

## Enhancing the Canon with Historical Fiction and Informational Texts

**M**y (Jackie) son's fourth-grade teacher sent home a note about the books he would be reading this year:

We will begin exploring the genres of literature. We will then dissect the genres even further by analyzing books and noting characteristics that are present in genre subsets in order to identify the genre. For example, understanding that historical fiction is realistic fiction set in a different time period.

Curious about the role realistic fiction was going to play in the new Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). I contacted three colleagues to see what their feelings were on this topic. As a result of the CCSS's push for more informational texts, teachers will, no doubt, be scrambling to find examples of charts, graphs, statistics, first-person accounts of events, as well as other primary sources from multiple academic disciplines. They might choose to include a fireman's account of responding to the 911 attack or a scientist's account of her participation in the human genome project. The English/Language Arts (ELA) canon will be expanding in potentially new and exciting ways as students come into contact with types of texts they may not have

read in previous ELA courses. However, with the canon expanding to include more informational texts, teachers will inevitably have to abandon other texts. While the CCSS claims that their lists are not exclusive, it would be easy to see these lists as "checklists."

The CCSS list of exemplar texts for grades 6–8 is broken into four genres—stories, drama, poetry, and informational texts. While this implied canon expands the possible range of topics and concepts covered, it does so at the expense of the interdisciplinary focus the new "Comprehensive Curriculum" hopes to promote. There is a notable thematic disconnect among the exemplar titles as the list apparently tries to cover a wide range of topics from the Holocaust to slavery. Teachers looking to find their favorite historical fiction novels to teach will find only one suggestion: *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976).

The CCSS's suggested list promotes the isolated teaching of texts as opposed to an integrated approach. Informational texts should not be randomly included in the curriculum when, instead, the planned inclusion of such texts can enhance and enrich novel units with a piece of historical fiction at their center. Examining the

expanded canon, then, becomes less of a vice and more of a virtue because of the increased interdisciplinary possibilities. Given that many middle schools teachers frequently teach units with historical novels, more emphasis should be on careful selection of informational texts to teach in conjunction with these stories. In this article, we offer ways to incorporate the teaching of informational texts with three commonly taught historical fiction novels.

### What Is Historical Fiction?

As my son's teacher notes, historical fiction can be tricky to define. Bucher and Hinton (2009) define historical fiction as a novel that is set in the past (at least one generation, which could be defined as approximately 15 to 20 years) in relation to when it was originally written (pp. 213–214). Recognizing that some stories are obviously historical fiction because they are set in the distant past, Cole (2009) wonders: "How much time must pass before an event becomes history? A decade? Five years? One day?" (p. 239).

In addition to discussing the temporal distance that might position historical novels, Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, and Nilsen (2013) suggest other important

qualifications: “[Historical novels] should be historically accurate and steeped in time and place. . . . Historical novels should give a sense of history’s continuity, a feeling for the flow of history from one time into another” (p. 258). For middle school students, the future is often next Friday and the past was lunch the day before. As they mature and grapple with complex ideas and their own place in the world, students can benefit from a unit that encompasses a quality young adult historical novel and accompanying informational texts; such a context can provide them with an avenue of inquiry (Wilhelm, 2007) into how the issues of the past connect to the events of the present.

While the CCSS document groups all genres of fiction into a category labeled “stories,” we hope that this classification includes short stories, novels, and other narrative forms in a wide range of genres. The “stories” category might include realistic fiction, fantasy fiction, science fiction, historical fiction, and many others that both students and teachers find interesting and accessible. However, among the limited titles suggested, we find historical fiction woefully underrepresented, especially as we examine the push to include more informational texts across the curriculum. Many teachers might seem overwhelmed if they feel that including informational texts means developing new units that might be difficult to fit within an already packed curriculum. On the other hand, using informational texts as part of an historical fiction unit can enhance the curriculum as teachers strive to address the additional requirements.

## **The Interests and Development of the Middle Level Student**

In *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association, 2010), the Association for Middle Level Education highlights that middle school students experience a great deal of flux as they develop physically, cognitively, morally, psychologically, socially, and emotionally. These issues play a role in how they interact and learn in a school setting. For example, cognitively, they “are intensely curious and have a wide range of intellectual pursuits” (p. 56), while at the same time, they often “show disinterest in conventional academic subjects, but are intellectually curious about the world and themselves” (p. 57). While they may be “quick to see flaws in others, but slow to acknowledge their own faults” (p. 58), they are “idealistic, desiring to make the world a better place and to make a meaningful contribution to a cause or issue larger than themselves” (p. 58) and “often show compassion for those who are downtrodden or suffering” (p. 58).

Combining the sense of curiosity with their sense of social justice that stems from their moral development can prove productive during units based on *The Watson’s Go to Birmingham—1963* (Curtis, 1995), *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967), and *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 1989) when those units are supported by a variety of informational texts.

### ***The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963***

Taught alone, *Watsons* (Curtis, 1995) is a powerful novel that

treats important themes, including sibling rivalry, family values and struggles, friendship, schooling, and racial tensions. The overarching narrative begins with a comic tone as the Watsons, an African American family, manage a lower middle class existence in Flint, Michigan. Their situation is emblematic of the migration of the black workers from the rural south to the industrial north with its suggestion of better pay, better opportunities, and a taste of the American dream. The family plans to take Byron, the oldest son who is struggling with obedience and parental authority, to Birmingham for an immersion in family values. Their reverse migration, however, is a nonstop car trip back into the Deep South and an intense reminder of racial segregation.

An Internet search on *Watsons* provides an abundance of informational texts that meet the mandates of CCSS and enhance the novel, providing both information and supplemental reading activities. The title foreshadows the Birmingham Church bombing of September 15, 1963, an event that left four African American girls dead and others wounded. The tragedy occurred a month after Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech (August 23, 1963) and preceded the assassination of President John F. Kennedy by two months. These events are landmarks of a turbulent decade embroiled in the war on poverty, the Vietnam War, civil rights legislation, and the pulsation of rock and roll.

We suggest three informational texts that promote the themes associated with the Birmingham

bombing. Martin Luther King Jr. offered a speech, *Eulogy for the Martyred Children*, at the funeral for three of the murdered girls. This speech connects to King's other speeches and to the novel's theme of racial inequality. A second text would be Junie Collins Williams's (2012) account of surviving the bombing. Her sister, Addie Mae Collins, died, and until recently, Junie has avoided talking about this painful event. The third informational text could be the *New York Times* article (Sitton, 2010) which covers Governor Wallace's reaction to the tragedy as well as naming public figures that students could research.

Informational texts to support a unit on the *Watsons* (Curtis, 1995) might focus on the bombing and subsequent events that followed. Other informational texts could also be linked to the novel, depending on how the teacher develops the unit's inquiry. Linking a funeral eulogy, an eye witness account, and a prominent newspaper's report demonstrate how three informational texts can enhance a well-established historical fictional text.

### ***The Outsiders***

In *The Outsiders* (1967), S. E. Hinton captures the anger, love, and sadness of a group of young men. Set in Oklahoma during the sixties, it is a story about two rival gangs divided by socioeconomic class—the Greasers and the Socs. Narrator Ponyboy Curtis finds himself on the run after a particularly violent fight. The novel, in many middle school teachers' curricula, addresses topics important to adolescents, including bullying, making a difference, and finding one's purpose in

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this world.

While *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967) could be considered an example of realistic fiction, Bucher and Hinton (2009) allow us to treat it as historical fiction with our students today. With references to Corvairs, T-Birds, The Beatles, and Elvis Presley, Ponyboy's world is removed from today's generation. Informational texts for a unit on this text might introduce students to the political and social climate of the sixties as well as the many cultural references found in the novel. Teachers might show a documentary, such as "Time Machine: On America's Love Affair with the Car" (Arts and Entertainment, 1993) to contextualize this era's cultural infatuation with the automobile. By using this documentary, students could watch and analyze advertisements for some of the cars mentioned in the novel. Situating the novel in its historical context will provide additional levels of connection for the students. Because the book was such a controversial text when it was first published, a culminating activity might be for students to examine, respond to, and evaluate opinions from book reviews written when the book came out and others writ-

ten in recent years.

Burke (2008) offers advice for those teachers wishing to keep a powerful historical fiction text in their curriculum while also incorporating more informational texts. Referring to Applebee's (1996) concept of conversation, Burke advocates approaching the teaching of a novel by focusing on a larger theme or literary element to open up spaces for expository, narrative, dramatic, and poetic texts. Because "each text offers information in a different way and serves a different purpose" (p. 44), he advocates that there does not need to be an established, sequential way of organizing these texts. Instead, as each additional text is folded into the unit, its genre, purpose, and structure should be introduced and discussed.

### ***Number the Stars***

Lowry's (1989) *Number the Stars* is an example of historical fiction that has developed a key place in the middle school canon when teaching about the Holocaust and World War II; it often serves as a companion to the play, *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1989), which is on the exemplar list under Drama. The novel, set in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1943, is told from the perspective of Annemarie Johansen. The political struggles and human rights issues that are difficult for students to understand are made personal as students see what Annemarie, her friends, and her family endure. *Number the Stars* does what good historical fiction does: it immerses readers in the culture and events of the time period, embedding key dates, facts, and events in the narrative;

it makes abstract concepts such as suffering and persecution personal through characters that struggle in challenging times. The historical events are complicated by showing multiple points of view around the issues. Additionally, Lowry's Afterword provides information about the historical and personal sources used in the construction of the novel.

Annemarie says, "The whole world had changed. Only the fairytales remained the same" (Lowry, p. 17) as a way to illustrate how the changes, the war, the loss of family, and the disappearance of friends had affected her world. The events in the novel become springboards for research for the students; often they ask, *Did the Nazis really send people to concentration camps? Did King Christian really ride around Denmark on a horse? Were there soldiers stationed in many towns in Europe? Were there resistance fighters?* These questions grow out of a desire for more specific information and encourage readers to turn to informational texts for additional knowledge.

This initiates Applebee's concept of conversation—between texts, between readers, between ideas—and builds on Burke's explanation that "texts offer information in a different way" (p. 44). When texts, both fiction and informational, work together, they provide meaningful learning for the students. Numerous documentaries about World War II, concentration camps, Anne Frank, and other topics related to the Holocaust support this text. Additionally, there are websites and books with first-person accounts of resistance fighters, concentration camp survivors, and

soldiers that provide additional information to students.

## Conclusion

After writing this article, we realized that we are arguing to keep the existing canon of young adult historical fiction currently found in many middle school ELA classrooms, with the idea that these are texts with which students and teachers already engage. Selecting informational texts can enhance that engagement and provide students with additional experiences with another genre and build collaborative partnerships across disciplines. Building on the idea that supplementing powerful historical fiction with equally powerful informational texts, we are hopeful that with a little extra thought and work, we can enhance and enrich our students' experiences with novels that we find to be relevant, challenging, and engaging.

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