

Homeschool History

As Michelle Moran points out in her “Why Historical Fiction Belongs in Your Classroom,” *Promoting Active Citizenship* (New York: Random House, Inc.), “Historical novels teach psychology, geography, history, and English literacy, all in one addictively entertaining package.” (www.randomhouse.com/highschool/RHI/) In Moran's experience, it was the historical novels that made children repeatedly come to her with questions after class. By using historical novels, she so caught their interest that they became avid historians, and that's pretty hard to do with grade school or high school history!

What I remember about my own experience of history throughout grammar school, middle school, and high school, were the dusty tomes we were required to read. Even the pages were manilla-colored and hard to make out. The information was so watered down that you couldn't remember any of it, even after hours of trying to commit it to memory, and my memory is stellar! And debate? There were always two or three gawky boys, with triple-lens glasses, who argued about current events. The rest of us stared dumbly into space, praying the bell would ring. When at last I entered college, I discovered that 'historical people' had fascinating lives with exciting friends. What a revelation! A few years later, historical fiction became a popular literary kind. Because of my upbringing I resisted these books, but, by the time I had my Ph.D., I had read John Gardner's wonderful *The Life and Times of Chaucer* and fallen in love with the genre. Later, when I was asked to write about American History for the schools, I realized that the only way I could do it was to develop historical fictions.

What I discovered in writing these books was, as Michelle Moran points out in her article, that the story has to be firmly anchored in geography. I spent months pouring over maps, with the result that my novels describe each region in exquisite detail, making it immediate and alive for the reader. Because the characters are kids, a little older than the readers, they provoke questions like 'were Lewis and Clark good guys or villains?' 'What was a good person expected to be like in the 1800s?' 'How is that different from what we expect from our heroes today?' 'Did the Euro-Americans really commit genocide when they conquered the Indians?' 'Were we “white people” really that savage?' or 'Did Clark really expect York to go back to being a slave when the team returned to the States?'

Kids reading about sumptuous California may well want to learn more about the problems of homelessness in a posh community like Santa Cruz. They will certainly wonder whether there were really over 100 Indian languages spoken in the state prior to European contact, or how the Indians were able to learn one another's languages with such ease. And they will question the methods and beliefs of the *padres*, who ensnared the Indians in the missions. The Indians were eager to learn about progress, to move into

the next century. Did they accomplish these objectives at the Missions? Or was the Mission system a complete failure?

Smaller children will want to know if Chief Pontiac really did storm off to Orchard Lake Island to chomp on an apple when he was mad. Did the Indians really foresee the coming of the Europeans? Did the Indians really peacefully and quietly move out of Holland and Frankenmuth Michigan because they were annoyed with the white settlers' disregard for their property?

Moran suggests some of the following activities for using historical novels to teach history and language arts: 1) Read the appropriate novel for the age-group and unit you are studying. 2) Have the child describe the ten most interesting facts, ideas, or events they came across in the novel. A large-scale, detailed map or diorama of the novel is suggested to enhance the student's presentation, and 3) have the child write a ten-page "missing chapter," where the characters in the novel interact during an event that wasn't covered in the novel. This last assignment requires the child to read history books to see what the novelist left out, and it also requires that he assess the artistic reasons for eliminating incidents from the book.

Reading historical fiction, and complementing it with history books, not only allows the student to see the differences between history and fiction, but also gives rise to lively debates about politics, religion, morals, and power.

Another of Moran's ideas, which would work wonderfully well with my novels, is to have students create a glossary of foreign words: French, Nez Perce, Ojibwe, Spanish, and Esselen. As a matter of fact, *The Journals of Kevin Murphy: Summer of the Bear* already has a French glossary in the appendices because I am a French teacher, so couldn't resist. Similarly, *The Journals of Kevin Murphy: Son of Fireheart*, has a Spanish glossary (I have my masters in Spanish).

Wouldn't it be wonderful if you were able to team-teach these books, using experts in history, or in the English, French, Spanish, and Indian Languages?! Parents in California, might want to look into the tape recordings of Indian languages owned by the University of California Library system.

Don't forget to consult the Student Guides on this site for each book, as these are rich in questions to use when teaching Homeschool History and Reading Language Arts. There are even some tips for Writing Language Arts or Middle School Language Arts, and, don't forget to consider our Writing Language Arts Contest page, where your child can submit her own historical fiction and picture for possible publication.