

Operation Pied Piper:

Historical Texts and the CCSS

The Common Core State Standards' College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading and Writing (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) stress key critical thinking skills from close reading and logical inference to argumentative writing using sound reasoning and well-explicated textual evidence. Finding interdisciplinary materials that can help Language Arts and Social Studies students master these skills while cultivating a wide range of student engagement with informational texts could pose challenging, however.

My academic research on "Operation Pied Piper," the British World War II evacuation of children, and my experience teaching some of these materials at the college level may prove useful to middle and high school teachers seeking texts that help fulfill the Standards in numerous classes. The plan's code name signals the cultural importance of poetry in its reference to Robert Browning's *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* (1885), which could easily be incorporated into a study of the evacuation, given its focus on a town's coming to terms with the loss of its children. What is more, the history is gripping, directly involving millions of children and teenagers, and these events produced an astonishing range of accessible written materials (both fiction and nonfiction) that could be utilized in a number of classes.

Over the course of the Second World War, the British government evacuated over 3.5 million children to the countryside or British dominions and commonwealth nations in order to protect them from

German aerial bombing (Gardiner, 2004; Smith, 2007; Welshman, 2010; Wicks, 1988). Although some children were only evacuated for a short time—returning home after a few months because of the "phoney war" and then being evacuated again once the German bombing began—many did not return to their families until 1944 or even 1946. Most of the children sent overseas were separated from their families for four to six years, and sustained their relationships entirely through writing. The evacuation thus provided the space for children and young adults of all classes to write, describing the war in diaries, stories, poems, and essays as well as letters home. This unique historical moment thus left an entire generation with a means of creating a written record of their experiences as young people (as opposed to adults reflecting on their youth).

Important materials for scholars, these types of documents could be profitably incorporated into assignments addressing the Common Core Standards ranging from reading for key ideas and details or craft and structure to integration of knowledge and ideas (College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9), as well as Standards for writing and research (College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 10). Furthermore, these materials would likely be particularly interesting to middle and high school students, since they can see how children and teenagers were actively involved in major historical moments in ways they may not have previously contemplated. (See Mayall & Morrow [2011] for the range of ways

the young were actively involved in the war effort.)

Together with adult-authored materials, child narratives provide unique views of children's experiences of WWII. Familial letters available on the Internet and fictional letters found in children's and young adult evacuation literature can be productively juxtaposed to help students contemplate the nature and limits of historical and/or literary evidence as well as to hone their close reading skills. Further, focus on fictional children's letters can help students think about the possibilities afforded in epistolary self-representation in addition to apprehending what might be omitted from letters. In short, fictional letters can help illuminate the limits and possibilities of historical evidence.

Although this experience was understandably traumatic for many children, relocating millions of children to homes across divisions of city, country, and class (and at a time when gender roles were more relaxed because of the war effort) created a space of possibility and growth for many. Because of this historical event, "real life" now presented options for children that had previously only been part of the world of fiction. Children who had never left their neighborhoods, for example, now traveled to distant parts of the country or to America, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa. The actor Michael Caine describes himself initially as "a six-year-old cockney more familiar with the smells and sounds of Billingsgate fish market than with manure and bird-song" (Wicks, 1988, p. vii). Although he had some "rough treatment from the family who first took [him] in, . . . [he] went on to enjoy some halcyon days over the next six years growing up on a 200-acre farm in Norfolk, which changed [him] . . . into the country-lover [he is] to this day" (Wicks, p. vii). For Ben Wicks, the author of *No Time to Wave Goodbye: The True Story of Britain's Wartime Evacuees* (1988), "evacuation from the squalor of soot-covered slums provided a view of the outside world," literally and figuratively, showing him "greener pastures" (Wicks, p. xi).

These more positive experiences are recounted in novels such as Michelle Magorian's *Good Night, Mr. Tom* (1981), whereas more vexed experiences of evacuation are articulated in Nina Bawden's *Carrie's War* (1973). A marvelous trilogy, *The Guests of War* (1989–1993) by Kit Pearson, imagines both types of experiences through a brother and sister evacuated

to Canada and is particularly well suited for contemplating the limits and possibilities of children's and teenagers' letter writing. The second and third novels, in addition to examining both child and adolescent perspectives on evacuation, also explore the ramifications of returning home after several years.

Materials available online provide a sturdy foundation for contextualizing evacuation as well as for highlighting the types and range of letters that document this unique experience. *George—an Evacuee's Story* contains a small collection of letters to, from, and about George Shephard Johns as well as a series of official documents pertaining to the evacuation. These materials enable students to see primary source documents urging evacuation and to understand why parents were willing to part with their children. The West Bromwich Education Committee, for example, tells parents that the "noise and fright" of an air raid "will be so great that the child will remember it all its life, even if it lives through the raid" (West Bromwich Education Committee, "To the Parents of Children," September 4, 1939). In addition to the harbingers of their child's possible death or lifelong psychological scarring, they also let parents know that in the event of an air raid, "so many people will be hurt that Hospital and Ambulance Services will be so engaged that it will be impossible to give everybody the attention which they should receive and every child that remains in West Bromwich makes this difficulty greater" (West Bromwich Education Committee, "To the Parents of Children," September 4, 1939). Other materials on the website orient readers to the practicalities of evacuation, such as how it was paid for and the items children were allowed to bring with them.

The small collection of letters about George Shephard Johns quickly familiarizes students with the correspondents (adults writing to or about an evacuee and the child evacuee writing to adults—either his parents or other caretakers) and provides more infor-

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mation about the ways families adapted to wartime conditions. The letters provide useful evidence for understanding inference especially. In the first one, Florence Field writes to George's mother, telling her, "we shall take great care of him so try not to worry about him," and that if she is allowed to visit, "we

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shall be pleased to see you any time" (Field, September 6, 1939). She also lets her know how close they are to the school, that her son is "pleased to have him," and that there is another evacuee staying there, assuring George's mother that she has "no doubt they will be great chums" (Field, September 6, 1939). Students can quickly discern the facts of George's billet (where it is and who is in the household), but they can

also infer Florence Field's desire to reassure George's mother that she will be taking good care of her son and that he has arrived at a good home.

George's letter to his parents reflects the practical side of being an evacuee: he asks his parents about buying books he needs, requests that they send him his bathing suit, and tells them about going to the movies and writing his grandparents (Johns, September 15, 1939). His letter does not mention how he feels about being evacuated—an omission about which students can speculate, but given the lack of evidence cannot infer anything. His postcard, however, reveals that "Brian pushed [him] out of bed," suggesting that perhaps these "chums" did not always get along (Johns, December 1, 1939).

In the final letter in the collection, written by Nurse Field to George after he has returned home, readers learn his mother has died. Although the cause of her death is not discussed, Field's articulation of an earlier wish—that George and his parents could have visited over the upcoming summer—followed by "this awful war has altered everything" suggests that her death was connected to the war (Field, November 1, 1940). While the evacuation was an obvious result of adults' desire to provide children with safety, the

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A significantly longer set of letters about another evacuee, John Swallow (2003), gives contemporary readers more information about activities children found interesting and engaging—plane spotting, learning Morse code, going to the movies, studying French—as well as providing a more sustained look at how children and parents managed to stay connected despite their separation. It also makes clear the real costs of war as bombing raids and the death of John's older cousin are recounted. Swallow's letters are especially significant for the ways they elucidate how much this boy and his parents missed each other and how the war shaped almost every aspect of their lives. Swallow writes repeatedly about his gas mask, planes he has seen, and battles that were fought in Britain and elsewhere. In addition to signing his letters as their "ever loving" son, John Swallow's eventual return home (along with his mother who joined him in evacuation at some point) illuminates how difficult it was for families to be separated. His letter telling his father that he and his mother are coming home reflects the unique blend of logic and emotion many evacuees used to try and convince adults to let them return. Out of ten points he uses to make his case, numbers five and six reflect the boy's understanding of the war as well as his strong desire to be with his parents. Point five asserts that "the [air]raids will probably almost cease in winter, as the airfields in Northern France, Holland and Belgium [. . .] have become waterlogged: the Jerries will have to build concrete runways which will be bombed by us" (Swallow, November 11, 1940). In point six, Swallow reasons, "If we have to go, we might as well all go together—you have got to die sometime and it might as well be painlessly by the bomb as by a long illness or something" (Swallow, November 11, 1940).

Many children did not want to be evacuated or yearned to return home once they were. Like John Swallow's letter, there are others available that eloquently articulate evacuees' feelings and advance sophisticated arguments designed to persuade adults. One 11-year old boy wrote the following letter to his parents that he sent to *The Times of London*, where it was published:

I am writing to beg you not to let me go to Canada. (I suppose you know we probably are going?) First, because I do

not want to leave England in time of war. Prejudice apart, if it had been peacetime I should have opened my mind to it. Second, because I should be very homesick. Third, because it would be kinder to let me be killed with you if such a thing happened (which is quite unlikely) than to be left adrift in a strange world and finish my happy childhood in the contrary fashion. Fourth, I would not see you for an indefinite time, perhaps never again. Letters simply redouble my homesickness. These are my reasons and I hope you will take them into consideration. I cannot do anything myself but I implore you to be reasonable. I am not asking to live in London. I am merely asking not to leave the country. P.S. I would rather be bombed to fragments than to leave England. (qtd. in Post, 1940).

In addition to calling attention to his homesickness, this boy—like John—makes clear that dying with one’s parents is preferable to being sent away. He tempers his request by saying that he does not wish to live in London, he is “merely asking not to leave the country.” He ends his letter with the astonishingly moving statement that he’d rather be “bombed to fragments than to leave England.” Contemporary students can thus read a compelling historical document from which they can infer the young boy’s feelings as well as trace his logic. The boy presciently mentions how letters from home will “simply redouble my homesickness,” a theme found in many memoirs and fictional accounts of evacuation but rarely articulated in evacuees’ letters.

While online materials such as these profitably provide students with primary source materials and informational text, literature can productively expand and complicate these offerings. Evacuation fiction can be helpfully juxtaposed with these types of historical documents to help students contemplate the range of evacuation experiences as well as comprehend how child authors were fashioning themselves in their letters home: giving voice to or silencing emotions and/or analyses of the war. Kit Pearson’s *Guests of War* trilogy provides readers with 21 accounts of letter reading, writing, or receiving that make clear the importance of letters to sustaining familial ties. It also provides students with compelling examples of how children censored themselves. Although fiction, it valuably extends the real letters available online by reminding readers of the limits within an epistolary relationship. The *Guests of War* books follow the lives of two evacuees, Norah and Gavin, siblings aged 10 and 5 at the beginning of the war, who are 15 and 10

at its end. Over the long arc of the trilogy, Pearson is able to examine the issues surrounding leaving home and adjusting to Canadian life as well as tackling the complicated issues of returning to Britain. Norah is yearning to go, while Gavin struggles with imagining a life with people he barely remembers, as well as fearing life in a country so deeply affected by war.

Although both Norah and Gavin eventually adjust well, the first book in the series, *The Sky Is Falling* (Pearson, 1989), illustrates how, like many children, they were traumatized by evacuation. Both wet the bed at different times; Gavin becomes hysterical when adults in Canada try to take off his balaclava, which he’s worn since the second day on board the ship; Norah struggles with nightmares; and friends of theirs have developed rashes and nervous habits despite their creation of “a society called the ‘Thumbs Up Club’” (Pearson, 1989, p. 50).

Pearson’s novel accurately describes the experience of evacuation, from the travel involved to selection by foster parents, but more important, it beautifully attends to the rich welter of emotions accompanying epistolary contact with loved ones now far away and provides some very plausible reasons for the silences and elisions in children’s letters.

Norah longed to pour out the truth, to relieve her misery with a litany of complaints. [. . .] Just to be able to tell them all this would be a huge relief.

But she couldn’t. It would only worry them, when they had the war to worry about. And she knew how disappointed Dad would be if she complained. Grandad would understand, but if she wrote to him separately her parents would wonder why.

Finally Norah thought of a way to fill up the page. She dipped her pen in the crystal bottle of ink and began.

Dear Mum, Dad and Grandad,

Here is what is different about Canada. The cars drive on the wrong side of the street. The robins are huge. There is no rationing of food or petrol. There’s no black-out. Canadians

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have different money and they speak a different language. Here is a list of the words I know so far.

[. . .]

By the end of the letter she was limp with homesickness. (Pearson, 1989, pp. 114–115)

The heart-wrenching description of Norah's homesickness conveys how deeply she, like thousands of real children, yearned for home. Pearson illustrates well the ways Norah censors her letter, and by providing readers with the whole letter, they're also able to see how a "newsy" letter could, in fact, not contain any news. Indeed, Norah's father replies, "Norah we are delighted to know you're learning so much about Canada. . . . We'd like to hear more about *you*. Are you happy at the Ogilvies? Is school all right? Please tell us everything" (Pearson,

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1989, p. 150). Only toward the end of the novel does Norah feel she can "write long uncensored letters home and say honestly she was all right" (Pearson, 1989, p. 222). These earlier potent omissions from her letters reflect many written during the war. In archival materials I have read, more than one set of parents had to ask repeatedly about questions they had asked their children or information they had shared that was met with silence—and this was silence on important issues. Even in the small collection of letters about George Johns, readers wonder about the incident when Brian pushed him out of the bed: was it a small, ordinary argument or was it used synecdotally to describe the relationship?

Pearson's trilogy, like other contemporary works of children's and adolescent literature (e.g., Little, 2010, or Stone, 2011)), also examines the emotional difficulty of receiving letters from home. When Norah receives cards from her old friends, she finds the experience "so unsettling" that she only reads them quickly once. The temporal and spatial distance has made them "see[m] like people in another life" (Pearson, 1989, p. 235).

For younger children, like Norah's brother Gavin, letters or gifts from home presented other problems. In the trilogy's third volume, which focuses primarily on Gavin's experience, he struggles to write his parents. He can't remember them; "their faces were blank" (Pearson, 1993, p. 42). He finds thanking parents for gifts sent to a much younger child not only frustrating, but it makes him "wigg[e] with guilt. He knew Dad had carved the truck and Mum had knit the hat" (Pearson, 1993, p. 42). Like many younger evacuees, Gavin recognizes his parents because "he'd had their faces pointed out in [. . .] photograph[s] as 'Mum and Dad.' But he recognized them the same way he did a picture of a famous actor or hockey star: someone familiar but not intimate" (Pearson, 1993, p. 68). Letters for other evacuees reminded them of their great distance from their biological families since foster parents and their new lives had become home. Fictional Gavin's experience thus extends the online letters of children domestically evacuated for a short time and enables students to apprehend the emotional consequences of being separated for several years.

Although exchanging letters was sometimes fraught for children like Norah, who yearned for home, and for those like Gavin for whom home was his foster family, the letters illuminate quite a bit for the reader. When Gavin reads all the ones he and his sister received over the course of the war, he learns that "the letters portrayed two people bravely struggling from day to day in war-torn England. [. . .] Every letter said how much they missed Norah and Gavin and looked forward to having them back" (Pearson, 1993, p. 69). Gavin not only understands more about his parents, but in their responses to his letters, when they "commented on something Norah and Gavin had told [them . . .], Gavin remembered the thrill of learning to swim and ski, the exciting train journey west," etc. (Pearson, 1993, p. 70). While the letters are not powerful enough to restore Gavin's lost memory of his parents, readers can quickly discern how they functioned to maintain family ties. One can then return to details from John Swallow's online collection to discern more about his relationships with other family members. For example, his excitement over his Aunt Phyllis's impending visit—"???Guess? guess? guess? guess??? Auntie Phyllis is coming down tomorrow!!!!" (June 19, 1940)—reveals how much this young boy loved his aunt and delighted in anticipating her visit.

Significantly, Pearson ends the trilogy with

Gavin's letter to his Canadian "Aunt" Florence, her daughter Mary, and their cook Hanny after he has returned "home," giving him the last word. Ending the book with a letter stresses the importance of letter writing for evacuees, and it also provides another extraordinary piece of evidence about the limits and possibility of letter writing. Pearson movingly expands readers' thinking about how children write about themselves in difficult situations.

Dear Aunt Florence, Aunt Mary and Hanny,

Thank you for your last letters. I'm glad [the dog] is still okay. Uncle Reg sent me a picture of him. He looks fat! I hope Uncle Reg isn't feeding him too much.

[. . .]

School isn't too bad. There's only six other kids who are ten and only thirty-three in the whole school. . . . Some of the kids tease me about my accent and call me "Yank." I told them they should call me "Canuck" instead. Joey said I was a coward because I left England during the war. But another boy called James stuck up for me. Yesterday James came for tea. He likes all my models. You can't buy models in England any more.

[. . .]

(Pearson, 1993, pp. 194–195)

Pearson recreates the whole letter—like Norah's early in the trilogy—granting readers access to what feels like Gavin's unmediated voice, and offers them documentary evidence of his experience. While it is clear that Gavin is being teased upon his return, being called Yank, it is also clear he is fighting back—correcting them. His long letter continues to recount his British news, updating his Canadian "family" on his new life. On the third page of his letter, however, Pearson's narrator returns to elaborate his experience of writing:

Gavin put down his pen and read over what he'd written. There was so much he'd left out. How the puppy he'd picked seemed afraid of him. How small and drab England was. How crowded they all were in Muriel and Barry's tiny house. The meager food. The bitter coldness inside, now that fall—*autumn*—he corrected himself—was here. Most of all, his constant, burning homesickness.

[. . .]

Gavin picked up his pen again.

*I miss you very much and I miss Canada.
I am being brave.*

(Pearson, 1993, p. 196)

Here, the narrator describes how very difficult returning home was for many and demonstrates the process of acculturation when Gavin corrects himself using the British "autumn" rather than the North American "fall." He also thinks about—but does not write of—the material realities of returning to a country more directly involved in the war than Canada, and one in which food and fuel are still rationed. Beyond physical privations, though, he considers emotions that could not be articulated—either for parent or child. Gavin *yearns* for Canada, and while he does mention that he misses it and them, he does not write about his "constant, burning homesickness," and temperately articulates his love for the women who cared for him so well. Gavin consciously elides the pain of returning to a home that is unfamiliar. In this silence, readers witness this ten-year-old's resilience, realism, and his connectedness to others.

While there is no way of knowing what material was unsaid in the letter collections available online, the fictional letters in Pearson's trilogy provide students with concrete evidence about what might not be said, and can be used to contemplate the ways children created narrative versions of themselves for their readers. This particular insight—and one could use just the first and final letters in the trilogy to set up the exercise—could help inform more work on inference or other writing exercises. In Britain, younger students write letters from the perspective of evacuees (see Kennedy, for example). Older students could write letters as well, but like the ones described in Pearson's fiction, they could also separately describe the information they are *not* sharing with their parents. Contemplating what could and could not be shared along with evidence-based inference could produce more careful readers of historical evidence as well as more self-conscious writers attentive to varied potential purposes of a letter.

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Letters helped maintain family ties during the Second World War—especially for evacuees. Good fiction about the evacuation reveals both the excitement and adventure of exploring a new home and locale, making new friends, and the thrill of being on one's own, but it also explores the emotional difficulty of these events. Evacuation fiction elucidates the particular vulnerabilities of the young as well as ways they are capable, and how those skills and potential are often disregarded in times of peace. The evacuation of British children was a watershed event in the history of childhood, an important part of the past that children and adolescents should know about. Such knowledge will quite likely make them interested in exploring history in ways that other historical events may not. My college-aged students are fascinated by the evacuation; I imagine younger students, closer in age to the evacuees, could be even more so.

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