

Getting the Story Right: Developing Critical Analysis Skills through Children’s Literature

Ann T. Ackerman, Patricia H. Howson, and Betty C. Mulrey

Social studies is “the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence,” and literature can help do that.¹ Taught in an integrated fashion, where accurate content and concepts are as important as structure and style, literature offers rich learning for students.

Children remember stories and trust what they read, hear, and see. Many of their ideas and attitudes will be influenced by their literary adventures. Teaching social studies using literature requires the teacher to know social studies content and determine the accuracy of the material. Is a narrative authentic? In other words, does it accurately depict the time and place in which a story is set? Are there omissions, stereotypes, or simplifications that could distort the reader’s understanding?

Of course, every author brings his or her values and perspectives to a story. Few narratives are completely accurate, nor can an author take into account every relevant perspective. But teachers can recognize myths and exaggerations in order to frame lessons and better use the literature. Moreover, we have the obligation to research and maintain the academic authenticity of social studies content, and to assist students in developing strong inquiry skills as they read literature.

Authenticating Text and Images

It is easy to become overwhelmed by the responsibility of finding literature whose social studies content is accurate. We have developed the charts below to assist teachers and students in analyzing and assessing the historical accuracy of literature. **HANDOUTS 1** and **2** have open cells for students to complete. We provided examples of how the handouts might be filled out using the picture book *January’s Sparrow* written and illustrated by Patricia Polacco.²

HANDOUT 2 is the heart of the activity. Students work collaboratively to fill one column with excerpts from the work of children’s literature (picture or chapter book). Students fill the adjacent column with information verifying (or not) the excerpts that they have just listed, and they cite the nonfiction sources

of that information. Groups of students are assigned different categories to research (such as the story’s depiction of women, men, children, place, details of life, and significant events). Students use any nonfiction sources listed in the book itself or provided by their teacher or librarian. These sources may lead to other sources that will aid students in the verification process. Students then share their findings with their fellow classmates and, ultimately, assess the accuracy and usefulness of the entire book.

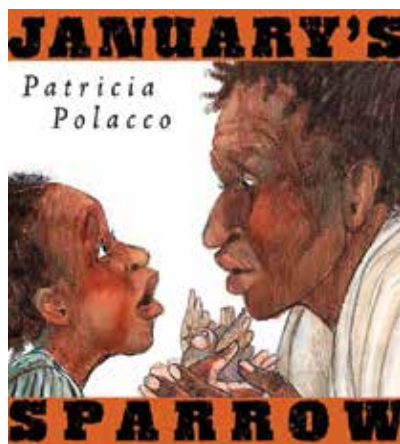
Using Credible Sources

The work of verification is both easier and more difficult in an Internet Age: easier, because of the accessibility of information online; more difficult, because websites are not all “created equal” with respect to their sourcing and scholarship.

Thus we provide (or steer students toward) websites that are likely to be more scholarly, such as those provided by museums, state and national agencies, and public media (such as PBS and NRP).

A Story about a Real Event

January’s Sparrow was a 2010 Notable Social Studies Trade Book.³ Author and illustrator Patricia Polacco’s narrative is based on well-documented history: the resistance of fugitive slaves Adam and Sarah Crosswhite who sought sanctuary for their family in Marshall, Michigan, in the late 1840s and early 1850s. The town, located on the famed Underground Railroad, was known for anti-slavery sentiment.⁴ Students can read the narrative in Polacco’s book and then compare it with historical accounts. They can also compare Polacco’s illustrations with etchings and drawings from the antebellum era.



It's notable that Polacco thanks local historian and middle school teacher Mary McCafferty Douglass "for her research and inspiration" (page 2 and back inside jacket). Douglass lives and teaches in Marshall, Michigan, where the Crosswhite saga took place.

"Useful" Errors and Ambiguities

Even if analysis reveals some shortcomings in a work of art or literature, a classroom discussion about these can lead to a richer and more critical reading of the text. For example, *January's Sparrow* includes an error (p. 93): "[I]n the middle of the war between the North and the South—the Civil War—he [Lincoln] gave all slaves their freedom." In fact, he did not.

The Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves only in states that were then in rebellion against the Union. Indeed, there was misunderstanding and confusion in 1863 about what the Emancipation Proclamation actually achieved—especially among illiterate Americans, both white and black. The passage of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, adopted in 1865, finally did prohibit slavery in all of the United States.

Does this error negate the value of this book as a teaching tool? In our opinion, it does not, but it does create an opportunity to teach accurately and thoughtfully about the steps that led to full emancipation.

This process of questioning and fact checking becomes an opportunity to model for students how to research and acquire information, and how to judge its importance in relation to other concerns. By talking through the process, the teacher makes transparent his or her own learning process.⁵

Book Reviews

Literary and book reviews from credible professional sources are useful. Good sources for these would be *The New York Times*, *Kirkus Review*, the *Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction*, and the American Association of School Librarians.

Keeping an Open Mind

There is value in assessing authenticity. The inquiry process of looking for sources and analyzing content leads to the development of critical analysis. We do not know in advance

Authenticating *January's Sparrow* Nonfiction Sources for Grade 4-5 Students

BOOKS

Arnold, James R., and Roberta Wiener. *The Civil War: Divided in Two (The Road to Civil War, 1861)*. New York: Lerner, 2002.

Kamma, Anne. *If You Lived When There was Slavery in America*. New York: Scholastic, 2004.

Lester, Julius. *To be a Slave*. New York: Puffin, 2000.

Moore, Kay. *If You Lived at the Time of the Civil War*. Scholastic, 1994.

Nelson, Sheila. *Americas Divided: The Civil War 1860-1865*. Broomall, PA: Mason Crest, 2005.

Allen, Thomas B. *Harriet Tubman, Secret Agent: How Daring Slaves and Free Blacks Spied for the Union During the Civil War*. Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2006.

WEBSITES

"Emancipation Proclamation," (National Archives), www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/emancipation_proclamation/

"Flight to Freedom: The Crosswhite Affair," by Bob Garrett (Michigan Historical Center), www.seekingmichigan.org/look/2010/02/02/crosswhite



"Map of the Underground Railroad" and a one-page story of the Crosswhite family (Michigan History magazine), michigan.gov/documents/dnr/mhc_mitten_underground_railroad_308417_7.pdf

"Operating the Underground Railroad" (National Park Service), <http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/opugrr.htm>

"Slavery, Resistance and the Underground Railroad in Michigan," (Michigan Department of Natural Resources), www.michigan.gov/dnr

"The Underground Railroad, 1780-1862," (PBS), www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2944.html

"Time Line of Slavery Resistance and Freedom 1837-1893," (Michigan Department of Natural Resources), www.michigan.gov/dnr

"Underground Railroad," (Black History Canada), www.blackhistorycanada.ca/events.php?themeid=21&id=6

exactly where our investigations will lead, and therefore remain open to re-evaluating our prior conclusions as we analyze new information. Critical analysis and reflection will help tell the story and deepen student learning. For example, after working through **HANDOUTS 1 and 2**, ask students to discuss or write about this question: "What is your reflective analysis?"

Notes

1. This definition of "social studies" can be found at www.socialstudies.org/about.
2. Patricia Pollaco, *January's Sparrow* (New York: Philomel, 2009).
3. NCSS, "Notable Social Studies Trade Books 2010," www.socialstudies.org/notable.
4. Bob Garrett, "Flight to Freedom" (Archives of Michigan), seekingmichigan.org/look/2010/02/02/crosswhite.

5. There are a few other aspects of *January's Sparrow* that call for a teacher's guidance while presenting the work to children in grades 5 and 6. This picture book is long (95 pages), it's heavy with words (for example, page 52 contains 216 words), and it's told by a fictionalized narrator who speaks in an African American vernacular based on dialog from the WPA Slave Narratives (as explained on p. 96). For example, the narrator says in the prologue (p. 4), "Sarah and Adam Crosswhite, even tho they was slaves themselves, took me in and held me as they own at the Giltner Plantation." Also, the illustration (in charcoal and watercolor) on pages 10-11 depicts a horrific scene: a runaway slave, a young man, who is tied to the ground as he is whipped and stomped by two slave catchers.

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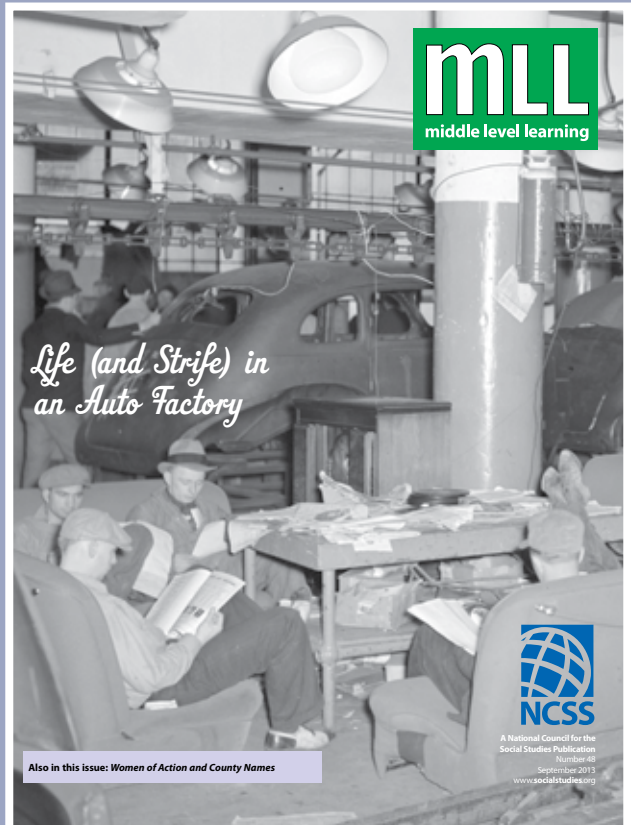
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Authenticating Literature with Nonfiction Sources

Part A: Record some basic facts about this book and its author and illustrator.

Title _____

Year of original publication _____

Author _____

Illustrator _____

When is this story taking place? _____

Where is this story taking place? _____

Are some of the characters in the story meant to depict **actual historical people** (real names), or are all of the characters **fictional**? Is it possible to tell?

What **cultures** are being depicted?

What **significant themes or events** are described in the story?

Do the author and illustrator have any **professional** or **personal experience** that might help them tell this story accurately? If so, what is it? (Look for any biographical notes in the book.)

What references does the author provide as sources for the story that is told in the book? Sometimes the author will list or describe sources at the front or back (preface or postscript) of the book. Check all that apply, and list any others.

- Introduction
- Author's Note
- Source and Photo Notes
- List of Websites
- Suggested Reading
- Bibliography
- Notes at the End

Other:

Authenticating Literature with Nonfiction Sources

Example

Part A: Record some basic facts about this book and its author and illustrator.

Title January's Sparrow

Year of original publication 2009

Author Patricia Polacco

Illustrator Polacco, who is also the author

When is this story taking place? 1840s and 1850s

Where is this story taking place? Carroll County, Kentucky and Marshall, Michigan

Are some of the characters in the story meant to depict **actual historical people** (real names), or are all of the characters **fictional**?
Is it possible to tell?

The Crosswhites were a real family that escaped slavery, first by running away to Michigan, then to Canada. The book's dedication reveals this fact.

What **cultures** are being depicted?

The book depicts plantation life in Kentucky, as well as an abolitionist community in Michigan. Both black and white Americans are depicted.

What **significant themes or events** are described in the story?

The book depicts the cruelty of slavery as well as resistance that is both secret (the Underground Railroad) and open (white citizens who publicly admit to assisting runaway slaves and thus must pay a fine). (p. 93) The book shows the strength of family relations and friendships between blacks and whites.

Do the author and illustrator have any **professional** or **personal experience** that might help them tell this story accurately? If so, what is it? (Look for any biographical notes in the book.)

Polacco, who lives in Michigan, has written and illustrated many children's book. She enlisted the help of Mary McCafferty Douglass, a local historian and middle school teacher in Marshall, Michigan. Polacco's website is www.patriciapolacco.com.

What references does the author provide as sources for the story that is told in the book? Sometimes the author will list or describe sources at the front or back (preface or postscript) of the book. Check all that apply, and list any others.

- Introduction
- Author's Note
- Source and Photo Notes
- List of Websites
- Suggested Reading
- Bibliography
- Notes at the End

Other:

Page 2 and the inside back jacket mention assistance by researcher Mary McCafferty Douglass. On page 3, the author thanks "the amazing Crosswhite family and their descendants," so we know they are real. But no historical works about them are cited in this book.

HANDOUT 2

Authenticating Literature with Nonfiction Sources

Part B: Compare the text and images in this book with information that you find in nonfiction sources. Are they in agreement, or not?

Categories	A work of children's literature Give specific examples and page number(s)	Nonfiction account or evidence Give the title of source (and page number or URL)	Agreement? (Yes or No)
1. How are women depicted?			
2. How are men depicted?			
3. How are children depicted?			
4. How is the place depicted?			
5. How are details of life depicted? (Food, clothing, pets, dwellings, tools, media, and activities)			
6. When and where is the setting of this story? What significant historical events were happening at this time and place?			

Authenticating Literature with Nonfiction Sources

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Categories	A work of children's literature Give specific examples and page number(s)	Nonfiction account or evidence Give the title of source (and page number or URL)	Agreement? (Yes or No)
1. How are women depicted?	<p>Warm, nurturing, protective. Sarah, Sadie's momma, an enslaved person, is a loving wet nurse for David (son of the master) (12) and wants her family to appreciate their freedom and not fear the slave trackers (52). She protects her children (70) while living (in hiding) in Michigan.</p> <p>Strong and courageous in the face of danger, a black girl, an Underground Railroad conductor, has the strength to row seven people across the Ohio River to Indiana. She risks her life for others. (22)</p> <p>Aunt Della, a black woman, uses her home as a station for the Underground Railroad. (22)</p>	<p>Slavery broke up families, and children often lived with their mothers, sometimes seeing them only in the mornings, evenings, and Sundays.—Kamma, Anne. <i>If You Lived When There was Slavery in America</i>. p. 24.</p> <p>The bravery of conductors on the Underground Railroad is described in—Merlene Davis, “Women of the Underground Railroad featured in Kentucky Exhibit,” (<i>Lexington Herald-Leader</i>, February 28, 2013), at www.mcclatchydc.com.</p> <p>See also—Allen, Thomas B. <i>Harriet Tubman, Secret Agent: How Daring Slaves and Free Blacks Spied for the Union During the Civil War</i>, p. 146.</p>	Yes
2. How are men depicted?	<p>Cruel. White slave owners are very cruel, beating and torturing a captured runaway slave. (10–11)</p> <p>Courageous. Other white men are shown as very brave, standing up for their black neighbors at gunpoint, and offering their names to officers of the law as a form of resistance. (36–38, 63, 66–81)</p> <p>Resilient. The black hero of the story, named January, is a victim of violence, but also resilient in his reappearance and truth telling toward the end of the book (80–81) The father, Adam Crosswhite, devises a plan of escape in Kentucky, and then of resistance against approaching “paddy rollers” (slave catchers). (55)</p>	<p>Slave owners mistreated enslaved persons (Lester, 76). Slave catchers were hired to capture runaway enslaved persons. Some free-blacks were kidnapped.</p> <p>Some blacks and abolitionist whites worked together to resist returning enslaved persons to owners and acted as contacts, provided defense and protection, and used legal tactics.</p> <p>Some enslaved black men sought freedom through escape, sometimes taking spouses and other family members with them.</p> <p>http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/opugrr.htm;</p>	Yes
3. How are children depicted?	<p>On the plantation in Kentucky (15), children are terrorized by the cruelty they witness.</p> <p>Black and white children play and go to school together in a tolerant community in Michigan. (48)</p>	<p>Kamma, Anne. <i>If You Lived When There was Slavery in America</i>.</p> <p>Schools in Marshall, MI, were racially integrated in the 1850s. www.seekingmichigan.org/look/2010/02/02/crosswhite</p>	Yes
4. How is the place depicted?	<p>A plantation, Hunter's Bottom in Carroll County, Kentucky, on the Ohio River. (4, 20)</p> <p>Marshall, Michigan, a free state, was part of the Underground Railroad. Illustrations show a town center, businesses, a mill, a church, and a stockyard. Horse-drawn buggy and horses. (27, 34–37, 47, 49, 56–57)</p>	<p>Francis Giltner's plantation in Hunter's Bottom, KY along the Ohio River http://landmarkhunter.com/188452-hunters-bottom-historic-district/</p> <p>Kentucky owned enslaved persons—Nelson, Sheila. <i>Americas Divided: The Civil War 1860–1865</i>, p. 17</p> <p>Map of the Underground Railroad at the Michigan Historical Museum, www.michigan.gov/dnr</p>	Yes
5. How are details of life depicted? (Food, clothing, pets, dwellings, tools, media, and activities)	<p>Aunt Della's house has a “real bed,” chamber pot, and multiple rooms (indoor kitchen with wood stove, bedrooms, a second floor; chickens outside. (41)</p> <p>The Crosswhite's house in Michigan is shown as a wooden two-story with multiple rooms, indoor kitchen, glass in windows. (52–55, 60–61)</p> <p>White congregants welcome a black family in front of Methodist Freedom Church. The church's sign, partly obscured, reads “Fugitive Slaves ...” (48–49)</p>	<p>Historic homes in Marshall Michigan in 1800s, www.eyeonmichigan.com/guides/Marshall/photos.php</p> <p>Religion and churches were valued and an important part of community life. (Lester, 79–80) Methodists founded their first anti-slavery association in 1834. “Slavery and the Churches,” www.christianchronicler.com</p>	Yes
6. When and where is the setting of this story? What significant historical events were happening at this time and place?	<p>The story occurs in Tennessee and Michigan 1840–60.</p> <p>Federal laws regarding fugitive slaves, Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, gave slave patrols and others the authority to capture and return slaves to their “rightful owners.” (72–78)</p> <p>“[I]n the middle of the war between North and the South—the Civil War—{Lincoln} gave all slaves their freedom.” (93)</p>	<p>Slavery was the great moral and political issue of the era. “Torn Within and Threatened Without: Kentuckians and the Civil War Era”, http://history.ky.gov/portfolio/what-would-you-choose/</p> <p>The 1863 Emancipation Proclamation freed only enslaved persons within states that were in rebellion against the Union. It was not until the 13th Amendment was adopted in 1865 that slavery was abolished in the United States,</p> <p>www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/emancipation_proclamation/</p>	Yes No