

Evaluating Historical Fiction for Children and Teens

by Kathleen Ernst

“I love the idea of integrating novels into our social studies curriculum,” a teacher once told me. “But I don’t do it very because I have no way of knowing whether the author got his facts right.” Since I write historical fiction for children and teens, I appreciate her concern. Getting the actual facts about a given time and place right is a big order. Novelists must consider micro-details, adequately describing stuff (hairstyles, ships, toys) and processes (loading a flintlock musket, cooking in ancient Rome). And we often need to convey an accurate sense of sweeping historical events, such as war, mass immigration, or the Great Depression.

Those things, though, are only part of the challenge. Equally important, and sometimes overlooked, is the need to convey the flavor of the social norms of a given time and place.

Creating characters who interest modern kids but are still true reflections of their own period can be one of the biggest challenges we writers face. Almost a decade ago Anne Scott McLeod wrote in *Hornbook*, “Too much historical fiction for children is stepping around large slabs of known reality to tell pleasant but historically doubtful stories.” (*Hornbook*, Jan.-Feb., 1998.) A quick scan of any bookstore shelves can turn up titles featuring characters who are appealing but remarkably anachronistic for the setting.

No busy classroom teacher, school librarian, or home-schooling parent can assess every new title with a scholar’s eye. After analyzing countless historical novels, though, I’ve realized that my favorite authors imbed certain reassurances within their work. Although I may know nothing about a novel’s time and place, these “markers” signal that the author has probably done her homework. By recognizing a few of these markers, educators can become more comfortable evaluating books for their students.

So, what do I look for?

1. The cast of characters includes people who provide different perspectives on a challenging issue.

Sympathetic characters who hold different beliefs about a topic or problem help students understand the complexity of historical events.

2. If a character does something that modern readers find laudable, but that took unusual thought, courage, or conviction for the time and place, the character's motivation for that action is clear. I'd love to think, for example, that a wealthy girl on an 1850's-era plantation, raised to believe that slavery is acceptable, might decide to help slaves escape on the Underground Railroad. But if she does, I want to understand why.

3. A character's commendable action, if unusual for the setting, has consequences. Sometimes young people do find the strength to make a brave or difficult life choice. It's unrealistic to think, though, that they won't lose something in the process.

4. If a character acts in a manner modern readers find objectionable, that character's motivation is also clear. Characters who are one-dimensional "bad guys" are easy to hate. Understanding what made them that way makes them much more interesting. And these characters sometimes provide the best prompts for discussions about contemporary people and problems.

5. The author provides specific, sensory details that signal the depth of their knowledge about this time and place. Research is like an iceberg: only the tip may show, but there is great depth beneath the surface. An author who has immersed himself in a particular setting and subject can't tell all he knows. Instead, he carefully chooses specific, sensory details to evoke a vivid, fresh sense of the period.

6. Similes, metaphors, and other examples of figurative language emerge organically from the setting. A strong command of language is a plus in any book, but especially so in historical fiction. Whether in dialogue or exposition, every image is consistent with the character's worldview and experience.

7. The past is not presented as simpler or sweeter than the present. Many people have romantic images of the past. Escapist novels written in that spirit may, arguably, have a place on some adult bookshelves. However, they do a disservice to children who might be experiencing their first glimpse into a particular era through fiction.

8. Gender roles and expectations are clear. Socio-economic status, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and other factors affect the freedoms a character might have, especially strong female protagonists.

9. The resolution is at least hopeful, but the limitations of the period are still clear. Some plot strands might not be resolved as ideally as readers would wish.

10. Through a note in the book, or on a website, the author helps readers sort fact from fiction. This information can inspire a student to explore further on their own.

My favorite historical novels feature complex characters struggling within the limitations of their time. The cast includes sympathetic characters with multiple perspectives about important issues. Gender and socio-economic status affects what characters can realistically do and say. Although books end on a hopeful note, nothing is ever tied up sweetly with a pink bow. And the author is so steeped in her topic that a strong sense of period and place emerges within sensory details and figurative language.

The good news is that many authors are writing superb historical novels for young readers. With a little searching, you can find books that will help students imagine the past, gain insight into historical events, and draw connections to current affairs. Happy reading!

