

Why Historical Fiction Writing? Helping Students Think Rigorously and Creatively

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The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) lays out “a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century.”¹ Among educators, conversations about reading and writing have shifted to reflect the CCSS emphasis on informational, technical, opinion, and other non-narrative forms. Yet, these standards also demand that students at the elementary school level write increasingly sophisticated narratives. Many teachers meet the writing standards by having their elementary students produce personal narratives or fictional stories, such as fairy tales, but historical fiction writing projects also satisfy the narrative writing standards. Crafting historical fiction narratives also provides an opportunity for students to think rigorously about the past. Through the process of writing historical fiction, students can

develop and refine their historical thinking capabilities in many dimensions. Namely, writing historical fiction allows students to:

- Engage their imaginations
- Humanize history
- Think empathetically
- Demonstrate historical causation
- Consider multiple viewpoints
- Engage in historical inquiry.²

Why “Civil Rights” as the Topic?

In order for students to produce high-quality historical fiction, they must be immersed in learning about a specific time period,

Carol Ruth Silver addressing students in 2013 at The Chinese American International School in San Francisco. Carol, the founder of our school, was a Freedom Rider in 1961.



Bibliography

Brandy, Michael and Eric Stein. **White Water**. New York: Scholastic Books, 2011. *Michael is desperate to try “white water” from the fountain in town. He devises a plan to go into town alone and drink from the fountain, but soon realizes that the water is all the same.*

Lewis, E.B. **The Bat Boy and His Violin**. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998. *Reginald is more interested in playing his violin than playing baseball, despite having a father who coaches a team in the Negro National League. Segregation in professional sports during the late 1940s is the setting.*

McKissack, Patricia C. **Goin’ Someplace Special**. New York: Atheneum Books, 2001. *Tricia Ann is excited when she is allowed to go to her “special place downtown” alone for the first time. She encounters many markers of a Jim Crow society: segregated city buses, movie theaters, park benches, hotels, and restaurants—finally arriving at the integrated public library. Includes: Author’s Note.*

Pinkney, Andrea Davis. **Boycott Blues: How Rosa Parks Inspired a Nation**. New York: Harper Collins, 2008. *This book portrays the events of Rosa Park’s arrest and the subsequent boycott through a rhythmic and lyrical text. A wonderful companion to Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood by Sitting Down written and illustrated by the same husband-wife duo. Includes: Author’s Note.*

Ramsey, Calvin A. **Ruth and the Green Book**. Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, 2010. *When her family travels from Chicago to Alabama in their 1952 Buick, the young Ruth soon learns about segregation related to interstate travel. “The Negro Motorist Green Book,” helps the family identify hotels, gas stations, and mechanics friendly to black travelers. Includes: History of The Negro Motorist Green Book.*

Weatherford, Carole. **Freedom on the Menu: The Greensboro Sit-Ins**. New York: Puffin Books, 2005. *Connie, a young witness to the event, sees her family becomes more active in the movement, listening to Martin Luther King Jr. preach at their church and joining the NAACP. Includes: Author’s Note.*

Good Historical Picture Books...

- Teach the reader something about life in the past. use illustrations to help the reader understand the time period
- Have a clear beginning, middle, and end
- Can be told from first-person (I, me) or third-person (she/they)
- Use a balance of actions, thoughts, and dialogue
- Include historically accurate details about everyday life (food, transportation, clothing, speech, buildings, technology)
- Have the character’s conflict relate to his or her historical period
- May center around real historical events and/or people
- May include repeated lines or rhyming
- Often include an author’s note that gives the reader more information about the history related to the story

event, or era. Two years ago, I received permission from our school’s administration to select a new history topic for our third graders. From a practical standpoint, I knew that I needed to select a historical topic that had a wide array of print, photo, and film resources that third graders could read and analyze. The civil rights movement met this initial requirement, and there were also dozens of relevant historical fiction picture books. Furthermore, much of the history we covered would fulfill the third grade History-Social Studies Content Standards for California.³

On a more personal level, our school has deep ties to the civil rights movement: Carol Ruth Silver, a Freedom Rider in 1961, founded The Chinese American International School 20 years later. This K-8 school, where I teach, is a bilingual Chinese-English immersion program in San Francisco that attracts a very diverse student population.

While it is difficult for many of us, situated in our current time and place, to imagine life in a segregated society, it is equally difficult to imagine a place like our school could exist today if the social movements of the 1960s had not occurred. I felt that it was important for students to understand this legacy and to formally introduce them to what Keith Barton and Linda Levstik, in their book *Teaching History for the Common Good*, term the “border area of human experience,” situations where we must “respond to fear, discrimination, or tragedy.” The civil rights movement holds “emotional relevance” for young students, as that was a time when many people—including youth—displayed extraordinary bravery. Today, my students “imagine themselves in the circumstances they read about” and begin to “speculate about their own abilities to handle such dilemmas.”⁴ One student, Avery, wrote at the end of our historical study that he was inspired by stories of people who “had to stand up for themselves” and questioned whether he could “be that brave.”

Implementing the Writing Workshop

My early attempts to get young children to write historical fiction yielded less than stellar results. I assigned a relatively narrow prompt, led the class through a brainstorm, and eventually received 30 stories that sounded very similar. However, in 2011,

literacy expert Lucy Calkins published a unit guide for writing historical fiction that changed my instructional practices.⁵ Using the writing workshop model in my classroom dramatically increased student engagement, elevated the quality of student writing, and produced stories that sounded original.

What follows is a blend of Calkins' curricular guide and my own experience implementing it in my third grade classroom during our unit of study on the civil rights movement.⁶ With proper scaffolding, many of the activities and techniques could easily be used in classrooms K-5 with any historical topic or time period. Although my class spent two months on this unit (about one month learning the content and another month writing), the time allocated could easily be extended or truncated depending on the grade level and needs of the students.

Immersing Students in Content

In order to write historical fiction, students must have background knowledge about a time period. Thus, the first week of instruction oriented students in the study of history and the time period: they placed on a timeline some of the major public events and technological and social developments of the era; learned the difference between primary and secondary sources; identified southern states on U.S. maps; and analyzed photos of segregated life. In the weeks that followed, we studied key civil rights events in chronological order, including the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Sit-Ins, Freedom Rides, and the March on Washington. Learning activities ranged from analyzing primary sources in small groups, to performing a skit for the kindergarteners, to hearing an oral history presentation from Carol Ruth Silver.

Using Authors as Mentors

In the weeks leading up to the writing unit, I read several high-quality historical fiction picture books (SIDEBAR 1, p. 18) aloud and asked the students to pay careful attention to the books' construction, style, language, and scope.

After I read each book aloud, the class discussed the qualities they noticed, and I added them to our "Good Historical Picture Books..." chart. Just before students began the writing process, we the class populated the chart with ideas (SIDEBAR 2, p. 18).

Just before we started the writing process, I led students through an activity designed to help them see how much historical information can be gathered from the prose and illustrations of a rich historical fiction picture book. I divided the pages of Patricia McKissack's book *Goin' Someplace Special* among the students.⁷ Working in partners, they recorded on paper (HANDOUT A, p. 20) what could be learned about clothing, segregation, jobs, transportation, hobbies and entertainment, language, and architecture from just one page of the story. The activity furthered students' understanding of historical fiction and opened their eyes to the amount of historical detail integrated into each page of a story. Giving students time to deconstruct the genre of historical fiction gave them a better sense of what they were trying to achieve during the writing workshop.

Generating Story Ideas

After our thorough, month-long study of the civil rights movement and many class discussions about the qualities of good historical fiction writing, it was time for students to begin brainstorming ideas for their own stories. In this phase of the writing workshop, students worked to generate as many potential story ideas as possible, and, at the end of the week, they vetted their favorite story ideas with a partner. Finally, they chose one idea to develop into a story.

Several lessons on how to use primary and secondary sources to generate historical fiction ideas helped scaffold students' skills and knowledge. I asked students to use their historical imaginations while examining a wide array of primary source photographs from the civil rights era. While looking carefully at each photograph, students asked themselves: What hidden stories are contained in this photograph? Is there someone in this photograph who could become a main character of my story? Could the scene in this photograph become the setting for my story? For example, a photograph of the Memphis Zoo, with the sign, "No White People Allowed In Zoo Today," generated these story ideas from the class:

- * Black people try to buy admissions tickets on whites-only day (non-violent direct action)
- * A character visiting the zoo thinks about how animals of different colors are treated the same
- * A story about a black teenager who works at the zoo
- * Friends or families who can't all go to the zoo together because some are white or black
- * A black child gets lost in the zoo and is helped by a white zookeeper who dislikes segregation.

In addition to using the photos, students also generated story ideas based on written primary sources, such as a boycott flier handed out to shoppers at San Francisco's Woolworth's and Kress stores during sit-Ins. Students generated story ideas by asking themselves: Who created these fliers? Who helped distribute them to shoppers? Who received them, and what choices did they make? Did shoppers support the boycott? (HANDOUT B, p. 22)

Similarly, students also used secondary sources to generate additional story ideas. Students read and re-read one- to two-paragraph excerpts from secondary sources, thinking about any hidden stories they might contain. For example, students read this excerpt from a secondary source about the Montgomery Bus Boycott:

"The black taxicab companies in the city charged people less than the usual fare for a ride. And people who owned cars picked up riders at special street corners.

"People in different cities learned about the boycott from newspapers and television. Many sent money to help. Churches around the country donated station wagons."⁸

From Fact to Narrative

I also asked students to isolate facts from the text and, then, generate their own story ideas. One pair of students wrote: "Fact: People

HANDOUT A

Name(s):

Gathering Historical Information from Historical Fiction Stories

What can you learn about the past from looking at just one page of a historical fiction story? Be sure to reread the text over and over again to gather as many clues as possible. Also, don't forget about the illustrations! Record what you discover in the chart below:

Clothing

Segregation/Integration

Jobs

Transportation

Hobbies/Entertainment

Language

Architecture (Buildings)

Other:

met at special street corners to get rides. Hidden Story Idea: A mix-up over where to meet makes two students late for school.”

Our class continued to look at many sources, including biographies and documentaries, gathering dozens of story ideas. I encouraged students to select any topic to which they felt connected, and the result was a great diversity in story topics.

Historical Fiction Story Topics Chosen by Students to Write About

Story Topic	Number of Students who choose the Topic
Segregated Life (zoos, swimming pools, sports, etc.)	9
Freedom Rides	6
Interracial Friendship	4
Montgomery Bus Boycott	3
Sit-In Movement	3
March on Washington	2
Nonviolent protest (movie boycott, pool wade-in)	2
School Desegregation	2

Total Students in Class over Two Years, 2011–2013 **31**

At the end of the unit, several students explained why they selected their story ideas. Avery, who wrote a story about a little boy and his mother sitting in the First Baptist Church in Montgomery during a rally to support the Freedom Riders, explained, “[Mr. Hughes] asked me, ‘Which story are you most connected to?’ I picked the rally [in support of the Freedom Riders] because it was a big event. It was important.” Another student, Erin, wrote a simple story about a friendship between two young girls, one black and one white. She reasoned, “I just thought that many people would not be writing stuff about kids, so I did.” Corbin, who wrote about the bombing of a Freedom Ride bus in Anniston, Alabama, simply replied, “Well, I kind-a like explosions.” Clearly, students connected to different story ideas for different (and sometimes juvenile) reasons, but the power of choice made them think more deeply about the history we studied.

Rehearsing Timelines Before Writing

Elementary school students benefit from plenty of time to plan and talk about what they will write before they put pencil to paper. I emphasized to my class that we would be writing short picture books, not long chapter books. My class began by creating simple timelines that broke their story into five smaller events. One of the greatest challenges for the class was planning how to control time throughout their narratives. When I asked students to orally rehearse their timelines (using their five fingers to represent points on the line), I overheard one student say, “My character goes to a Sit-In and, then, on a Freedom Ride.” While it is entirely possible that a person could have participated in both events (in fact many people did), that story would have spanned from 1960–1961. Students needed help understanding that historical events happened in real time, and it would be too cumbersome to cover so much in a short narrative.

Seeing a need for further instruction on this point, I reviewed

the importance of controlling time within an historical fiction piece. As a class, we revisited several historical fiction picture books that we had read earlier in the unit. We noticed that these “model narratives” often had plots that took place in just one day, one week, or one season. Students were encouraged to re-evaluate their plot ideas and find a slice of their story that they could write about in great detail. Eventually, students committed their timelines to paper, and I had a quick conference with each student individually about his or her timeline. When everyone had come up with a viable story that followed a creditable timeline, they were ready to create a first draft.

Drafting, Revising, and Editing (with Technology)

The drafting phase began with students writing a variety of first sentences, or leads. They experimented with beginning their stories with dialogue, a thought, action, or sound; by describing the setting; or by giving a summary of the history. Students chose the lead sentence that seemed to work best for their narratives. Examples of student leads included:

“It was the summer of 1953, the summer I moved to the South, the summer I met my best friend, and the summer I realized I could not play with her because she was white.”

“It was December 1, 1955 in Montgomery Alabama the day Rosa Parks got arrested the day me and mama saw it all.”

Students wrote their initial drafts on paper and, then, typed them on our school laptops, using Google Docs, a free web-based word processing program. Students shared their documents with my Google account, which allowed me to track and monitor their progress and leave electronic comments in the margins of their stories. During the drafting phase, students were encouraged to look at our class chart, “Good Historical Fiction Picture Books” as a reference.

Students completed their drafts and “shared” them with their writing partners using Google Docs. Each student read her or his partner’s story and left three electronic comments suggesting revisions. Students helped one another by pointing out places where the narratives didn’t make sense, where there were historical inaccuracies, or when they accidentally switched between first and third person.

After they made the revisions suggested by their writing partners, students received a paper copy of their draft for editing. At this point, I taught several brief lessons on type spacing, quotation marks, creating paragraphs, and capitalization. Students worked to the best of their ability to correct their grammar and conventions, and used spelling resources, such as our class word wall and dictionaries, to correct some misspellings. Finally, I had a ten-minute, one-on-one conference with each writer to work through any glaring problems with her or his story.

During my conferences, I found that students needed coaching on writing genre-appropriate story endings. Unlike other genres of narrative fiction, historical fiction never concludes “and they

... Liberty, Equality and Justice for All ...

In the South, Negroes are denied seats at lunch counters; as long as this prevails

Do Not Buy At Woolworth And Kress

II

It is equally important that freedom-loving Americans show their support to the courageous southern students and their disapproval of the policies of these chain stores. Our southern students, while initiating the prevailing southern sit-in protests, are being unjustly arrested, brutally beaten, subjected to mass expulsions from schools, jailed, and severely threatened. **THEIR DEMANDS ARE MORALLY RIGHT-- THEIR TREATMENT IS IMMORALLY UNJUST!**



- Kress and Woolworth's central management in New York can end their southern lunch counter discrimination against Negroes.

Don't buy until it ends!

- A dollar spent at Kress and Woolworth here denies a Negro a seat at a Kress and Woolworth lunch counter in the south.

Don't buy until Negroes can sit!

- Kress and Woolworth must serve ALL people alike the nation over.

Don't buy until service is equal!

WEST COAST REGION N. A. A. C. P.



BRANCH



A sit-in demonstration at a downtown Woolworth's in *Sitting for Freedom* by Niko

lived happily ever after.” Calkins notes that, although historical fiction stories often leave characters’ problems unresolved, as they mirror the unsettledness of historical events, children tend towards “Superman-type endings.”⁹ I encouraged students to think about what their characters might be thinking or feeling at the end of the story. We discussed how this simple technique could provide closure for the narrative without resolving all of the characters’ problems. Students’ final story endings seemed to fall into three broad categories:

1. *Characters felt proud of their contribution to social change:*
 “I was proud that I had done something to help support the Freedom Riders and end segregation.”
 “Dad was proud of me for helping the Freedom Riders and I was proud too.”
2. *Characters expressed hope for change in the future:*
 “We hoped that some day [sic] the south and the whole world would be a place like our tree house.”
 “I prayed for integration ... I know it might be a long time but eventually those signs would come down!”
3. *Characters reflected on something they learned in the story:*
 “I sat on the couch and thought about how mean segregation is.”
 “I was thinking about what mama said and it was true. Maybe sometimes people have to break rules for good.”

Publishing Our Work

After students finished editing and revising, they spent the last week adding illustrations, an About the Author section, and an Author’s Note to their stories. Before illustrating, the class discussed how the elements of daily life needed to be historically accurate to aid the reader in understanding the time period.

Again, the class revisited the picture books we read to examine the qualities of historical fiction illustrations. In their About the Author Paragraphs, students included information about their families, favorite hobbies, sports, or foods. In their Author’s

Note, students explained the history behind the narrative. This section allowed students to do some expository writing and display their historical knowledge of the time period and events.

When all of the pieces were completed, we hosted a publishing party for the parents. Students stationed themselves around the classroom, and parents circulated around, listening to authors read their stories aloud. After listening to each story, parents left a written compliment for the student on a brief form.

The parents’ responses to me about this unit were overwhelmingly positive. Many parents e-mailed afterward, expressing their gratitude to me for helping their child understand the civil rights movement ... and the writing process. An e-mail from one mother stated the greater aim of the unit beautifully: “More than the amazing stories you’ve gotten out of [the students]...this lesson will stick with them as they hear more and learn more about the civil rights battles that are being fought in our time.”

I could not hope for more. 🌟

Notes

1. “English Language Arts: Introduction,” Common Core State Standards Initiative, www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy.
2. Linda Levstik articulated that reading historical fiction developed historical thinking in similar ways in “Historical Narrative and the Young Reader,” *Theory into Practice* 28, no. 2 (1989): 114-119.
3. Teaching about the civil rights movement addresses most standards listed under “3.4 Students understand the role of rules and law in our daily lives and the basic structure of the U.S. Government.”
4. Keith C. Barton and Linda Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 213.
5. Lucy Calkins, “Historical Fiction: Tackling Complex Texts,” Unit 5 in *A Curricular Plan for the Writing Workshop, Grade 4* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2011).
6. See articles such as: Joan Zaleski and Vera Zinnel, “Who Writes History? Developing a Social Imagination with Third Graders,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 25, no. 3 (January/February 2013): 23-26, and Barbara C. Cruz, “A Novel Approach: Historical Fiction in the Elementary School Classroom,” *Social Education* 77, no. 3 (May/June 2013): 122-126.
7. Patricia C. McKissack, *Goin’ Someplace Special* (New York: Anthem Books for Young Readers, 2001).
8. Levine, Ellen, *If You Lived at the Time of Martin Luther King* (New York: Scholastic, 1994), p. 30.
9. Calkins, 103.

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