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Teaching with Historical Fiction: Grade 8 U.S. History  
from Revolution to Reconstruction

***"[Historical fiction] may help readers develop consciousness of how time and place influence who they are. That is, by better understanding the past, children better understand themselves, their community, their culture, and the world"***

(Temple, p. 310)

Historical fiction allows real history to take shape through the characters created by the author; it is fiction mixed with truth. The stories give junior high and middle school students an opportunity to see what it was like for a young person to live in a particular era, with its particular setting, dress, speech and the daily activities. The reader is exposed to different points of view that often include dilemmas that could be faced by young people in any time period but are framed by a particular series of events.

Historical fiction presents an opportunity to show the choices of that time in history. Therefore, as a department head working with teachers on ways to make history come alive, a study of novels became the focus of this final paper for the Teaching American History course.

When selecting a novel for the class consider, the framework developed by Cai (1992) relating to time, tone, truth, and perspective is helpful:

- What does one learn about the place and period as seen in description of home, environment, clothing, work and play?
- How does the author use dialect or topics of discussion to create the voices and mood?

- In what ways does the reader feel the main characters are true reflections of the persons living then, based on what the characters do, say, and feel?
- How are viewpoints on issues woven into the plot?

The best historical fiction gives students a new understanding of how humans affect history and how events affect society and family. Readers learn about technological developments, religious beliefs, and the importance of the individual in history. Thus, reading historical fiction opens up opportunities for a different approach to answering essential questions of social studies state standards, such as:

- Of what importance is personal freedom and human dignity?
- How does geography affect one's life?
- How do technological innovations, trade or education guide a country's development?

The U.S. History teacher has options in how a novel is taught. Reading a novel with the class may fit within a time frame of a few weeks. However, literature circles in which two or three novels for an era are read by students can be quite effective. Also, cooperative learning grouping allows the teacher to use differentiated instruction strategies young people to access a text appropriate to their reading level while working on a similar theme. Teachers develop instructional strategies for historical thinking and interpretations that include activities matching student learning style.

In preparing this article, considered are two dozen novels written for adolescents from four historical periods: the Revolution Era; Frontiers; Immigration/Migration; and Civil War/Reconstruction. While quite a few novels have stood the test of fifty years of time being used in classrooms, others are more recent written. Included are works by authors popular with the adolescent audience for their writing of realistic fiction.

## Novels on the Revolutionary Era

Selected in this category are seven novels appropriate for junior high school readers. Narrated from a boy's view are these four: *Johnny Tremain* (Reading Level 5.5), *My Brother Sam is Dead* (RL 5.8), *April Morning* (RL 8.0), and *The Crossing* (RL 7.8). Three others are from the young female teen view: *Sarah Bishop* (RL 6.8), *Fever* (RL 5.0), and *The Fifth of March* (RL 5.1). Each book deals with the underlying theme of growing up against a backdrop of major events in U.S. History. In working with a class, the teacher may decide to read one novel with the entire class or set up literature circles for varying reading levels. The essential question is: what are the costs of war both positive and negative?

Esther Forbes' Newberry winner *Johnny Tremain* (1943) is a story whose pages are filled with patriots: Hancock, Revere, Otis, Samuel Adams, and Joseph Warren. Forbes brings them to life through her realistic depictions of their roles in the events centering around Boston in 1775. On other levels the story is also about friendships made and broken as well as the search of a young man for personal and political identity. Students anguish over the mistake that causes Johnny to lose his apprenticeship as a silversmith and enjoy reading about the challenge of riding a horse to deliver Patriot communications. This is a classic that shows the figures of our Revolution with respect.

James Lincoln Collier's and Christopher Collier's Newberry Honor Book, *My Brother Sam is Dead* (1976) is unusual for its revelation to young readers of the negative ways the American Revolution affected the lives of a family that was trying desperately to stay non-partisan. The Connecticut small town and surrounding farming community is the setting; we hear about everyday chores, such as pouring candles into molds, churning

butter, and making plow shares. The story is told from the view of the youngest son, a 15 year old, Tim Meeker, who picks up the burdens of the household when his father joins the Loyalists and his older brother the Patriot side. We see how tough the war has been on the mother as she takes over running the family tavern; she is in constant fear as to when her crops or cattle will be commandeered by Patriots or Tories to feed their troops and leave her with nothing. As such, the tone is sometimes despairing and filled with the real anger of the average person, trying to survive. Many times we hear the question raised why are we fighting this war when we are suffering so much? Doubts are raised about the goals of Revolution when the mother asks: "We were free all along, so what did the English do against me?" The closing chapters which reveal both the death of the father and his elder son show the vagaries of war as perpetrated by both sides during the Revolution. The focus is on the harsh effects of war.

Howard Fast's *April Morning* (1961) is a well written work which knits together the events on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April 1775 around Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts between Patriots and Redcoats. By keeping the action moving within the 24 hours of that fateful day the author shows how dramatic events can focus the beliefs and attitudes of the young boy as he accepts the role of the man in the family after his father falls to Redcoat bullets. Further, *April Morning* is filled with the details of daily life. For example, at evening we learn the meal is most often soup, meat cakes, potatoes, and boiled pudding. What Adam does each day, the way he talks and even his thoughts about war and family help the reader to identify with him. Although he is too young to understand everything that is going on, Adam recognizes change in the way his father approaches him and the issues of the Redcoat attempts to control Lexington. We also see

the woman's view from his Granny, his mother, and girlfriend; war is unkind and brutally removes from us those who we love most.

Howard Fast's *The Crossing* (1981) is a riveting account of the Battle of Trenton complete with the rising stars of the Patriot side, General Washington, Artillery General Knox, Aide de Camp Alexander Hamilton, Colonel John Glover in charge of military transport by water, and Tom Paine, war correspondent. The author takes us with these brave men through a bitter weather as they face a pursuing British army, a desire for a win in battle, and ice floes in the Delaware River that could spell disaster. We meet a surly Horatio Gates, an uncertain Lee, and Hessians whose reputation arouses fear in the many recruits whose enlistment is about to end. The author shows us the heroism and humanity of General Washington.

Of the next three novels, the first two center on the lives of two teenage girls affected by the Revolution by different degrees of hardship. The third novel deals with a time during the first government installed in Philadelphia during which the yellow fever becomes of epidemic proportions.

Scott O'Dell's *Sarah Bishop* (1980) invites us to travel a scary and difficult road that demands great courage from a teen. Sarah lives on Long Island with a brother who joins the Patriot cause and a father who supports Britain. Because of his sympathies a mob takes him to be tarred and feathered. Sarah suffers the death of her dad, the burning of her home and fends for herself living in a cave near New York City. The harshness of the journey she travels is directly connected to the horrors of war that few of us could imagine.

Ann Rinaldi's *The Fifth of March* (1993) tells the story of Boston in 1770 before and after the Boston Massacre. Rachel is an indentured servant working for John and Abigail Adams. The author shows that the Adams family is anti-slavery but is willing to give those who need a job an opportunity to advance to freedom. Rachel helps Abigail through a difficult time after Abigail loses her baby. Rachel is also friends with a young Lieutenant in the British regulars, who tells her of the frustration of being taunted, having objects thrown at them, never being invited in to a single home, while being stationed in Boston for nearly a year. Another female friend engages Rachel in making substitutes for tea so that they can help protest the British laws. We see the period from the eyes of a young person who understands the two views of the situation in a colony moving toward change in allegiance.

Laurie Halse Anderson's *Fever 1793* (2000) begins: "I woke to the sound of the mosquito whining in my left ear..." For sixteen-year-old Mattie this is the start of a two month struggle against yellow fever experienced by and her fellow Philadelphians in the summer of 1793, when President Washington and Congress residing in Philadelphia. She helps her mother and grandfather at their downtown coffeehouse until they the mother takes ill. The author makes vivid a world gone crazy, when families become so afraid of those who have the fever that they even turn away family and friends. We are reminded of scenes from the Middle Ages when the bubonic plague caused people to bring out their dead and load them on carts to be buried outside of the city. By its end 10% or 5000 people have died. Finally, the author intertwines many interesting facts relating to medical practices believed to heal such as mercury, bleeding and quarantine.

Especially of importance were free blacks who helped both white and black citizens in Philadelphia to safe recovery.

### **Novels Dealing with Frontiers**

Although there are many books that have been written of young people living in various frontiers, the difficulty is locating works of higher reading level. While *Prairie Whispers* and *Streams to the River, River to the Sea* are RL 5.5, *A Gathering of Days* is RL 6.0. Since U.S. history is an eighth grade course for many districts, this is an area requiring more research. On the other hand, the novels described below provide answers to the essential question: How does gender affect expectations and roles in nineteenth century American society?

Frances Arrington *Prairie Whispers* (2003) is about hardship and honesty of a young girl living on the South Dakota prairie in the 1860s. Colleen is a dutiful daughter who helps a woman on a wagon train to give birth to her baby. When the baby lives and her own mother's baby dies at birth, she makes a switch that affects her whole family. Eventually, the woman's husband arrives and wants the money chest and watch that he left with his wife. This causes a major problem for Colleen; she makes a choice to lie about the child which has repercussions beyond anything that she planned. The story is told as a third person narrative with many vivid descriptions of the river, the cottonwood forests, poisonous snakes, and a terrifying fire that settlers halt with a backfire.

Joan Blos' Newberry winner, *A Gathering of Days: A New England Girl's Journal, 1830-1832*(1979) is about 13-year-old Catherine who starts a diary when she moves to Holderness, New Hampshire after her mother's death. She relates the excitement of quilting, making gingerbread at Christmas, berry picking, maple sugaring,

and the break out of the river ice after winter. And she discusses the feminine ideas and issues of the day that she reads *Godey's Lady Book*, first published in 1830. Although the focus is on the young girl's life, she relates many of the activities of the farming community done by the men folk. She becomes aware of injustice and compassion when she learns of the life of the runaway slave and the heartbreak of losing her best friend to a fever. Easy reading and a fast pace of 140 pages makes this novel accessible to struggling readers.

Scott O'Dell's *Streams to the River, River to the Sea* (1987) is told from the first person narration of Sacagawea captured, traded, and married away from her Shoshoni people. Her travels with the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1804-05 shows her courage and value despite disappointments, the difficulty of teen birth while traveling, abuse from her husband, and hardships of travel. O'Dell makes her story come alive through effective dialogue and action driven narrative.

### **Novels on Immigration or Migration**

The works in this section introduce the reader to: a teenage Chinese boy helping to build the railway from California to Utah; a teenage girl of Hispanic descent migrating in 1850 from Massachusetts to the new state of California; a girl from Boston whose family become pioneers in Wisconsin in the 1860s; and a New England farm girl migrating from rural to an urban area to work in the Lowell textile mills. Whichever book the young person reads they will be able to answer the essential question: How does moving to a new environment often change a person's attitudes, beliefs, and goals?

Laurence Yep's Newberry Honor book, *Dragon's Gate* (1993) is written for young adults because of serious themes and scenes. It provides students with a first



person account by a young male Chinese immigrant who helps construct the trans-continental railroad in 1867. The working environment is filled with threats from avalanches and bitter cold, to being crushed inside the tunnels from explosions or loss of limbs when the dynamite charges go off too soon. The foremen on the railroad have the power to whip the Chinese workers and give them less pay, while feeding them on rice or corn gruel.

The author uses the mountain setting in California and Utah to show us the brutality as well as beauty of this saga. Through the dialogue we come to an understanding of the importance of male relationships and the determination of the immigrant to succeed in a land portrayed as one of golden opportunity. Unfortunately, the young hero, Otter, and his uncle, Foxfire, are the only two dynamic characters in the novel with which the reader forms a relationship. Both overcome odds to help others and change their perspective on why they are in America.

Joan Blos' *Letters from the Corrugated Castle: A Novel of Gold Rush California* (2007) RL 6.2 centers on the life of 13-year-old Eldora of Hispanic heritage, who writes letters to her cousin Sallie and to her friend Luke. She moves with her adopted parents from New Bedford, Massachusetts to San Francisco when California becomes part of the Union. She is amazed by the types of people she meets and the business of a big city. When she learns that her real mother lives in Salinas Valley, she moves south to live and work in the inn she owns. She experiences through her friends the racism toward Mexican miners in the gold mining camps. She also meets a teen who travels with his journalist father and sends her letters about life in other parts of California. By the end Eldora finds out that she is a natural when she begins teaching English to Mexican

immigrants. The plot of the story is somewhat disjointed because of the structure of letters among several different characters and the lack of an action adventure. This may cause some readers to lose interest.

Carol Ryrie Brink's Newberry 1936 award winner *Caddie Woodlawn* RL 5.0 is a fine choice for the struggling reader. Set in the 1860s Caddie is eleven years old and one of seven children who moves with her family to the Wisconsin prairie from Boston. There are several chapters that deal with relationships with Native peoples who a few years prior to their settlement had fought a war against pioneers. Racism of the community is dealt by Caddie who sees things differently for her friends. This is an attractive character that is independent, open, and thoughtful about life. There are great scenes going to school in a sleigh and Saturday morning spelling bees. The real Caddie Woodlawn was eighty-two years old when this book was published.

Katherine Paterson's *Lyddie* (1991) RL 7.5 concerns a ten-year-old girl who leaves her farming community and begins working in the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, as they begin to become the center of cloth manufacturing in the early nineteenth century. The reader learns how difficult and troublesome it is to leave family and home, live in a boarding house, work ten hour days, listen to the noise of fourteen looms in your workspace, avoid diphtheria, and try to develop your mind without formal schooling. Paterson has captured the moment in time and makes it real for the reader.

### **Novels on Civil War and Reconstruction**

By far this time period has the largest selection of works. Standard certainly are these two works: Irene Hunt's 1964 Newberry winner *Across Five Aprils* RL 6.0 and Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* (1895) a Young Adult novel. In Hunt's classic a

young boy takes charge of his Illinois farm when his father goes over to war for five years. The author used stories from her grandfather and family letters to recreate the life of the period and the troubles faced by Jethro and his mother. And Stephen Crane's work remains a classic of the graphic but glorious tribute to men living for an ideal. Although many high schools study use the text, teachers of eighth grade could consider selecting a chapter of the work that makes use of Crane's colorful imagery and figurative language to create mood and voice.

In addition, there are historical fiction works by Paulsen, Keith, Rinaldi, and Wells that help adolescents understand the Civil War with its horror and courage. The first three center on two teenage boys. The second two authors focus on how girls deal with life during the era. The essential question to reference while reading these novels is: How do individuals and communities adapt to major environmental and societal change brought about by war?

Gary Paulsen's *Soldier's Heart: A Novel of the Civil War* (1998) is a novel which starts in 1861 when 15-year-old Charley leaves his Minnesota farm and walks to St. Paul to enlist. He is excited about his adventure as he travels by train for the first time all the way to Virginia, where he participates in the battle at Manassas Junction. What seems to be a beautiful meadow with many new friends becomes a scene of putrefying bodies and later back at camp of a pile of amputated limbs that makes him ill. They learn to kill the horses to disorganize the enemy cavalry; and to aim for the legs of the infantry to disable. Even though the Young Adult work is less than 100 pages, it is a graphic description of the horrors that continue to haunt the soldier long after the war.

Harold Keith's 1958 Newberry winner *Rifles for Watie* tells the story of Jefferson Davis Bussey, a sixteen-year-old from 1861 through 1865 while he serves as a Union soldier first in Kansas, then Missouri, Arkansas, and the portion of the Cherokee Nation (now Oklahoma). Before the war we follow his pioneer life threshing wheat using two hickory clubs tied together with buckskin and using a mule driven plow. The author tells the story from the omniscient point of view that conveys Jeff's experiences as a Union foot soldier, an artillery man, a cavalryman, a scout. So we see a variety of roles with increasing importance. When Jeff becomes a spy infiltrating Confederate lines we learn the other side of warfare with an army near its end in terms of getting munitions to continue the fight. We also view life for the Cherokee and Creek who were forced to live in this territory and then experience a war in their land not of their making. The Young Adult book is never dull and the women he meets in the course of war are shown as strong, holding together life on the ranches and farms.

Carolyn Reeder won the Jane Addams Book Award for her novel, *Shades of Gray* (1989) RL 5.5, which deals with a twelve-year-old in post- Civil War Virginia. Although there are many references to how life changed because of the battles fought that divided the people and destroyed the countryside, the plot involves mostly conflicts that the young person faced with a loss of his parents from the war. He goes to the Piedmont to work on his uncle's farm and has to learn to trap animals, work in the fields, mend fences and develop the physical strength to help his relatives remake their farm. He also has to deal with school bullies, a friendship with a girl, and conflicts over whether he should take the offer to return to his the town where he was raised. His anger comes to the surface toward his uncle who refused to fight the Yankees and toward a Yankee who is

invited to stay at the farm. This is a novel that could work as a choice under the theme of Frontiers.

Ann Rinaldi's *Come Juneteenth* (2007) RL 5.5 is based on the emancipation of slaves in Texas of June 19, 1865. Most of the book focuses on life on a Texas ranch, which is run by a wealthy but kind white family during the Civil War. Life is viewed through the lens of their daughter, thirteen-year-old Luli. As with many Southern families, some slaves were treated like family, living and eating in the Big House with the owners. In this story one young mulatto girl, Sis Goose, is raised as a sister to Luli, the first person narrator of the story. They do most activities together whether it is reading, baking, and horseback riding, attending parties, or visiting the local hoodoo medicine woman. Christmas at their ranch is filled with happiness for all, black and white. Then the war ends and a Union officer arrives to tell the slaves they are free and have been for two years according to President Lincoln. This information leads to tragedy for the girls, for the ranch owners, and to how the Union soldiers treat the property. The novel certainly explains the role of Luli's Confederate brothers keeping the Comanche Indians at bay on the Texas frontier as well as fighting in far off places. But it more closely follows the internal conflicts for people in regard to race, respect and freedom.

Rosemary Well's *Red Moon at Sharpsburg* (2007) is about a struggle for survival by young India Moody who prior to the Civil War finds pleasure in books and going to school with her best friend Julia. But India lives in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley and war puts an end to life as she knew it. There are wounded Union and Confederate soldiers who march through and have to be nursed at her home and Union soldiers who

burn the orchards and steal the furnishings. Her best friend escapes early in the war to live with family out west, but India's father who hates war is brutally killed at Sharpsburg, while she and her mother manage to eke out an existence. She rises above the horror by studying the sciences and holds fast to a dream of going one day to Oberlin College. India's willingness to harbor a severely injured Yankee brings her food and money that propels her on the journey to Ohio.

Historical fiction enhances the teaching of U.S. history by providing personalities and primary issues for discussion in the social studies classroom. Furthermore, there is an abundance of teacher created online resources for formative and summative assessments, including reading, writing, discussion, Internet sites, and presentations. Students learn new vocabulary, connect to real life experiences, and create visualizations of past when reading historical fiction.

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## Post Script

For teachers of the second half of U.S. History, Joan Lowery Nixon has three Young Adult novels on turn of the century immigrants, with the heroines of each originally meeting on a ship from Liverpool to New York City. The novel, *Land of Hope* (1992), centers on Rebekah, a fifteen-year-old Jewish immigrant from Russia. She helps her family by doing piece work in a sweatshop, while desperately wanting to go to school and become a teacher. There is as much history of the old country of Russia with its customs and politics, as well as the practices of the Jewish faith in America. In *Land of Promise* (1993), fifteen-year-old Rose comes from Ireland to live with her brother and dad who arrived earlier. She secures a good job as a store clerk in a woman's department store. However, there are problems of her dad's drinking and her brother's support of revolution in Ireland. In *Land of Dreams* (1994) sixteen-year-old Kristin travels with her family from Sweden to Minnesota, where she rebels against what she sees as double standards for boys and girls. To her credit she leaves for the city to become a journalist and active supporter of Susan B. Anthony. Each novel deals with both the customs and reasons for departing the land of their birth and the reasons what each girl hopes to gain in becoming an American.

Want to be sure your home is reader-friendly? You may want to pick up a copy of Nancie Atwell's "The Reading Zone." It's a quick, inspiring read penned by one of the most influential reading teachers in the world and the first recipient of the Varkey Foundation's Global Teacher Prize. Reading fiction can allow you to temporarily escape your own world and become swept up in the imagined experiences of the characters. And nonfiction self-help books can teach you strategies that may help you manage symptoms. That's why the United Kingdom's National Health Service has begun Reading Well, a Books on Prescription program, where medical experts prescribe self-help books curated by medical experts specifically for certain conditions. May even help you live longer. the same time that Darwin did (Wallace) was deemed superior a better candidate for law school or even a business promotion. Knowledge of historical facts has been used as a screening device in many societies, from China to the United States, and the habit is still with us to some extent. Understanding the operations of people and societies is difficult, though a number of disciplines make the attempt. An exclusive reliance on current data would needlessly handicap our efforts. How can we evaluate war if the nation is at peace unless we use historical materials? How can we understand genius, the influence of technological innovation, or the role that beliefs play in shaping family life, if we don't use what we know about experiences in the past? Children's literature helps a young child make sense of what it is to be human and helps them understand the world around them. The fairy tale genre provides ways for children to receive important messages. Although there are some themes in fairy tales that are unrealistic, the overall effect is positive and offers fundamental elements for children's development. Based on the Jungian interpretation, fairy tales teach children how to deal with basic human conflicts, desires, and relationships in a healthy way; acquiring these skills can ultimately impact a child's health, quality of life, or even History is the story of who we are, where we come from, and can potentially reveal where we are headed. Why Study History: The Importance. History is important to study because it is essential for all of us in understanding ourselves and the world around us. History can help us become better informed citizens. It shows us who we are as a collective group, and being informed of this is a key element in maintaining a democratic society. This knowledge helps people take an active role in the political forum through educated debates and by refining people's core beliefs. You will also understand the suffering, joy, and chaos that were necessary for the present day to happen and appreciate all that you are able to benefit from past efforts today. Photo by Giammarco Boscaro on Unsplash.