

A Novel Idea: Historical Fiction and Social Studies

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With all the teaching methods that come and go, one method can be counted on to benefit students consistently—reading. Incorporating historical fiction novels into the social studies classroom is both relatively easy and worthwhile. South Carolina’s standard course of study for the seventh grade focuses on modern world history, from approximately 1600 to the present.¹ To provide students with practice in reading as well as interest them in the narrative of history, I have incorporated historical fiction in my lessons through read-aloud sessions and classroom novel sets that are used for homework.

Eye Opening

I begin class by reading aloud for approximately ten minutes. I choose novels that provide an alternative perspective on history and those that focus on cultural aspects of major events in history. For example, in *Behind the Bedroom Wall*, a Holocaust sanctuary story is told from the viewpoint of a young German girl. Korinna is devoted to Hitler and her Nazi youth group, *Jungmadel*, until she finds that her parents are hiding a Jewish woman and her young daughter behind her bedroom wall. Not only must she keep this secret from her friends, but she must also decide whether to turn her parents in as enemies of the state. Through getting to know the young Jewish girl in hiding, Korinna comes to see that her *Jungmadel* leaders have been lying to their young followers, and her dedication to the Fuhrer wanes.

Most American students have grown up being able to take freedom for granted, especially the freedom of religious expression. Discrimination of this sort is almost incomprehensible to them. Through Korinna’s eye-opening experience, students begin to understand how the Jews became the outcasts and scape-

goats of Nazi society, how a Holocaust can happen.

A Series to Build Upon

After reading aloud the first book in a series, I often assign students to read one or more books in the same series as homework to be done over several weeks. For example, in *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis, a ten-year-old girl who lives in Taliban controlled Afghanistan is faced with a momentous decision. After the Taliban arrest her father, Parvana is faced with the dilemma of whether to cut her hair and dress as a boy so she can work in the streets of Kabul. Parvana quickly realizes that she must if her family is to survive. This book provides a girl’s view of how restricted life is under the Taliban—from the requirement that women wear the

burqa (cloth that fully covers the face) to public executions that serve to display the power of these supposedly religious men.

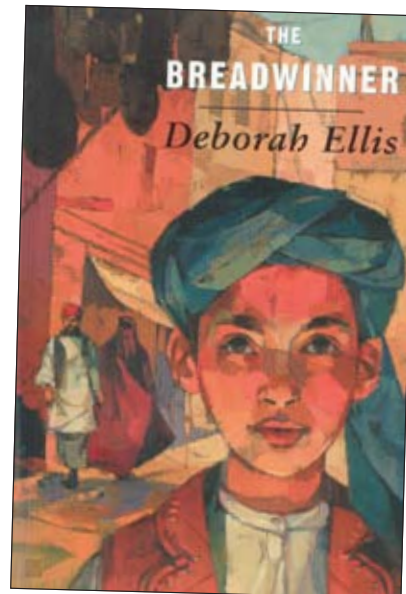
After the students and I have read this book aloud, I assign each class to read *Parvana’s Journey* and *Mud City*, the second and third books, respectively, in the series. The students’ response to this trilogy has been impressive. Many students who seem to be reluctant learners have become engrossed in this series. They discuss the books with each other in the hallways. I have seen grades improve and self-esteem increase, and I attribute these

successes to the use of emotionally and intellectually engaging material for this age group. Most important, my middle school students are reading and enjoying it!

Lives in History

Other cultural aspects of history are addressed in these novels. For example, the ancient custom of foot binding in China is discussed in *Ties that Bind*, *Ties that*

Break; a sixteen-year-old German soldier (who is fluent in Russian, the language of his mother’s family) survives by switching uniforms with a dead Russian soldier when he is trapped behind enemy lines



in *Soldier X*; a thirteen-year-old girl in modern India is forced into an arranged marriage in *Homeless Bird*, and a young Chinese girl is an outcast in her own family because her mother died after giving birth to her in *Chinese Cinderella*. Students are able to identify with main characters who are pre-teens and teenagers. In many of these stories, the main characters use education as a way to improve their situation, which reinforces the positive and practical benefits of learning.

I have discovered these books and others like them through persistent use of the book companies' online search feature, through browsing book fairs, consulting the Notable Trade Books in Social Studies annual lists, and avid reading of young adult historical fiction. (See Resources for Teachers, below.) I have purchased the classroom sets of these novels over several years through use of my own money and grants.² Each classroom set is rotated among my four classes.

Pacing and Assessment

Most of the reading assignments last for four weeks; each week the students are required to read approximately 50 pages. I give the reading assignment on a Friday and quiz the students on the following Friday. Each quiz consists of ten true/false questions. Because the syntax of true/false questions can be confusing, I read aloud each question so that students can ask for clarification if they need it, and the whole class benefits. I derive these questions (about factual knowledge) from information that appears in various places throughout the assigned pages. This way, if a student only finishes 40 of the 50 pages assigned one week, his or her grade is not ruined.

Any incorrect answer on the quiz counts off seven points instead of ten. Therefore, if a student misses one question they still make an A, and if they miss two questions they will receive a B, etc. This results, in my experience, in a good spread of grades without grade inflation.

A Process of Discovery

The facts of history that students learn

through reading these books serve as a reference point when we study these time periods in social studies. The reading helps build background knowledge, which is desperately needed by my group of students, since this is their first modern world history class. Students are able to make a connection between some previously obscure historical fact and relate it to something that they know from reading. It makes history come alive for them. Naturally, some students will not read all of the assigned books, but if they only read some of the assignment, this is more reading than they would have done if I had not assigned these books. Also, grades are listed on their progress reports by title of the book and page numbers, so parents can readily see whether their child is reading. Parents have been receptive when I contact them to say that their child does not appear to be keeping up with the reading. In eight years of teaching, I have not yet heard a complaint from parents about this type of assignment!

Using historical fiction in my social studies classroom has changed my method of teaching. I am excited each time I assign a new novel and look forward to the process of discovery that my students will encounter because of reading. The best part is that I know that reading is good for my students and that they will grow from the process. These books help me to build a relationship with my students by giving us a common topic for conversations. It may be difficult to verify whether this method improves state-mandated test scores, but I have seen how reading is good for these students in terms of their subject knowledge and motivation to learn. Why stop now? 📖

Notes

1. "NC Standard Course of Study," (2006), www.dpi.state.nc.us/curriculum/socialstudies/scos/.
2. Grants to help teachers acquire classroom book sets are occasionally listed at www.teacherscount.org

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Literature for Youth

Ellis, Deborah. *The Breadwinner*. Berkeley, CA. Groundwood Books. 2000, cover illus. Pascal Milelli.

_. *Parvana's Journey*. Berkeley, CA. Groundwood Books. 2002.

_. *Mud City*. Berkeley, CA. Groundwood Books. 2003.

Namioka, Lensey. *Ties that Bind, Ties that Break*. New York. Dell-Laurel Leaf. 1999.

Whelan, Gloria. *Homeless Bird*. New York. Harper Collins. 2000.

Williams, Laura E. *Behind the Bedroom Wall*. Minneapolis, MN. Milkweed Editions. 1996.

Wulffson, Dona. *Soldier X*. New York. Penguin Group. 2001.

Yen Mah, Adeline. *Chinese Cinderella*. New York. Random House. 1999.

Resources for Teachers

Krey, DeAn M. *Children's Literature in Social Studies: Teaching to the Standards*. Bulletin 95. Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 1998.

Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People. Previous years' lists are available as free PDFs at www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable. The most current list is an NCSS member benefit, published in the May/June issue of *Social Education*, which is sent to all members in the spring, including subscribers to *Social Studies and the Young Learner*. The current list is also available online to NCSS members only at members.ncss.org. The list is a joint project of NCSS and the Children's Book Council.

Sandmann, Alexa L. and John F. Ahern, *Linking Literature with Life: The NCSS Standards and Children's Literature for the Middle Grades*, Bulletin 99. Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2002.

Silverblank, Fran. *An Annotated Bibliography of Historical Fiction for the Social Studies Grades 5 through 12*. Washington, DC: NCSS, 1992.