

Historical Fiction

Cheree Charmello, *Educator of the Gifted*

(Next Book List: *Book-to-Film Adaptations*)

Historical fiction serves a double-duty as a learning tool: *Literacy coupled with historical study*. The genre of historical fiction can present itself in a number of ways. Most commonly, historical fiction is written through the voice of a fictional character who retells factual historical events. Some authors; however, often use a character to help pin-point the general feeling tone of a particular era in history. Though the setting is well-researched, the characters, and even some events, may be fictional. Another spin on this genre is to use a famous historical figure to establish a fictionalized autobiography. This often includes the perceived feelings of the historical figure. An additional form of historical fiction involves an attempt to capture a glimpse into a moment of history in which a particular concept is evident, such as in Todd Strasser's, *The Wave*. It is important for students, parents, and teachers to recognize which type of historical fiction is being used so that students can receive the maximum benefit of the literacy and historical study combination. This enables fact and fiction to be more easily distinguished.

Elementary Level (2-3)

The Great Saint Patrick's Day Flood, Mildred R. Flaherty

The fictitious main character, eleven-year-old Billy Flynn, is elated to discover that school has been cancelled on a cold day in March, 1936, but he soon realizes that dangerous conditions are looming. He and his family are evacuated from their Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania home as the waters of the Three Rivers begin to rise.

The actual Saint Patrick's Day Flood drove nearly 135,000 people from the city as floodwater raged 21 feet above flood level. Many people lost their lives, while many others lost all that they had once owned. The book documents the peril of the situation and includes primary historical documents such as photos and maps.

Number the Stars, Lois Lowry

Using fictitious characters, the author recreates a realistic account of the seldom told Nazi occupation of Denmark. On September 29, 1943, natives of Denmark secretly rallied to transport 7,000 Jews safely to Sweden. With merely hours to spare, the Danish people loaded a flotilla. 10-year-old Annemarie Johanesen, whose family is protecting her Jewish best friend, Ellen Rosen, quickly begins to understand the gravity of the situation and comes to terms with the possibility of letting her friend go – possibly forever.

Intermediate Level (4-5)

Macaroni Boy, Katherine Ayres

Mike Costa, the fictitious sixth-grade main character, helps out in the Italian food store that his family owns and operates. Mike does his best to shake off the school bully's taunts of "Macaroni Boy!" because he's got much bigger things to worry about: Grandpap is sick.

Set in the historic "Strip District" of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, during the height of the Great Depression, three mini mysteries unfold in this book, but each are masterfully tied together: *Why is the school bully so focused on Mike? Why is grandpa getting so sick? Why are there fewer and fewer rats in the family business basement traps?*

So Far From Home: The Diary of Mary Driscoll, an Irish Mill Girl -Barry Denenberg

Mary Driscoll, the main character, may not have been a real person, but the story told through this character's eyes delivers a truthful piece of history. The story is set in mid 1800's America during the Industrial Revolution. This era proved to be a difficult time for hopeful immigrants, like Mary, who risked everything to start better lives in America. Although many fared well, others found harsh, and often discriminatory, conditions. Mary came to America by way of a "fever" ridden ship after her homeland of Skibbereen, Ireland is devastated by a potato blight. To survive in America, she must work long hours in a dangerous mill. You'll be transported back in time as you read about the tough life of a "mill" girl.

Middle Level (6-8)

The Journal of Augustus Pelletier: The Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804 – Kathryn Lasky

Written in diary format, the author creates a fictitious character named Augustus Pelletier, or *Gus*, to serve as an eye witness to the infamous westward exploration by Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and the Corp of Discovery. Gus is an orphaned 14-year-old undereducated, but none-the-less resourceful, boy who aspires to secretly follow the expedition in the hopes of finding a better way of life. This story is packed full of time period and explorer-savvy vocabulary, idioms, and carefully crafted dialects.

Bud, Not Buddy, *Christopher Paul Curtis*

Set in the Flint, Michigan during the Great Depression, this book gives a rarely emphasized glimpse into the lives of the orphaned children of the era and alludes to the style of jazz music that arose out of the time period. The fictitious main character, 10-year-old Bud Caldwell, escapes from a foster home with nothing more than a suitcase, his self-written "Rules and Things for Having a Funner Life and Making a Better Liar Out of Yourself", and the hope of finding his father. Human *need* is the emphasis of this era-defining novel.

High School Level (9-12)

The Wave, Todd Strasser

The Wave is a fictionalized account of a true event. In 1969, a high school history teacher in Palo Alto, California tried to help his students understand how the Nazis were able to establish a high level of authoritarian control during WWII. By assigning labels and rules to each of the students in his classroom, the teacher established a micro culture. As other students took the experiment outside of the school, a few students recognized the negatively-charged mentality and set out to stop it. The book can be used as a powerful tool in helping students to understand how propaganda can promote the spread of hatred.

War, Luigi Pirandello

“War” takes place on a train ride from Rome, Italy. Although the war is never named, the story an excellent resource for prompting discussions on the sociological and psychological aspects of war. For example, the last people to board the train are a couple whose only son has just been “sent to the front lines”. The woman is extremely upset and she and her husband seem to think that they are suffering more than anyone else. The other passengers are obviously traumatized and voice their opinions in subtle ways.

Parent Resources & Book List

The most effective way to help inspire a love of literacy is to let your child see and hear you reading! To create a child-parent “book club” try to:

1. Select age appropriate books for your child and read them BEFORE offering the book to your child.
2. Be prepared to tell the child what you liked about the book, but don’t give too much away. Comments such as “*Just wait until you see what happens when...*” can help to create intrigue!
3. Ask general questions about the sequence of events and the personality of the characters to insure that the child is focusing on basic details.
4. Ask higher-level, open ended questions about the book once the child has finished, such as, “What did you like about the style of writing?” or “What do you think would happen if ... never happened in the story?”
5. Consider creating an activity based on the book: *Visit a location mentioned in the book. Draw your favorite scene. Write an alternative ending. Recreate a recipe used in the story. Have a silly conversation in the dialect or personae of the book’s characters.*

Wise, Jessie. *The Ordinary Parent's Guide to Teaching Reading*. Peace Hill Press, 2003.

Bauer, Susan. *The Well-Trained Mind: A Guide to Classical Education at Home* (Third Edition). W.W. Norton and Company. 2009.