it is written.”¹ These public events and social conditions must be accurately portrayed when used in historical fiction. The author of historical fiction must blend historical facts with imagination and creative style to master his art. He must be a master of the past so as to portray accurately ideas, attitudes, tendencies and themes and weave his story—accurate in all its details—into the thematic materials. If he is successful, he can appeal to the reader on an emotional level and reveal significant insights about the past. The writer develops the characters, setting, plot and theme so they elucidate the past. If he wants to call his writing historical fiction certain basic elements must be included. Historians and novelists often differ in their points of view about the historical novel and its purpose. However, both agree that the writer of historical fiction must not distort past reality; the writer must not manipulate historical facts to make the novel more interesting or exciting.

Historians generally agree that the fiction writer does not pay enough attention to historical detail. They feel much of the fiction called historical fiction is merely romantic literature that manipulates historical data at will to make the novel seem more exciting. Ms. Walsh calls these kinds of novels “costume” novels. In the “costume” novel the writer simply plunks fictional characters in a historical setting, but they do not participate in public events or interact with other characters to reveal social conditions or dominating tendencies of a particular era. This “costume” treatment of historical fiction is probably the single most frequent objection voiced by historians in their criticism of historical novels. Good historical novelists and historians agree on this point and express themselves explicitly about what the historical novel must be.

MacKinlay Kantor, the author of the Pulitzer Prize winner, *Andersonville*, is adamant about the novelist's obligation to history. He says, "The term 'historical novel' has a dignity of its own, and should be applied to those works wherein a deliberate attempt has been made to recreate the past." ² He feels that the historical novel is an important genre of literature because an awareness of the past can help the general reader confront the fear and perplexities of the present and future. He feels that the historical novel helps the reader to profit from the lessons of the past with ". . . its agonies, its triumphs, its dreams, its disillusionments"

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Kantor believes that the historical novelist approaches the reader on an emotional level, but the good historical novel can evoke an intellectual response. Like the historian, the good historical novelist searches for the truth in history, and infuses this truth into his fictional work. The writer of good historical fiction uses research and realizes the importance of accuracy. The historical novelist is as interested in conveying history as he is in originating fiction.

Bruce Catton, the distinguished Civil War historian and editor of *The American Heritage*, believes that the historian is performing the same function. He says:

Once the historian addresses himself to the general reader—the historian has to face the fact that he is engaged in the literary art . . . what he writes is finally going to have the effect of expanding his reader's horizon. It is going to move the reader emotionally just because a true account of man's unending struggle with destiny is always moving. To discharge his obligation fully—to meet the challenge which the writing of history presents—the historian must always bear in mind that he is for the moment acting as an artist ⁴

The writer of good historical fiction recreates the past with an immediacy neither expository history nor pure fiction can achieve alone. Good historical fiction must not only be good history, but must also be good literature. The historical novelist presents the reader with characters caught up in a conflict and builds his narrative from historical details. As the reader becomes involved with the characters and story line, he begins to absorb the historical data and begins to recognize the many human qualities of the character. Gradually the characters become real to the reader and the reader begins to "root" for this character if he or she is being treated unjustly. The reader might question in his own mind the need for law or government to protect this character's individual rights.

And, at this moment, the reader is unconsciously using his cognitive ability to sort and group these historical details; he compares them to his own society, and begins to discern the differences in the historical period he is reading about and to compare it to his society today. If the historical novelist accomplishes this kind of reader involvement, he has made some impact on the reader's conscience. He has made the reader think, consider, discover, and, most important, begin to realize the importance and usefulness of studying history. He has, of course, as his central purpose, also described and explained some significant historical tendency.

Bruce Catton believes that the historian who is writing history for the general public is writing literature too. He believes ". . . that when it becomes literature history does not in any way cease to be history." ⁵ He explains that if history is simply the record of what really happened then historians would simply repeat this record. But in the course of his research, the historian finds many half-truths, many unspoken words and many different views of the same incident. He is looking for the fact, but it is difficult to say what is fact and what is not, and it is even harder to say which facts are meaningful and which are subsidiary. He determines what data to use, and in performing this fact he is interpreting the past. He chooses the facts and he says what these chosen facts mean. He sets his ideas down in writing. He is writing for people about the past and

in writing this history he is writing literature. It is not fiction like the historical novel, but Catton believes the historian does use the skills of the literary writer.

. . . when he undertakes to put his findings into words he is bound to attempt the artistic approach simply because he does want other men to read what he is writing, and to succeed he is obliged to use the skills of the creative artist. ⁶

If the historian succeeds, then his writing will take its place as literature. Bruce Catton says “Good history is literature.” ⁷

Since written history is interpretation, it is important to consider the importance of historiography in the historical novel. Historiography is the methodology of historical research and the study of varying historical interpretations. The writer of good historical fiction is aware of the various interpretations of the same period of history and, if he is sophisticated about the historiographic view, he will integrate historiography in his novel. James Lincoln Collier and Christopher Collier, authors of *My Brother Sam Is Dead*, attempt to deal with the historiographic dimension in this novel. They include the Whig, Progressive, and Imperialist interpretations of the American Revolution within the framework of the novel. The Whig interpretation is that the American Revolution was justified because of the tyranny of George III against the colonists. The Americans were patriots who organized to fight for freedom. This historiographic view is expressed through the character of Sam, the hero of the novel.

The Imperialist point of view is that the Empire protected the twenty-four colonies. From the British perspective only a few colonists in only thirteen colonies were dissatisfied. The Imperialist view is expressed by Sam’s father who is loyal to England.

The Progressive interpretation is that the colonists were more concerned with local economic and political conflicts than with libertarian ideology or imperial relations. This view is portrayed in the events of the story and in the relationship of Sam with his father.

In including the historiographic dimension, the Colliers incorporated facts about American history that are important to readers’ understanding of the past. These facts are important because the people and the story cannot be understood without knowing them. Christopher Collier cites this important historiographic distinction in his essay entitled “Johnny and Sam: Old and New Approaches to the American Revolution,” published in the anthology, *Crosscurrents of Criticism*.

In addition to attention to the historiographic dimension the good historical fiction writer incorporates accuracy in specific detail. Only an honest portrayal of the past events illuminates the times accurately. Jill Paton Walsh says a good historical novelist “. . . has to believe, I think, that what really happened is bound to make the best story of all.” ⁸ It is a demanding art form because if the writer honestly writes historical fiction he will have to spend a commensurate amount of time on research. MacKinlay Kantor warns, “The past is buried deep and cannot be torn from its tomb without devotion and perseverance . . . go and live in that other time, before you would tell of it.” ⁹

Some historians and some novelists realize the importance of historical fiction. Catton and Kantor are masters in the art of historical fiction. British writers such as Jill Paton Walsh, Penelope Lively, Rosemary Sutcliff, and Hester Burton have a large public following because of their strict attention to historical detail. American writers such as Eather Forbes, Anya Seton, Christopher Collier and James Lincoln Collier write historical novels

for young adults. They, too, combine historical accuracy with fictional form in exciting and interesting literature. These writers of historical novels provide an invaluable experience for readers.

When the history teacher brings this kind of fiction into the classroom he is providing the student with another understanding of the past. The historical novel uses imaginative and figurative language to entice students into a historical exploration. The character and drama interact with past events in such a way as to involve the student in a study of the past on an emotional level as well as a cognitive level. This student involvement is a logical reason why history teachers should be persuaded to use historical fiction.

Once students become immersed in the novel's setting, character, plot and theme, they become interested and stimulated by the novel's story. They begin to draw inferences while reading the novel, about geography, governmental organization, religious beliefs, social attitudes, manner of dress, types of food, size of towns or cities, modes of transportation, distribution of wealth, social classes, and laws. They begin to absorb the historical details in the novel without even realizing they are being instructed. In contrast, if these same historical facts were presented in a textbook and the teacher asked the students to memorize or know them, it is likely that little information would be retained by many students.

The events become more significant because the students must understand them in order to understand the novel. Students retain the historical information more easily because it has been understood within the context of the plot, character, setting and theme of the novel. Students begin to consider the relevancy of this segment of the past in relation to the society they live in. The students begin to see how a study of the past helps them to understand the present.

The impact of a historical novel on students cannot be minimized. The range of their imagination and understanding can be broadened. If they respond to a good historical novel, they might be motivated to research the novelist's use of historical data. They begin to discern the novelist's biases and they might decide to search for historical data to support or contradict the point of view expressed by the author.

By studying and analyzing historical fiction students can become more discerning readers and develop critical thinking skills. This has many kinds of ramifications for the students and teacher. When students become critical thinkers they are able to discern what is fact and what is fiction. They begin to think about what is good and what is bad, and why it is good or why it is bad, and what is wrong and what is right, or why it is wrong or why it is right. They see the value of objectivity and learn to consider the many different possibilities before they decide on an answer or solution. They begin to recognize biases, review judgements, identify values, and develop criteria for making generalizations. They are thinking about ideas, theories, and philosophies. They attempt to consider and to discuss, intelligently, the various interpretations of history. If a historical novel can inspire these kinds of learning experiences, then students can understand the importance of studying history as a means to understanding themselves, understanding their place in the world, and understanding their role as a part of humanity.

And, perhaps they begin to grasp what is meant by a historical perspective. If a particular historical event is described in a novel and they perceive that event as a problem that still exists in the present as well as the future, they might begin to comprehend the significance of the study of history. *All the King's Men* by Robert Penn Warren is an example of a historical novel that deals with the theme of how men use power in the political arena—a universal and eternal problem.

When students delve into the past as depicted in the historical novel, they become immersed in characters moving through time and place; they begin to perceive the continuity of time. By reading about a historical

character in a novel, they begin to place that character's life in the past; they more readily grasp the process of age and the progression of time. This leads to an understanding of the concept of the present and the past and leads to a consideration of the interaction of the past and the present.

History is the study of change over time. Students can learn that their attitudes, their surroundings, their language, their folk heroes are transient in nature and that the elements of the past must be understood in order for them to understand their present. They will begin to understand the process of change; their present will soon change. They will learn to control or to adapt to change.

Historical fiction can help students to resolve some of the hopelessness they feel as they face the complex problems in the world today. They will understand the courage needed to face conflict as they identify with characters dealing with conflict in a historical period. The form of a well written historical novel allows students' imagination to meld into the time frame of that novel. They begin to understand history as a human experience, rather than a series of isolated events, and, most important, learn that it is not merely a series of dates to be memorized for a test.

Students admire, respect, identify with, or reject as unworthy, some of the characters involved in historic struggles. They begin to understand the courage needed to deal with challenges, the personal risk involved in fighting for a social cause, they agony in accepting defeat, and the determination needed to succeed.

Are the people of history any less human than the people of today? Are we all not part of the same human experience? Can the study of history make students realize that they can help shape their destiny and, in doing so, help shape the destiny of others? Can students realize that an understanding of the past is a means of dealing with the challenges of the present and the future? History teachers who bring historical fiction into their classrooms can help their students to realize some of the answers to these important questions.

Classroom Application

This unit is designed to help teachers use historical fiction in history class. The history teacher can use this genre of literature to clarify, reinforce and dramatize significant historical events and themes that students might not otherwise remember or understand. These novels can provide unusual insights into history for the student who is confused, uninterested, or unreceptive to textbook history. The student's personal response to a well written historical novel can be the beginning of an understanding of what history is about and why it is accessible in school libraries, public libraries, and in soft cover editions in book stores.

Historians write about the past; they interpret and record those important events and tendencies in history that give meaning to our lives. As a working definition an historical novel is "about past public events and people and social conditions and are based on historical facts. The historical novelist does not distort historical data for the sake of literary form." Very often, in the classroom, mere facts become a body of information that seems irrelevant and dull to students. Textbook historical figures often become so heroic and extraordinary or so flat and lifeless that students cannot conceive of these people as ordinary men and women endowed with normal human characteristics. Students cannot comprehend that these historical figures hold a world view of another era. When students cannot grasp the idea of historical figures as real people, then history becomes more mythology than reality. Paradoxically, historical fiction is an excellent tool to upset this mythology.

Most students like a good story, a story with excitement, adventure and challenge; if a historical novel is well written, it includes these elements and more. The “more” is historical accuracy in detail and theme, the necessary elements of a meaningful historical exploration through fiction. The conflicts of men and women in history become real to the student because these men and women can be presented in their human dimension. They are mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, daughters, sons, who are caught up in a particular event. Their defeats and successes evoke an emotional response from readers. This response is the draws students into the world of the past and imbues his perspective with an historical dimension. The historical figures emerge as human beings responding to a human condition in the context of history.

The history teacher can devise numerous strategies and techniques for sifting the fact and the fiction. The historical clues may be picked out by students who see textbook history spring to life in historical fiction. Students can become experts or “nitpickers” about the writer’s use of historical data and the exercise can be stimulating for class discussion. Reference sources for checking the accuracy of historical data include encyclopedias, almanacs, biographical dictionaries, dictionaries of history, serious local and national histories, and numerous other readily available sources. Students may check school and town libraries as well as local historical societies and the state library. Primary source materials are often available locally in church records, deeds, wills, probate records in town halls, local cemeteries, local tax lists, federal census, town meeting records, old maps, letters and diaries, sermons, industrial records, local newspapers and elders who have resided in a community for a long time.

The history teachers who use this unit should be aware that though the bibliography of historical fiction focuses on Connecticut history, any good historical novel can provide a rich experience and reflect a period of history. School and town librarians are indispensable resources. Junior and senior high reading lists are available from the National Council of Teachers of English in Urbana, Illinois. There are a few bibliographies that index historical fiction; they are listed in the bibliographical section of this unit.

As history teachers use more historical fiction in the classroom students will develop the ability to recognize and analyze good and weak historical fiction. More important, history will become a subject about real places and real people facing real problems, not just a list of dates and places circled on a map on the bulletin board.

There is no mystique in using historical fiction in history class. It’s a positive way to learn history.

Guidelines for Using Historical Fiction

Before discussing or writing about an assigned historical novel, it is important for teacher and students to consider some guidelines to evaluate the novel’s historical accuracy. The guidelines for analyzing data can be divided into four main categories: setting, character, plot, and theme. Here are some suggested questions for analyzing historical fiction. Recall that our definition is that “historical novels are about past public events and people and social conditions and are based on historical facts. The historical novelist does not distort historical data for the sake of literary form.”

I. Setting (time and place)

- a. Has the author accurately described a particular historical period in the novel? Explain.

- b. List some details that describe the historical period and parallel your study of this particular historical period, e.g. geography, transportation, costume or dress, rural, urban, religious mores, social attitudes.
- c. Are the details of locale authentic in the novel?
- d. Does the description of the locale fit the historical period? Support with specific details.

II. Characters

- a. Are there real historical figures whose names you recognize? List them.
- b. Do the historical figures belong in the period described?
- c. Does a check against the history textbook or biographical materials show that the historical characters are accurately portrayed?
- d. Are fictional characters in keeping with the historical setting?
- e. List positive and negative character traits of at least four main real or fictional characters. Show parts of the novel that support this trait.
- f. Explain the characters' involvement in the historical setting and events.
- g. How are the historical characters important to the action of the novel?

III. Plot (story line)

- a. Does the plot focus on a specific historical incident? Explain.
- b. Do the historical characters in the novel participate in a well known historical incident? Explain.
- c. Is the conflict real or fictional?
- d. Do the characters dramatize an eventful moment in the history of Connecticut, or some other familiar place.

IV. Theme

By theme we mean the author's use of people and events from the past to elucidate some truth about a past era.

V. Summary

- a. Why do you think the author chose to write about this particular historical episode?
- b. Is the author revealing any new insights about the historical characters or historical events?
- c. Why is this considered a historical novel?
- d. Is this novel a good or bad historical novel, based on the previous definition of historical fiction?
- a. What social condition in history does the novel reveal?
- b. What comment do you think the author is making about this social condition?
- c. How can this social condition be related to contemporary life?
- d. How do the characters reveal the theme?
- e. Does this novel reflect more than one theme?
- f. Is there more than one point of view about the theme(s)?

Suggested Strategies for Using Historical Fiction in History Class

After studying a particular historical period have your school librarian search for historical fiction related to it. Set up a cart in the classroom and ask three students to read the same novel. Duplicate copies are probably at the local library.

Divide the class up into groups of three or four. These groups are responsible for presenting a historical novel to the class using the guidelines listed above. Research should be completed within two class periods.

For example, a group has read *The Winthrop Woman* by Anya Seton. The group will be aware that the novel is divided into three parts: England 1617-1631, Massachusetts Bay Colony 1631-1640, and Connecticut and New Netherland 1640-1655. Each group can divide up the guidelines: one person responsible for plot, one student responsible for characters, etc.

For example, in part 1, England 1617-1631, a student can begin to analyze the characters. The heroine, Elizabeth Fones is introduced and her family relationships are described in great detail. The student might

want to make up a visual chart depicting various family members and their relationship to one another and check it against the real Winthrop family. As the student analyzes this section of the novel the others analyze plot, setting, and theme. When they have completed their analyses, they begin to organize their oral presentation to the class. They should be responsible for leading class discussion on this part of the novel. After each group has presented its report to the class, the teacher might organize some activities based on the three or four novels.

Here are some activities that might be focused on:

The Winthrop Woman .

- 1) Develop a time line of Elizabeth's life in the novel according to her age and where she lived and with whom.
- 2) Make a list of soldiers, kings, politicians and ministers in the novel. Identify them using various historical reference tools.
- 3) Find a sound, simple historical description of Puritan ideology.
- 4) Write a brief history of the Puritan struggle in England.
- 5) Using the source materials mentioned in the author's note, write a brief biography of John Winthrop.
- 6) Check the source of John Winthrop's Patent as described in the novel.
- 7) Research the structure of government in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.
- 8) Contrast the governments of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and New Netherland during the seventeenth century.
- 9) As Thomas Dudley, you are Deputy Governor to John Winthrop. What is your opinion of him?
- 10) You are Elizabeth Fones Winthrop. Describe the London you lived in until you left for Massachusetts.
- 11) As Elizabeth Fones Winthrop write a diary about the trip to Massachusetts on the ship *Lyon* .
- 12) You are a passenger on the *Lyon* ; describe the Winthrop family.
- 13) You are a devout Puritan. Describe the life of a Puritan living in Boston during the 1630s.
- 14) Dramatize the trial of Anne Hutchinson.
- 15) Draw a map of Elizabeth's various homes from the time she landed in Boston to her removal to New Netherland.
- 16) What Indian tribes were around the Massachusetts Bay Colony at this time? On a map identify the various tribes around Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Netherland at this time.
- 17) Draw a map of the Massachusetts Bay Colony as it existed under the governorship of John Winthrop. Draw an overlay showing the geography as it is today.
- 18) Draw a map of Boston, Watertown and the various early settlements at this time.
- 19) Write a newspaper about the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Some feature articles should include the election of Governor Winthrop, the trial of Anne Hutchinson, Boston as a city and a port at this time, jobs available, interviews with residents about why they came to Massachusetts, etc.
- 20) What's fact and what's fiction about the setting, plot, and characters?

These strategies are a few examples to illustrate the kinds of activities that can be organized around an historical novel in order to illuminate and vivify the era, themes, and characters it deals with. Teachers are encouraged to use films, film strips, video tape recorders, and field trips to help students to feel a part of the history. For example, in *The Winthrop Woman*, the heroine Elizabeth Fones Winthrop buys an island in Greenwich, Connecticut. It would be a fine idea to arrange a field trip to walk over and imaginatively create the island as it was described in the novel. The whole point of using local history to illuminate major historical themes is, of course, the availability of nearby historical sites and museums to vivify and dramatize classroom materials. Many historical novels connect with such local resources.

Students and teachers will become historical detectives as they begin to analyze and verify the accuracy of the various historical novels. They will find many discrepancies between history and historical fiction. This is a wonderful learning experience.

Notes

1. Jill Paton Walsh "History is Fiction," in *Crosscurrents of Criticism*, ed. by Paul Heins. Boston: The Horn Book, Incorporated, 1977. p. 221.
2. MacKinlay Kantor, "The Historical Novelist's Obligation to History." Macon, Georgia: Wesleyan College, 1967. p. 2.
3. Ibid, p. 1.
4. Bruce Catton, *Prefaces to History*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1970. p. 91.
5. Ibid. p. 83.
6. Ibid. p. 85.
7. Ibid. p. 93.
8. Jill Paton Walsh, "History is Fiction," in *Crosscurrents of Criticism*, ed. by Paul Heins. Boston: The Horn Book, Incorporated, 1977. p. 224.
9. MacKinlay Kantor, "The Historical Novelist's Obligation to History." Macon, Georgia: Wesleyan College, 1967. p. 17-18.

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