

Social Education 71(4)
© 2007 National Council for the Social Studies

Capturing the imagination of students is the key to engaging them in the study of their subjects. One of the best ways of doing so is to introduce them to excellent and captivating literature. In this closing issue of the school year, as is our tradition, *Social Education* presents the latest list of Notable Social Studies Trade Books and Carter G. Woodson award-winning books, accompanied by articles that show how literature and the arts can best be used in the social studies classroom.

This issue is also enhanced by a special section on using the humanities to teach about Latin America. Even though the region includes important international neighbors of the United States, and an increasing proportion of citizens and students in the United States have family origins there, widespread ignorance persists about its history, cultures, and current challenges.

In the opening article, Bárbara C. Cruz, the guest editor of the special section, points out that “teachers today have a plethora of excellent literature” from which to choose books about the region (170). She identifies the best strategies for teachers who want to present literature about Latin America to their students, and recommends attractive books that cover the range of social studies subjects for each of the elementary, middle and young adult age groups.

“In our increasingly visual world,” Harry E. Vanden points out (181), outstanding films can engage classes and lift the curtain on the cultures and modern history of Latin America. He recommends some of the most gripping and perceptive films and offers advice on how teachers can provide the background to these dramas and link them to the themes discussed in their social studies classes.

Noel Smith’s article on the visual arts in Cuba shows how art can be used as a window into the history of the country. Smith highlights the way in which teachers can view Cuba’s historical, social and political development through art, and calls attention to the role of artists during the Castro era, when they have both enjoyed government sponsorship and carved out a role as a possible vehicle for change.

It can be a challenge to introduce students to a world region with the cultural diversity and rich history of Latin America. Adriana Novoa suggests four thematic units that enable teachers to identify both general trends and important differences in the region: race/ethnicity; progress and civilization; conflict and violence; and migrations. She recommends readings, music or art that can assist with lessons based on each of these themes.

Outside the special section on Latin America, this issue continues our annual tradition of recommending the best recently published trade books. In the center is our annual pull-out of Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People, selected by a committee of NCSS members in cooperation with the Children’s Book Council. It includes more than 130 books published in 2006 that have exceptional social studies value

and outstanding literary qualities. The reviewers’ annotations list the themes of the social studies standards to which the books relate, as well as the appropriate grade levels at which they should be used.

Complementing the Notable Trade Books are reviews of the publications that have won our annual Carter G. Woodson Awards, which honor books of exceptional educational value that can enhance knowledge and understanding of ethnicity and race relations in the United States. This year’s selections include books portraying the life, times, and struggles of some noteworthy and inspiring personalities, including César Chavez, Roberto Clemente, Bayard Rustin and Ray Charles.

The use of documentary films is widespread in social studies classes. Diana Hess, in her “Democracy Education” column, examines the issues that arise when documentaries that are committed to a particular point of view are shown in class. She argues that these documentaries can be a useful means of introducing students to issues, and compares them to newspaper editorials in this respect; their greatest value, however, is as a vehicle for training students to identify and evaluate perspectives, and teachers using them should also introduce students to reasonable perspectives that differ from those in the documentary. Hess, who attended the Sundance Festival earlier this year, reviews three documentaries she considers particularly likely to interest social studies teachers.

Who should own a country’s cultural property treasures? Major museums in Europe and the United States have many objects that were acquired from other nations with rich ancient histories (and, in the case of the United States, from Native American tribes); these have sometimes been obtained through military conquest or purchases from individuals whose title to the artifacts was questionable. In our Looking at the Law column, James H. Landman reviews the laws relating to the protection of cultural property and the high profile disputes that can arise over cultural treasures. Michelle Parrini’s accompanying teaching activity focuses on China’s recent attempts to protect its cultural heritage.

This issue’s Teaching with Documents column looks at the War of 1812 through two sources—a letter by Stephen Decatur describing his capture of a British frigate, and a painting by Thomas Chambers depicting a scene from that battle. The article and accompanying teaching suggestions show teachers the potential of using both primary documents and related artwork to teach history. The feature is a collaborative endeavor by educators on the staff of two of our most distinguished institutions—Lee Ann Potter of the National Archives and Elizabeth K. Eder of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

As always, the editors of *Social Education* welcome the comments of readers on any of the contributions to this issue at socialed@ncss.org. 