

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS COLUMN

Jim Brewbaker, Editor

Learning History Through Literary Memoir

by Jinx Stapleton Watson

From the Editor: Too Few Stories

Portland, OR—March 7, 2:00 p.m.—Coffee Shop at Powell's Bookstore

*Thinking that the NCTE spring conference can surely get along without me until tomorrow, I settle into a seat by the window at Powell's, the Portland landmark billed as the world's largest brick-and-mortar bookstore. A steaming mug of coffee is to my right, and poet William Stafford's *Down in My Heart* (Oregon State University Press, 1998) is to my left. I like the feel of the rough china mug in my hand. Thanks just the same, I think to myself, but no sleeved Starbuck's cup for me. Not at Powell's.*

Down in My Heart, I see, is Stafford's account of his years as a conscientious objector during World War II, an account he transformed after the war into his master's thesis. Stafford and other COs or "Conchies," as they were called, spent the war laboring on various public work projects—fighting forest fires, repairing dams—that sort of thing. Stafford was not exactly a prisoner but not exactly free either. He was paid nothing, and his food came from pacifist religious groups such as the Friends and Mennonites.

I've never thought much about conscientious objectors. My own father, the same age as Stafford, spent World War II working for the government in Washington, DC. Fort Myer was across the street from my Arlington, Virginia home. When our windows were open, I feel asleep to taps and awakened to reveille. We lived among the families of majors and naval officers; the men were overseas.

Skimming the slim volume, by now a second mug of coffee in hand, I light on the following:

. . . we often fought fire in the company of state prisoners and servicemen either not yet sent overseas or back home pending discharge. One bleak and frosty night three of us sat hunched over a tiny campfire on a ridge above the fire line. I asked the wearer of the purple heart how he had received it; he said it was for the wounds he received while accounting for the lives of some vast number of Japanese—fifty-three, I think.

Our companion was a prisoner, a Filipino doing the fifteenth year of a life term. He scratched his head, kicked disconsolately at the fire, and said,

"I killed a Jap too, but I guess it was out of season."

The decorated one looked at him with a sad expression. "No fooling, is that what you're up for?"

"That's what I'm up for," said the little fellow. "But if you think that's funny—here's a guy," and he indicated me, "who's up here because he refused to kill Japs."

An incident, a snapshot, a true story told in 167 words. Through it, Stafford takes me to a scene where three men are "hunched over a tiny campfire." Reading, I feel the cold, I smell the fire, and I sense the irony of their words.

In this spring's guest article, Jinx Stapleton Watson points out that there are too few stories in textbooks. She argues that literary memoir can and should be a powerful supplement to the normal fare in history classrooms. Finally, she illumines a number of books we ought to be using if we want to put flesh and blood on the bony history of our times, books that in most instances weren't written for adolescent readers but that—through the power of story to put us in real places where real men and women live their lives in extraordinary times—ought to be part of what young readers come to understand as history.

Read on. But pour yourself a second mug of coffee first, preferably in that old-timer with the little chip along its base.

—jb

Learning History through Literary Memoir

Jinx Stapleton Watson

In schools, students learn about people who have inspired notable changes in the history of the modern world. However, textbooks condense their lives into captioned photos that emphasize legendary, rather than three-dimensional status. Such texts do not fully explore the sustained human efforts required to bring about change nor do they portray the complex lives of the individuals behind the events. Thus, readers may imagine others to be extraordinary and super-human. Concurrently, our popular culture idealizes and idolizes both living and dead celebrities. Contemporary athletes, movie stars, singers, fashion models, and others, become subjects of hero worship through media coverage. What message do we offer teens when we neglect the lives of ordinary people who have lived through particular periods of history in extraordinary ways? How might we share the stories of people throughout history who have contributed to human progress in small, courageous ways?

In order to understand a history, one must first appreciate the conditions that influence individuals' range of choices of behavior in their time and culture. Indeed, the creation of one's own identity; the parameters of conformity and obedience within a society; the assumption of roles in time of

crisis, such as becoming a perpetrator, victim, or bystander of injustice; and the resistance to norms, ultimately make a difference to one's own life as well as to history (Strom). Because these questions are the very ones with which adolescents wrestle as they leave childhood and enter into adulthood, teen readers may link their own life with the memoirist's life, no matter what period of history. By reading the personal and social conditions that influence individual actions, students may begin to understand the more panoramic events of history often too difficult to grasp.

Adolescents naturally engage in the process of forging an identity (Elkind; LeFrancois). Reading and discussing literary memoir may inspire debate about the choices that human beings make in constructing their lives as well as offer a narrative constructed of the essential elements of good literature. In memoir one reads of the author as protagonist or hero, engaged with an antagonist or critical incident and resolution, much like literary fiction. Reading memoir, coupled with primary sources, such as legal texts, newspapers, and others' scholarship, offers students a rich set of documents portraying a particular period of history. Rather than conceiving of the historical record as a linear set of dates and official reports, most historians today agree that narrative lies at the very heart of the process we call history. Most agree, as well, that story does not presume to bring to light "the" truth, but at most, a version of it.

And its value resides in allowing the historian and student to compare a variety of available versions in order either to choose among them or to construct a composite image from all of them.

For example, teen readers of *The Diary of Anne Frank* hear Anne's story, among others, to connect to the "official" history they may learn from their teacher and texts. But, the power of her diary allows students to connect with Anne's relationships and with her passions and frustrations as a human being, first, before they comprehend the enormity of the history of the Holocaust. Coupled with primary documents and others' testimonies, students recognize the universal human issues first. Then, they may begin to appreciate what appears as an incomprehensible history, far removed from contemporary times.

As one example of understanding the power of perspectives, Hampl writes that Anne Frank listened to the radio while in hiding and heard Gerrit Bolkestein, Education Minister of the Dutch Government, in exile, deliver a radio message from London and report,

"History cannot be written on the basis of official decisions and documents alone. If our descendants are to understand fully what we as a nation have had to endure and overcome during these years, then what we really need are ordinary documents – a diary, letters" (188).

Perhaps this speech inspired Anne Frank to begin the diary of her ordinary life under extraordinary circumstances, thus portraying a picture of one Jewish family in hiding under the conditions of the Third Reich.

Contemporary historians have begun to use the literary device of multiple narratives to render the complexity and contradiction of historical experience to signal that history

is not just what happened but particular views of what happened. Story becomes the tag that pulls the reader's attention into the abstract concepts of complex human behavior. Carefully selected memoir may invite collaboration between history and English teachers in new ways, offering a window for teaching teens history and literature through story.

Too Few Stories in Textbooks

In recent years, historians have sought a narrative style in which to write history. Narrative history for adults includes writers such as David McCullough, Barbara Tuchman, Daniel Boorstin, Stephen Ambrose, William Manchester, and Simon Schama, among others. But textbooks written for secondary students have ignored contemporary historians' changes in discourse and rhetorical forms (Paxton). The narrative voice is missing and omniscient; anonymous authors strive for little elaboration and much authority. Textbook authors typically do not offer their audience any particular perspective, viewpoint or slant about their content (Paxton). Paxton's research suggests that students scan textbooks but read more deeply and engage in mental conversations when they read high levels of authorial voice. That is, "the reader uses back-

ground knowledge together with an author's textual cues to develop a personal understanding of a piece of writing" (Paxton 328). Students' construction of meaning of events beyond their own personal experience relies on engaging with the text. But

text, in itself, holds no meaning without some sense-making, some personal construction of meaning (Rosenblatt). Thus, in reading a variety of memoir and primary sources, students may question the authors of texts, and think more critically about perspective or stance. Students may begin to wrestle with a personal construction of history as well as to appreciate writing styles of nonfiction narrative.

The Genre of Memoir

Stanley Fish writes that biography differs from autobiography and memoir. He quotes Mark Twain – "biography is but the buttons on the coat" – to contrast the deepest feelings and idiosyncratic perspectives expressed by the author of a self-narrative. And autobiography may differ from memoir as well, for it assumes a full life lived and reviewed. Both autobiography and biography presume a significant or distinguished life. But memoir, as distinct from other forms, may focus on a vital event in the life of an "ordinary" person, a critical incident in which the writer speaks as witness or protagonist. Such memoirists offer, with no apology, a particular slant or perspective. Second, although writers may assume role of protagonist, as narrator of actions and feelings, they may take pride or dismay in others' involvement in the pivotal event, creating strong secondary characters in the narrative.

Memoirists' stories offer readers insight into what makes us human. We identify with the individuals' emotions, their challenges, their luck and choices, their dynamic possibilities. We begin to understand the universal issues that their particular story presents. Such stories help in teaching both history and literature because readers and listeners may identify with the protagonist and conflict, worry about the reso-

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lution, or care about the setting. In this way, such narrative has the capacity to entice back to former times while it connects to the reader's present condition.

Memoir of the Civil Rights Movement

I briefly present three memoirs in order to examine the history of the U. S. Civil Rights Movement. For each of the memoir, I have selected text to illustrate essential themes for adolescents: creating a sense of identity, conforming to, resisting, or choosing to participate in an historical moment (Strom). The texts include portraits of three women and their personal contributions to the history of the Civil Rights Movement. They vary in age, geographic settings and time periods.

The historical phenomenon of the Civil Rights Movement did not happen over one decade, but rather, was pieced together, stretched over many decades. Ordinary people, black and white, in ordinary neighborhoods, in the North and in the South, made a difference in the quality of life for all Americans, culminating in the Voting Act of 1965. Nicknamed the "children's movement," the history is full of stories of young people's personal courage and commitment to confront entrenched culture and longstanding law. For many reasons, memoir of the Civil Rights Movement offers a particularly powerful genre and primary source for adolescents, new to abstract and conceptual thinking, self-absorbed in their interests, but intrigued to make their marks in unique ways.

A Question of Identity

Virginia Durr, a white woman, became a Southern activist during the Depression, astonishing herself out of her Junior League and privileged role by launching into leadership to help end racial discrimination. Throughout the 1940's, 50's and 60's in Birmingham and Montgomery, Alabama, as well as Washington, DC, she was instrumental in working with Mary McLeod Bethune, Rosa Parks and others to mobilize resistance to segregation. What does it mean to be born with privilege, to be assured of the status quo, yet to urgently resist the system that sustains an unjust society? Virginia Durr confronts social ostracism, as she becomes an activist for civil rights long before it becomes fashionable. Pursuing questions of identity (Strom), we might ask, "How is our identity formed? Do the groups to which we belong limit us or can we expand our horizons? How can we keep our individuality and still be a part of a group?" (2). The forward to Virginia Durr's *Outside the Magic Circle*, written by Studs Terkel, poses similar challenges for readers:

She could be the actress playing out the stereotype of the Southern belle . . . In short, going with the wind.

If she had a spark of independence or worse, creativity, she could go crazy. . .

Or she could be the rebel. She could step outside the magic circle, abandon privilege and challenge this way of life. Ostracism, bruises of all sorts and defamation would be her lot. Her reward would be a truly examined life. (ix)

Readers begin to note the influences on Virginia Durr's life and watch her change from a privileged "Southern snob"

(xii) to powerful "troublemaker" (xii). By using her influence of wealth, education and personal networks, Durr touched many lives. Rosa Parks, best known for her leadership in the 1956 Montgomery bus boycott and active member of the NAACP, received a two-week scholarship to attend the Highlander Folk School to learn about civil disobedience the year before, thanks to Durr's nomination. There, Parks continued her own personal learning as resister, culminating in testing the constitutionality of the segregation law of the Montgomery bus system.

In Virginia Durr's memoir, readers witness the shaping of her identity. They may understand better the historical time for women, especially women of privilege, and learn to appreciate the courage of taking a stand to make a difference. Certainly not as well known as Rosa Parks, learning of Virginia Durr's role in Parks' experience helps students understand the small, background steps that help create real change

A Questions of Roles

Warriors Don't Cry by Melba Patillo Beals shares the idealism and pain of nine students integrating Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas from 1957 to 1959. The author fashions her memoir from her own journal and diary entries of the time, newspaper clippings

and letters from a scrapbook her mother maintained. It relies, as well, on the memory of the pain and joy of breaking new ground. Readers of this memoir appreciate the essential questions of when and why human beings assume the varied roles of perpetrators, bystanders, victims, rescuers and resisters of violence. As Beals writes of the nine students attempting to integrate the school, mothers and fathers, citizens, soldiers and policemen assume varying postures, either perpetrating violence against the students or nurturing them for success. White mothers throw bottles and taunt the African-American students as they enter the building. Young soldiers in the National Guard heckle the nine students under their breath as they stand on the steps ordered to protect them. But one white classmate, Link, surprisingly reaches out to befriend Melba amidst the turmoil.

The question of how and when we assume roles both surprising and contrary for our known character offers inspection. Readers of such acts ponder and examine the circumstances that drive human beings to surprising deeds. Even Melba questions herself in roles. Initially, full of courage, Melba signs the paper without her parents' knowledge or permission, indicating that she wants to attend Central High School. When her name is selected as one of the seventeen students to integrate the school, her beloved Grandma India's "mouth was poked out, but she talked to me, saying over and over again that I was too smart for my britches" (Beals 23). Shunned at first by her family and church members for attempting participate in integration efforts, Melba re-gains her courage and pride in going against the norm. Nevertheless, after many weeks of meetings to learn passive resistance techniques, Melba wonders why she has chosen to disrupt her formerly successful and happy high school career and announces she wants to return to her former school. And this time, her Grandma announces, "One little setback - and you want out," she says. "Naw, you're not a quitter." (Beals 42). Her personal courage waxing and wan-

Memoirists' stories offer readers insight into what makes us human.

ing, Melba writes in her diary during a tumultuous day of being forced back by the mob that will not let the students enter the school doors:

I was disappointed not to see what is inside Central High School. I don't understand why the governor sent grown up soldiers to keep us out. I don't know if I should go back. But grandma is right, if I don't go back, they will think they have won. They will think they can use soldiers to frighten us and we'll always have to obey them. They'll always be in charge if I don't go back to Central and make the integration happen. (Beals 42)

Today's adolescents may appreciate both the ordinary and extraordinary circumstances of Melba's life. In comparing similar dynamics of peer relationships, of aspirations and of school culture, contemporary students may connect to a history too typically marked by a paragraph or two in standard textbooks.

A question of choosing to participate

In the classic memoir, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Anne Moody reveals the loneliness of a young adult who dares to question the status quo in the early 1960's. Anne notices the differences in the quality of life between her own home and the homes of white folks that she cleans. She comprehends the disparities in employment opportunities for Blacks and Whites and suffers work at a chicken factory one summer in high school to make money for college. Fearing reprisal for her opinions and insights into life's inequities, Anne's own family dares not acknowledge her hard work for justice. Ostracized by her family and later, by some of her college friends at Tugaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi, she rejects the conformity of a co-ed life to assume leadership in the Movement:

I would go to the next meeting [of the NAACP]. All that night I didn't sleep. Everything started coming back to me. I thought of Samuel O'Quinn. I thought of how he had been shot in the back with a shotgun because they suspected him of being a member [of the NAACP]. I thought of Reverend Dupree and his family who had been run out of Woodville when I was a senior in high school, and all he had done was to get up and mention NAACP in a sermon. The more I remembered the killings, beatings, and intimidations, the more I worried what might possibly happen to me or my family if I joined the NAACP. But I knew I was going to join, anyway. I had wanted to for a long time. (Moody 248)

Trying not to allow her grades to suffer as she demonstrates in Jackson, Mississippi under Medgar Evers' leadership, Anne's activist life continued to grow. In her senior year, "a white student moved into the room across the hall . . . and soon I was going into Jackson with Joan and hanging out at the SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Council] office" (Moody 251) to canvass every other weekend in voter registration drives and every evening in mass rallies.

Readers may appreciate the risks taken in such political work. Anne reflects on "the schoolteachers and the middle-class professional Negroes who dared not participate. They knew that once they did, they would lose that \$250 a month job" (Moody 254). Choosing to participate in the Movement must have seemed a natural extension to her life's observations, for Ann writes, "That summer [1963] I could

feel myself beginning to change. For the first time I began to think something would be done about whites killing, beating, and misusing Negroes. I knew I was going to be a part of whatever happened" (Moody 254).

Indeed, one perceives youth's idealism and focus for meaningful work in

Anne's story. Alone and often ostracized by those closest to her, she risks membership in a higher ideal than her own life to make sense of a lifetime of injustices.

Conclusion

The stories of Virginia Durr, white and privileged, from Alabama; of Melba Patillo Beals, a middle class, African American high school girl from Little Rock, Arkansas; and of Anne Moody, a rural Mississippi, poor African American young adult, illustrate particular and individual responses to their worlds. Each of these lives, richly chronicled in memoir, reveals a three dimensional human being making choices, celebrating and suffering as she makes her way in the world. Their names are not mentioned in school texts; they would remain obscure if they and others had not written their stories, as both activists and witnesses of an historical period. Their issues are ones of defining themselves, as they respond to their singular values. They represent one ordinary human being engaging in extraordinary acts to ensure justice during a particular time.

Reading or listening to memoir of experience during a particular period deepens students' understanding of the history. More than a chronology of events, memoir offers varying perspectives and attitudes of the historical complexities rather than the distilled simplicity represented in texts. The memoir introduced in this paper represent a small sampling of artful writings to introduce young people to singular voices. And because this recent history is named "The Children's Movement," students may find themselves compelled to plumb for more. In doing so, readers may truly understand that literary memoir offers insight into universal human behavior as well as a particular historical period.

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