President’s Message
This time of year is always memorable and inspirational. Whether it is celebrating at a graduation ceremony, honoring a colleague as he or she retires, or acknowledging educational excellence in some shape or form, it is moving to hear stories of success, reflections of the past, and hope in the future. It is also important to couple our enthusiasm and festive spirit with a certain degree of gravitas in awareness of, and respect toward, those who may not have much reason to celebrate. As we rejoice, let us also be cognizant of our privileged position. After all, what we do as educators is to strive every day to make this world a better place. If what we do each day is not designed and intended to improve the human condition, then what are we recognizing and commemorating? If we do not utilize our position, our roles, and our influence, then what is our mission? Educational excellence means nothing in the absence of a fundamental, driving passion to make democratic values and universal human rights a reality for all. It is inspiring to know that so many educators pursue these ideals tirelessly and selflessly, and someday, they will become a reality.

On a more prosaic level, the Connecticut Council for the Social Studies has had another successful year as we continue to work diligently to advance social studies education throughout Connecticut. In addition to numerous professional development opportunities, often co-presented with like-minded organizations, we held an outstanding conference in the Fall and we are eagerly planning and looking forward to hosting

Whoever first said “May you live in interesting times”, must have had 2017 in mind. If one had trouble keeping student interest in a government course, there is a made to order lesson plan available every morning based on the latest tweet. Checks and balances? Separation of powers? Federalism? And the struggle to balance national interests with globalism offers new case studies every week. Of course one person’s “interesting times” might be another’s terrifying or exhilarating times; but we are trying our best to maintain some semblance of even-handedness.

Turning to more local events, who can predict the short- and long-range impacts of state budget cuts or the federal up-tick in support for vouchers and charter schools. Move over STEM! If it hasn’t already, Social Studies may be taking over the educational limelight. And speaking of limelight: if you missed the annual CCSS dinner and awards ceremony you missed a wonderful evening. We are very grateful to Commissioner of Education Dianna Wentzell and Secretary of the State Denise Merrill who joined us for the evening. Both have been long-time supporters of Social Studies. Congratulations to all the award winners with a special shout out to David Bosso, the Addazio awardee. Along with many recent CCSS leaders, David has helped bring Social Studies back to prominence in the state. In our efforts to prepare active and informed citizens, it’s the job of all of us to keep it there.

We have several items of interest for you in this issue. Highlights from NERC, the Annual Dinner and some State Department of Education programs can be found beginning on page 3. We have some more material on “fake news” on pages 6 and 7. Starting on page 8 you can find an interesting approach to building the immigrant experience of our students and their families into our teaching. And if you are looking forward to some summer reading and don’t want to feel guilty
President's Message - continued

NERC #48 in April 2018 in Hartford. Please consider submitting a workshop proposal and certainly mark your calendar to attend. The NERC 2018 committee, led by chairs Jen Gembala, Val McVel, and Tony Roy, have been hard at work. NERC 2018 is shaping up to be another amazing professional growth opportunity.

Hearty congratulations to our various award winners, as well as their families, friends, and colleagues who have been there along the way. They were each recognized at our Annual Meeting and Spring Social at Hartford Public Library, an enjoyable evening of camaraderie and renewal. Congratulations and welcome to our new CCSS Board members: Karen Cook, Rick O’Donnell, and Annie Tucci – we look forward to working with you as we continue our important work in support of social studies education in our state and beyond.

If you find any inspiration at this time of year, let it be to renew our commitment to carry out what we all believe: to cultivate critical thinking and lifelong learning, to nurture knowledgeable and active citizens, to engender a compassion and global awareness, and to support our students, give them voice, and help them grow. This is not just a stance that social studies educators should take; it is one that all educators should embrace. These are not just social studies ideals; these are human ideals.

Read . . . and Weep!! or “What is History For?”

I remember Pearl Harbor. I was five and a half years old and my sister had her 11th birthday party on December 7, 1941. We went to the movies—Sergeant York with Gary Cooper—about a Medal of Honor recipient in World War I. In the middle of the film, it stopped and the manager brought a mic out on the stage and said: “All servicemen report to your bases.” And all over the theater, soldiers, airmen, sailors and marines got up and left. When we got out of the movie there was an extra edition of the paper out saying Pearl Harbor had been attacked.

Today, a survivor of the Pearl Harbor attack wrote in The Boston Globe that when he asked a high school girl what she knew about Pearl Harbor, the girl said, “Who is she?”

Will Fitzhugh

Editor’s Note - continued

about it, we have an article on incorporating historical fiction into social studies classrooms. It doesn’t just start and end with Johnny Tremain! (See page 10) And page 13 includes some summer professional opportunities. Don’t delay; deadlines are short but even if they have passed, it’s always worth a call to see if there is some space.

Finally, to repeat our usual message at this time of year, may your summer be blessed with good health, relaxation and worthwhile experiences. Rest up for the fall; if the recent past is prologue, it’s gonna be a wild ride!

Tim thomas.weinland@uconn.edu
Dan danielcoughlin@charter.net
State Department Activities

Steve Armstrong

The Connecticut Council for the Social Studies and the State Department of Education are happy to again co-sponsor two social studies summer institutes this year. One will be from June 26-29 at Goodwin College in West Hartford; the other is from August 7-10 at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield. The two workshops will generally be the same, with several different speakers at each.

There will be an elementary strand throughout both sessions: there will be sessions for elementary teachers who want to improve their teaching of K-5 social studies. There will also be multiple sessions on all of the disciplines contained in social studies: history, geography, economics, and civics. A number of sessions will also focus on inquiry instruction. There will also be “content sessions” to refresh educators on subjects they teach, including World War I (this is the hundredth year of the entry of the U.S. into World War I), the Russian Revolution, Europe today, and the continued growth of modern China.

The first day of both institutes will focus on controversial issues in the classroom. We will be having sessions on facilitated discussion, structured academic controversy, and various formats for debates. In addition, Alan Marcus from the University of Connecticut will be doing a session on teaching difficult issues through film. In the afternoon, teachers who teach “difficult issues” will share strategies and techniques that they utilize.

These institutes will have sessions for classroom teachers, curriculum directors, and library media specialists. Even if you have attended our summer institutes in the past there will be plenty of new material for you at either of these sessions. For registration information, go to the Connecticut Council for the Social Studies website: www.ctsocialstudies.org.

This summer a group of social studies educators will be developing curriculum materials on the African American experience in Connecticut and the Hispanic experience in Connecticut. If you are interested in working on this project please contact Stephen Armstrong, social studies consultant at Stephen.Armstrong@ct.gov.

PLEASE NOTE:
Yankee Post is Available Only Online at www.ctsocialstudies.org
To receive Yankee Post via email, and notification of a new issue . . . please join CCSS and send your email address to: ct.socialstudies@yahoo.com
Yet One More Reminder

NERC 48 is in Hartford, Connecticut on April 12-14, 2018

- Join a committee
- Present a workshop

but above all:
Plan to be there !!!
2017 CCSS Awards

Excellence in Social Studies Award
   Grades K-8 honoree, Alana Crosby - Torrington Middle School
   Grades 9-12 honoree, Monica Blackman-Smith - Hillhouse High School in New Haven.

Bruce Fraser Friend of Social Studies Award
   Elizabeth Normen, from CT Explored

CCSS Service Award
   CT Public Affairs Network, Sally Whipple, Brian Cofrancesco + Rebecca Tabor-Conover

Louis Addazio Award
   David Bosso - Berlin HS

John H. Stedman Passion for the Social Studies Teaching Award
   Federico Fiondella, - North Haven High School.

CCSS Spring Social and Awards Dinner
Hartford Public Library, May 18, 2017

Special Thanks to: Houghton-Mifflin Harcourt for their sponsorship of the event

Award Winners with Education Commissioner Dianna Wentzell
Front: Cofrancesco, Normen, Wentzell, Blackman-Smith, Bosso
Rear: Whipple, Fiondella, Tabor-Conover, Crosby

From Top:
Commissioner Dianna Wentzell
Secretary of the State Denise Merrill
Frederico Fiondella with son and Steve Armstrong
Elizabeth Normen
The Bosso Family
Fake news! How students are learning media literacy in the post-facts era

By Beau Yarbrough, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin

POSTED: 04/09/17, 11:16 AM PDT | UPDATED: 2 DAYS AGO

Reading, writing and reality: Today's students are growing up in a world where facts aren't what they once were. "It's definitely an issue, especially during the election," said Michelle Kaganovsky, 16, an 11th-grader at Daniel Pearl Magnet High School in Los Angeles. "A lot of ('news') was made up and fake."

But California's schools are helping students navigate the era of "fake news" and "alternative facts," thanks in part to the Common Core State Standards. The standards, which have been adopted by 42 states and the District of Columbia, include an emphasis on closely reading and analyzing nonfiction texts, including speeches, essays and news articles. "We're asking kids to look at a variety of different documents, not just textbooks, and then they have to look at the source of the material and check their credibility," said Bill Kaiser, a world history teacher and newspaper adviser at San Juan Hills High School in San Juan Capistrano. "By the time the end of the year rolls around, they're pretty good at it."

Some schools are tackling media literacy head-on. "The term 'fake news' comes up all the time with students and with teachers," said Jenny Thomas, a teacher-librarian at Alta Loma High School in Rancho Cucamonga. "It's something that librarians in (the Chaffey Joint Union High School District) have talked about for years and years, although we've called it by different terms."

When teaching students how to evaluate the credibility of sources instead of just taking information at face value, Thomas deploys "the CRAP Test."

"Currency, Reliability, Authority and Purpose or Point of View," she said. "We teach them how to use that acronym for anything they look at online." And they use real-world examples: "We find them fake articles or articles that wouldn't be appropriate for research, and have them go through this why it wouldn't be useful," Thomas said.

In the current media climate, many of today's students have learned to take everything they read with a grain of salt. "If it's (a source) that I've checked before, I usually believe it, or if it's from teachers or parents," said Cuyler Huffman, 15, a freshman at Daniel Pearl. "But I Google almost every website."

But parents and teachers aren't necessarily any better at media literacy: In 2014, Rialto Unified made international headlines when teachers handed out information from a white supremacist website and labeled it as a "credible source" for an assignment on the Holocaust. "Parents rely on one or two sources and don't really check their facts a lot," said Angel Rivera, 16, a junior at Daniel Pearl.

It wasn't always this way. "When we grew up, there were more authoritative sources, and fewer of them. And now there's a plethora of them, and we don't really know," Kaiser said. "I think people are somewhat baffled. Today's students, all of whom were born years after the World Wide Web's birth, have the advantage of being born into this world, even as their elders might find the information onslaught overwhelming." I think there are definitely more web-savvy, app-savvy, technology-savvy kids than adults," Thomas said. "Our goal is, by the time they leave high school, they're media-literate, information-literate."

Media literacy, like so much else, has gotten political in the past year. "I have students looking at Breitbart on their phone and that's their source for facts, and everything else is fake. And other kids are looking at NPR," Kaiser said. "They're in two different worlds." Ultimately, Thomas thinks the current generation of students is up to the challenge of sorting out fact from fiction in the age of "alternative facts" and "fake news."

"The truth is really important to them, but it's also overwhelming," she said. "But they do care and they're engaged in figuring it out. They love to play detective, and they don't like being manipulated: 'This isn't out there because it's funny, it's out there to get you to do something or buy something or believe something.' When you put it to them that way, they respond quite well."

Maybe... "I think it comes down to whether or not you want to know the truth," Rivera said. "If they want to be naive, there's nothing you can do about it."
Some schools now teaching kids how to spot fake news  ROSE LINCOLN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

By Johanna Seltz  GLOBE CORRESPONDENT  MAY 12, 2017

The Republic of Molossia, it turns out, is not a real place — despite an elaborate website complete with a video greeting from “His Excellency, The President,” and links to the country’s history, government agencies, and postage stamps.

Most of the eighth-graders at Cohasset Middle/High School figured out the deception as part of classwork aimed at teaching today’s students how to tell the real from the fake in the digital world. The effort is part of a growing and timely trend in schools — one that began before the latest election season and its aftermath laden with accusations from both sides of information manipulation.

Asked why today’s computer-savvy students need the training, specialists point to a 2016 study at Stanford University that found that “overall, young people’s ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: bleak. Our ‘digital natives’ may be able to flit between Facebook and Twitter while simultaneously uploading a selfie to Instagram and texting a friend. But when it comes to evaluating information that flows through social media channels, they are easily duped.”

Says Barbara Gray, chief librarian at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism who teaches fact-checking to college students and tracks similar efforts at all levels of education: “Media literacy is a civic survival skill.” Bedford public schools Superintendent Jon Sills notes that it’s not only important to teach students how to discern what’s legitimate online, but also for faculty to learn “how best to tackle issues like false news without being politically partisan.”

In Massachusetts, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education doesn’t document what individual schools are doing to increase students’ online detective skills, but it has adopted voluntary “digital literacy” standards that include being able to verify information. And the state has said that high school students should be able “analyze the beneficial and harmful effects of computing innovations,” such as social networking and public media. “They all know how to use their little phones and play games and do Snapchat, but I want them to turn into discerning users of technology,” said Kathleen Cerruti, who worked for 20 years in the software industry before becoming Cohasset Middle/High School’s library media specialist. “With the prevalence of fake news, it’s getting a little trickier now. These skills have to be really honed,” she said.

Cerruti teaches an eighth-grade research class that focuses on how to evaluate websites, using a method called CARS, an acronym for Credibility, Accuracy, Reasonableness, and Support. Students work in pairs, choose two from a list of 13 actual websites, and then evaluate whether they are “good, or no good.” The list includes sites for the Republic of Molossia (fake), History of the Fisher Price Airplane (fake), and How to Build a Campfire (real).

The process involves looking at the website’s domain (a .com has less authority than a .edu, for example), at the author’s credentials, at whether the information is out of date or can be verified elsewhere, and at whether there are red flags like misspellings or links that lead nowhere or to ads. Students also look for clues to bias and whether the website makes sense. “I call it determining treasure or trash,” Cerruti said.

She said the lessons learned are then applied to student research projects — which have ranged from a study of the effect of stormwater runoff on Cohasset Harbor, to cellphone addiction in teens — and all sources have to pass the CARS test. “It’s a necessary skill,” Cerruti said. “It’s extremely critical to being able to navigate their online world.”

Hingham High School principal Paula Girouard McCann said her school librarians have developed a guide “to what is reliable” for students doing research, but added that all teachers work on “helping kids distinguish between fact and fiction. Teaching kids how to read and analyze has always been one of our goals.”

Donna Milani Luther, head of the Inly School in Scituate, a Montessori school that goes from toddler to eighth grade, said there’s an ongoing conversation about what is real and what isn’t in the digital information world. “Kids are getting exposed to a lot of things, bombarded,” she said. “We talk to them about finding that compass, that gut check, that says, ‘If I hear that and my stomach turns, I should double-check it because it’s probably not right.’” She added that the school asks that students’ electronic devices go to their parents’ bedrooms at bedtime.

At Andover High School, media specialist John Berube teaches his students to be skeptical and encourages them to take advantage of well-vetted databases and e-books. “I always emphasize that these have had editors and fact-checkers, and can be relied upon for accuracy and objectivity,” he said. Danvers Public Schools teach Internet safety and research skills from elementary school, and are adding an elective in media literacy at the high school next school year, according to Superintendent Lisa Dana.

David Copeland, a communications professor at Bridgewater State University, spoke recently at the Kingston Public Library about how to recognize “fake news” and avoid passing along bad information. He said that he’s trying to encourage healthy skepticism among his students, but is distressed to find many “have crossed over into cynicism.” “Even fake news has different meanings,” he said. “It started as hoax news, but it’s morphed into news coverage that we don’t agree with. We’re more inclined to believe something that confirms our own world view, so a lot of times I’m trying to get people to say if something seems too good to be true, it’s probably too good to be true.”

Johanna Seltz can be reached at seltzjohanna@gmail.com.
Using Student Narratives to Build Community

By Guest Blogger on April 11, 2017 11:33 AM

With the national conversation on immigration at the forefront of the news, teachers are working to incorporate this discussion into their classrooms. Here is how one teacher, Jennifer Ciok, Social Emotional Learning Specialist at Umoja Student Development Corporation, a non-profit organization in Chicago, Illinois, helps students understand their own personal stories of immigrants.

By guest blogger Jennifer Ciok

Stories make us who we are. They make history come alive in a way that no textbook can, they help us build understanding of, and respect for, our school, country, global community, and each other.

In 2002, I started teaching an immigration unit focusing on the early 1900s. As I would tell my own family’s stories of immigration from Norway in the 1920s, Germany in the 1700s and 1870s, and Denmark in 1910s, I was baffled by the fact that so many of my students did not know how or why their families came to the United States, even though some of them were immigrants themselves.

As I reflected on the early lessons of the unit, I realized that in order to make sense of what we were learning in class, I needed students to know their own stories and to be able to share them in a meaningful way. I wanted to be able to celebrate both the diversity and similarities of our stories around how we all came to be in America. I would tell my students, “We are a nation of stories. We all came from somewhere else and that makes America a place like no other!” With that in mind, I created an oral history project where students had the choice of how to best represent their family’s story.

Students Learn Their Own Immigration Stories

After learning the basics of immigration (push and pull factors, immigration stations in the United States, laws that were in place, and how early immigrants were treated), I sent my students home with a series of questions to ask their family about their immigration to the United States. These included questions from before they left their country, during their journey, and after they settled in their new home. Students who were not first- or second-generation immigrants or did not have enough information to complete the project interviewed a relative about their family history and stories using a significant historical event as the backdrop for their project.

Examples of the immigration project questions included:

- What did you and/or your family enjoy doing together in your/their home country?
- What were the conditions (political, social or economic) in the country from which you/your family emigrated when you/they left? Did the conditions in your country contribute to your reasons for leaving? Why did you/they leave? When did you/they leave?
- How were you/they treated when you/they first arrived in the U.S.? How has that treatment changed?
- If you had to give one piece of advice to someone immigrating to America today, what would it be and why?

Some students get more information than others, but they all learned something in the process and it had the added benefit of opening lines of communication in a time where sometimes those discussions are limited. For the students who were not able to get as much information, we relied on what they could gather and added in what we know from history to piece together their story. If the immigration story was truly not known or could not be researched, then students completed a time period project where students shared a historical event their family found significant in their lifetime and tied it to...
how it impacted their family story. Their stories centered around events like the March on Washington, bus boycotts, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, fighting in World War II, being forced into Japanese internment camps, the Challenger explosion, and even the election of President Obama. These stories served as an interesting parallel to the immigration stories from the same time period.

Presenting Their Story

When the students came back to school, they were ready to get started on their project. Using a storyboard template the students created an outline of a children’s book, memory box, or scrapbook to present their stories. They used a template to write a narrative that would accompany their pictures. Once the students had collected all of their artifacts, created their storybook pictures, and written their narrative script, students used video editing equipment to turn their projects into a digital story that could be shared to a larger audience. English teachers used this project to teach and assess narrative writing, along with public speaking skills. We collaborated on the rubrics so that they could assess the process and I could assess the content.

Lessons Learned

The lessons that came from this project are far reaching. One of the goals of the project was to help students find a personal connection to, and better understanding of, immigration. I wanted them to be able to put themselves into another person’s shoes and really think about what it would mean to leave your home and come to another place. The project led to more open discussions between students and their families, and between families and the school.

Engagement went up as families realized how much the school cared about them and their stories. The project often led students and their families to ask more questions and conduct more research into their stories. I find that when I teach younger siblings of previous students, they often know far more about their families’ immigration stories because the older siblings’ research resulted in continued family learning.

Finally, one of my goals for the project is to encourage students to celebrate and be proud of their heritage. The bravery students had in sharing their personal stories led to greater community and understanding in our class and in the school.

Respect for Immigrants

One of the outcomes of the project that was surprising is the amount of respect that students develop toward their family member(s) who immigrated. At the end of the project, students complete a personal reflection of the project and what they learned. One of the most memorable reflections came in the second year I did this project when a student wrote about his dad’s journey from Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge regime. He wrote, “I finally realize why my dad cannot return to the land that stole his parents and his childhood.” That same student came back to me years later to see if I still had his project and reflection, which affected him so much that he found a volunteer position at a Cambodian museum to help others understand and celebrate his family’s culture.

Another student wrote, “Since America ended up not being as great as my grandmother had envisioned, she always remembered to live the life she chose to the fullest…. She taught me to always think about what can be rather than what could’ve [been].” And yet another shared, “I learned that you’ll face a lot of situations, but you should never give up because at the end, there’s always hope…. My grandma says that, despite our problems, there is still so much courage, goodness, and possibility in each of us.”

We are a nation of immigrants and I definitely think we need to remember the lessons of our ancestors as we continue to navigate our future. These lessons are ones that I know I carry with me into my work with students each day, and they carry forward those same lessons to their families, their communities, and the world.

Connect with Jennifer, Umoja Corp, Center for Global Education, and Heather on Twitter.

Sample of student work courtesy of the author.
Using Historical Fiction to Connect Past and Present

The novels offer more than a good story—they can also be integral to critical-thinking skills, especially during periods of political turmoil.

ANNA DIAMOND

Shanna Johnson, a middle-school language arts teacher in Grand Rapids, Michigan, had just begun teaching the historical-fiction novel *Dragonwing* when it took on added relevance during the 2016 presidential election.

The book follows a young Chinese boy at the turn of the 20th century as he migrates to the United States to live with his father. The context of the story and its setting in San Francisco is the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first major piece of U.S. legislation that restricted immigration and which, in targeting an ethnic group, set the precedent for subsequent restrictive immigration laws. As Johnson pointed out, the book touches on themes of "racism, discrimination, and the anti-immigration attitude of the nation" that uncannily reflect the hostility and divisiveness of the recent election.

These same historical themes and trends came to the forefront over the course of President Donald Trump’s campaign and transition. His surrogates and supporters referenced Japanese American internment as a viable precedent for a possible Muslim registry. Trump loyalists also cheered on his intention to build a wall along the border with Mexico and to deport millions of undocumented immigrants—the latter of which he justified by invoking President Eisenhower’s controversial deportation program, “Operation Wetback.” In his first week in office, Trump signed a now-blocked executive order that halted the admission of all refugees for 120 days, and stopped entry for nationals from seven predominantly Muslim countries for 90 days. The action, whose stay by a U.S. district judge was upheld earlier this month by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, was issued on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, drawing parallels to the time the U.S. turned away Jews fleeing Nazi Germany.

Teaching 1984 in 2016

And just as has happened in past periods of upheaval, the cultural tensions exacerbated by the election have pervaded schools. Immediately following the election, there was an uptick in incidents of hate crimes and hate speech around the country, and teachers reported an escalation of harassment in schools as well. A survey by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), with responses from over 10,000 educators, found that “eight in 10 report heightened anxiety on the part of marginalized students” and “four in 10 have heard derogatory language directed at students of color, Muslims, immigrants, and people based on gender or sexual orientation.” In marked contrast to the increase in anti-black offenses after President Obama’s 2008 election, as Carly Berwick explained in *The Atlantic*, now “the hate crimes and bias attacks are being conducted in the name of the president-elect—not against one.”

What is it like for teachers, such as Johnson, and their students to read historical fiction at this discordant time—a political moment that summons the label “unprecedented” at about the same rate as the number of historical analogies stirred up by the Trump election? How are teachers best able to help students make sense of the many historical comparisons and the controversial issues facing the nation?

For elementary- and middle-school students, historical fiction can provide a helpful way into difficult subjects—for example, the Holocaust (*Number the Stars*), the civil-rights movement (*The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*), or slavery and racism in America’s founding (*The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation*). Maureen Costello, the director of the SPLC’s Teaching Tolerance initiative, explained in a phone interview that, for certain topics such as slavery, teachers can employ the genre to “talk about the subject in a child appropriate way.” But beyond providing an introduction to troubling issues, historical fiction can offer the chance, if taught conscientiously, to engage students with multiple perspectives, which are essential to understanding history; to help students comprehend historical patterns and political analogies; and to introduce students to historiography—how history is written and studied.

Successful historical fiction makes past events come alive in a more inviting or personal way than textbooks can. Linda Levstik, a professor in the University of Kentucky’s Department of Curriculum and Instruction, studies how children engage with historical thinking. The combination of a good book and factual story, she said in an interview, can help "embed history in a
critical-thinking skills to history and expose students to a variety of opinions. Sara Schwebel, a professor at the University of
Lesvick says they are also more susceptible to a well-written book with a shaky grasp of history than a poorly written book
explained, they will connect strongly with the perspective they read, and may initially reject alternative points of view.
However, teaching historical fiction has its inherent challenges: Kids, like the rest of us, love a good story. As Levstik
History is a narrative after all, whether the arguments made are in standardized textbooks or fictionalized accounts.
reflecting “who we are as a nation and how we came to be who we are” while paying attention to “the reality of each student’s
Perspective into the experience of another.
Humanizing history not only means it’s easier for students to connect the historical dots, research shows that it
also encourages empathy. Being told a story via historical fiction helps students identify with the characters’ points of view,
and that ability to recognize different outlooks, Levstik explained, is an essential historical skill: “How is it we understand
how the world looked to other people? And how do you get kids to care enough to do the work of figuring out somebody’s
perspective [back then]?”
In that vein, humanizing history means making it recognizable for all students. Rudine Sims Bishop, professor emerita
of education at Ohio State University, wrote a seminal article in 1990 that advocated for increased diversity in children’s
literature. Bishop presented a model of literature working as mirrors, which reflect and affirm readers’ experience; windows,
which provide insight into other’s experiences; and sliding glass doors, which allow readers the ability to move from their
perspective into the experience of another.
Not only do minority students need stories with people who are like them, she argued, a lack of diversity in literature also
negatively affects the majority group by reflecting back only what they know. Bishop wrote, “Children from dominant social
groups … need books that will help them understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in, and their place as a
member of just one group, as well as their connection to all other humans.”
Terrie Epstein, a professor of education at Hunter College, studies the differing frameworks with which students of various
races and ethnicities approach the history they’re taught in school. Her research found that minority students tend to have
a more skeptical view of textbooks and traditional historical narratives. For any narrative, whether historical or otherwise,
Epstein says students who don’t see their stories reflected are usually “less likely to give the source credibility than a source
that has their story in it.”
Psychology studies show that children develop a strong sense of fairness at an early age and understand when they are
receiving less than others. Kids in some countries, including the U.S., have been shown to have “advantageous-inequity
aversion,” meaning that they’re bothered when they receive more than others. As Levstik and her colleague Keith Barton
recommend in their book, Teaching History for the Common Good, teachers can build on students’ strong sense of justice
to connect discussions of historical events to contemporary civics and issues, guided by the question “what can we do to help
the world function better for everyone?”
And while teachers must obviously be wary of making false equivalencies or grand generalizations, understanding history
more thoroughly than what’s offered in a textbook leads students to an educated examination of current events. For example,
referring to possible comparisons with the treatment of Japanese Americans during the internment, Levstik explains the
need for teachers to ask: “When somebody says they’re going to lock up people on the basis of their religion, their ethnic
background, their point of origin, what does that look like in our history?”
Reflecting on the past’s relationship to the present is a priority for some of the instructors I contacted, including Mikko
Jokela, a seventh-grade history and language-arts teacher in Berkeley, California, who says he uses historical fiction to
engage with multiple perspectives to help his students become better-informed citizens. In his classroom, students focus on
analyzing “who we are as a nation and how we came to be who we are” while paying attention to “the reality of each student’s
life and the role of the U.S. in the world.” In an email interview, Jokela wrote: “Historical fiction (along with entertaining
non-fiction) is a component of teaching students “to have the ability to discern truth from falsehood, propaganda from
fact.”
History is a narrative after all, whether the arguments made are in standardized textbooks or fictionalized accounts.
However, teaching historical fiction has its inherent challenges: Kids, like the rest of us, love a good story. As Levstik
explained, they will connect strongly with the perspective they read, and may initially reject alternative points of view.
Lesvick says they are also more susceptible to a well-written book with a shaky grasp of history than a poorly written book
that contains solid historical research. But their initial, limited reactions can be challenged when instructors introduce
critical-thinking skills to history and expose students to a variety of opinions. Sara Schwebel, a professor at the University of
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South Carolina and the author of *Child-Sized History: Fictions of the Past in U.S. Classrooms*, sees historical fiction as an opportunity to introduce historiography, and to counter the often static and monolithic view of the past.

In a telephone interview, Schwebel spelled out the value of an “interdisciplinary approach where students and teachers together engage with the novel as literature, enjoying the story, thinking about the language, thinking about characters but then stepping back from historical fiction as a work of lit and considering the novel in fact as work of history that’s making a historical argument in addition to telling a story.” For young readers, this genre can serve as a starting point from which teachers and students put novels with different accounts and points of view in conversation with each other to create a more comprehensive understanding.

While this multidimensional approach to reading might sound challenging to younger readers, it aligns with the Common Core guidelines, the set of academic standards adopted by most states, which recommend textual complexity. As Schwebel pointed out, fiction is usually more complex than textbooks, and the overlay of historical arguments on works of fiction can offer a deeper and more nuanced perspective for students. In fact, one Common Core literature standard details that middle-school readers should “compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history.”

History is a narrative after all, whether the information presented or arguments made are in standardized textbooks or fictionalized accounts. The ability to decipher and interrogate historical assertions—by comparing, contrasting, and fact-checking them—is a vital tool, and one that it’s never too early to start learning.

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