



Teaching Social Studies with Historical Fiction

by Amy von Heyking

Historical fiction can be a wonderful way to capture students' interest in the study of the past. It can, however, be used for more than just an introduction to a history unit.

What Can Literature Do for Social Studies Instruction?

1. By including historical fiction in social studies, teachers can provide a greater variety of books for children. This simply makes sense since we know that not all the children in our classrooms are reading at the same level (McGowan and Guzzetti 1991).
2. The teaching of history includes bringing children to an understanding of many complex concepts: change, community, tradition and class, to name a few. Many writers have recognized that stories clarify these concepts for children because they personalize them: they provide a relevant and meaningful context that children can identify with (McGowan and Guzzetti 1991; Van Middendorp and Lee 1994; Brozo and Tomlinson 1986). The authors of historical fiction use language and images evocatively to transport children into different times and places. A 1992 study by Guzzetti, Kowalinski and McGowan demonstrated that sixth-grade students actually learned more social studies concepts and seemed to have a greater understanding of those concepts when they were taught through a literature-based rather than textbook-based approach. Studies have also found that elementary school students' interest in

history and their retention of historical information increased when their history instruction included children's literature (Levstik 1986; VanSledright 1995).

3. Reading stories can heighten children's emotional sensitivity. Their moral and social awareness grows when they consider reasons for people's behaviour in other times, other places or specific situations. Most children have not had sufficient life experience to imagine, let alone identify with, others. Stories provide the "insider's perspective" that allows children to connect with people in other times and places and come to a deeper understanding of others' experiences.

Cautions and Guidelines

Some important cautions or concerns have been raised about the use of historical fiction in social studies instruction.

1. Roberta McKay reminds us that literature is written to tell a story, not to convey information or clarify concepts. Teaching social studies content through literature can distort the purpose of the story. It should not be used as a substitute for the textbook (McKay 1995). When using historical fiction like the Dear Canada diaries, give children a chance to respond aesthetically to the stories they read or listen to. Do not jump into social studies questions or activities without giving children a chance to appreciate and discuss the important literary elements of the diaries. Talk about the way the authors used language in the diaries. (Examples:



How does the language or vocabulary the authors used make it seem as if they really were written long ago? Make a glossary of all the unusual or new words. How did they evoke a sense of the past? What were the important turning points in the diary? How did the authors make you want to keep reading? Did you get a real sense of place in the description of the setting? Discuss the characters in the diaries. Would you like to meet the fictional writer of the diary? Would she be a good friend?)

2. It is vital that even the youngest students begin to distinguish between factual and fictional writing. Integrating fictional stories into lessons in a content area (which is usually factual) can confuse them if explicit instruction in the two kinds of writing is not given. Teachers must teach the distinction between fiction and non-fiction literature explicitly, directly and often. Indeed, Levstik and Barton suggest that historical narratives carry extraordinary authority for children, and reading them to begin a unit may actually undermine children's attempts to do research on the topic or approach their research in an objective way. It takes careful, deliberate and teacher-directed work with fiction and non-fiction text to help children understand the complex "truth" of an historical episode (2001). Reading a range of fiction and non-fiction books on the same subject will help children examine various books critically, determining the interpretation the authors present. Levstik (1993) tells us that children "need to be exposed not just to textbooks and historical fiction, but also to biographies, autobiographies, informational texts, and even oral history; they need to be able to distinguish the features of each

form and to recognize their strengths and limitations. They will then learn to ask who is telling the story and to whom, and who is left out." Consider asking students how the authors of the Dear Canada diaries make their characters seem like "real" people. As students are reading, continually ask them how the author might have known specific historical details. (For example: How would Maxine Trottier know that people in New France ate muskrat? How did Julie Lawson know what kinds of things children would have been reading in their school texts in the 1880s?) After reading the diaries and doing research on the historical period, ask them to identify elements in the diary that are obvious fiction. Use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the diary with a non-fiction book on the same historical period. Place all the books students consulted on a continuum from "completely fictional" to "completely factual" and ask them to defend the way they placed the books.

3. Using historical fiction can obscure the fact that the past is a different place. While it can be important to motivate students' interest in the past, historical fiction can distort history and the experience of people in the past when it pretends that they were just like us. Anne Scott MacLeod reminds us that "people of the past were not just us in odd clothing. They were people who saw the world differently; approached human relationships differently; people for whom night and day, heat and cold, seasons and work and play had meanings lost to an industrialized world." (Quoted in Edinger 2000, 124.) There is a concern that we are actually encouraging a dangerous "presentism" or "present-mindedness" in children when we



emphasize the similarities between the past and present and suggest to children that they are even capable of understanding the experience of people in the past through the reading of historical fiction. Remember to ask students critical questions about the Dear Canada diaries when you are reading them: Why are real diaries written by children so difficult to find? Is it realistic to imagine girls like these keeping diaries? Why are all the fictional writers of the diaries a little bit eccentric? In what ways are the girls written to appeal to modern readers?

These cautions and guidelines are intended not to discourage teachers from using historical fiction, but are simply a reminder that it should be used judiciously and appropriately. At its most powerful, historical fiction becomes a springboard for students' own questions about the past.

Activities for General Use

Three activities that can be applied to any of the Dear Canada books are available on pages 45 to 47. (Activities and reproducibles for use with specific titles are included within each title's section.)

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