

# ***Critical Comprehension of Social Studies Texts***

by Glenn DeVoogd

**G**eorge Orwell's adage that "history is written by the winners" is often repeated in classrooms around the country. But the knowledge that our standard history is only one version of past events is rarely acted upon when considering alternative pedagogies or content. All too often, we educators acquiesce, repeating the winner's version of social studies written in the textbooks and failing to recognize that we are not fulfilling our pledge to a country that, ideally, strives to treat people fairly regardless of their beliefs, power, or socioeconomic status.

Examples of this "winner's bias" in textbooks are common, but since we are so familiar with history as it's been taught over the years, they are hard to recognize. Take, for example, one line in a typical eighth-grade social studies text that describes the death of approximately fifteen million native people in South and North America as a result of disease when Europeans first explored and immigrated to the New World. There are whole chapters in the same book that describe exploration of the Americas and the European–American movement to the western territories of what is now the United States, but only one line concerning the fifteen million natives who died during and as a result of this expansion. The fact that so little is written concerning this extremely important fact in U.S. history is evidence of bias in this social studies text.

It is unjust to Native Americans to minimize or to avoid discussing the toll of disease shortly after the first European immigration. When one begins to think in this manner, other problematic issues inherent in the way we typically think about our history begin to emerge—both in relation to issues of fair representation and issues of truth. Most U.S. history books discuss Pre-Columbian Native Americans in several chapters, but issues of power and

\*\*\*\*\*

*Excerpted from **RHI: Promoting Active Citizenship**, a publication of Random House, Inc. To request a complimentary copy of RHI, email [highschool@randomhouse.com](mailto:highschool@randomhouse.com), subject: "RHI: Citizenship"*

perspective are given limited consideration. Typical texts do not explore the inevitable effects that the sudden weakening and deaths of so many native people had on the rapid immigration and expansion of European immigrants in the U.S.—and how that makes our country so different from British colonies in Africa or India. In contrast to their experiences in Africa or India, European Americans had a relatively easy time moving in and homesteading the land vacated by the natives. By avoiding this topic, some social studies texts also leave other important issues unaddressed, such as the unintended negative consequences of easy travel and the evolution of diseases. These issues are not only of concern to Native Americans but to all people.

This emphasis on the “winner’s perspective” presents a skewed view of history that allows readers to make incorrect assumptions about the identity and character of European and Americans—both past and present. These incorrect assumptions allow readers to construct a view of themselves and others that may lead to further oppression. Therefore, it is important not to limit students to one particular version of history. Instead, in order to dismantle forms of institutionalized oppression, they should be allowed to explore other perspectives that give voice to those marginalized by society. Critical literacy is an approach to comprehension that encourages the reader to identify and dismantle the perspectives of power and the biases in texts.

### **Critical Comprehension**

One of the main principles of critical literacy, or critical comprehension, is its demand for an honest consideration of explanations and stories that give equal weight to the perspectives of the poor and marginalized. Critical literacy is a term used to describe the way that readers (and viewers) can challenge texts, films, conversations, and pictures that privilege the perspective of the status-quo “winners” in histories and in stories. This dialogue with the text is used to challenge the defenders of the status-quo system who support a history that marginalizes people on the basis of ethnic group, gender, or even philosophy. In the end, the goal of a critical literacy approach is to actively pursue the ideal of

\*\*\*\*\*

“liberty and justice for all.” Practitioners seek to reach this goal by encouraging free thought and by transforming existing systems to provide access to alternative points of view.

### **Skill, Practice, Desire and Controversial Texts as Prerequisites**

There is no guaranteed lesson plan that will result in critical comprehension; rather, teachers should focus both on establishing the classroom conditions for critical work to take place, and on ensuring students are in the correct mindset to perform the work. First, critical literacy requires that a reader or listener be open to understanding the content and perspective presented. Teachers will find that many existing practices can help to reach this first goal. Most texts on reading comprehension cover a range of techniques aimed at helping students achieve a more complete understanding of text—including ways to talk about ideas, graphic organizers, and, for narrative texts, story maps.

Secondly, instead of merely accepting the storyline and automatically adopting the author’s perspective, readers must enter into a kind of challenging dialogue with the text—looking around it and behind it, not for what is in the text but for what is left unsaid. This dialogue, like any good conversation, starts with an acknowledgement of what the author is saying. What are the messages of the text? Who or what is named in the text? Why did the author choose to write about these topics? Who is missing from the text? How does the text portray marginalized people? Who or what style of life looks good or bad? What kind of work does this book do in the world?

Like most patterns of thought, the ability to approach a text as one of many possible perspectives on a topic is not an easy habit to acquire. To effectively integrate this kind of challenging dialogue into a student’s repertoire of skills, the student must practice dialoguing with texts over many months.

To foster this type of critical analysis, teachers must allow students extra time to get acquainted with the story, and then more time to begin challenging

\*\*\*\*\*

*Excerpted from **RHI: Promoting Active Citizenship**, a publication of Random House, Inc. To request a complimentary copy of RHI, email [highschool@randomhouse.com](mailto:highschool@randomhouse.com), subject: “RHI: Citizenship”*

the inherent assumptions of the text. In total, the reader must not only be able to summarize and analyze the ideas in the text, but also want to go beyond the simple summary or analysis and challenge the author's choices and intentions. To be successful, critical literacy has to be interesting and engaging for students so they have the desire to participate.

For example, after reading a description of Andrew Jackson as an advocate for the common man in a social studies textbook, students often find it refreshing to challenge that stance by thinking about his attacks on Native Americans and his advocacy for their removal, culminating in a forced march west in which thousands of natives died. It is also interesting for students to challenge typical depictions of Thomas Jefferson as a promoter of liberty and independence by thinking about the implication of his slave ownership. Students also get interested in rewriting their history textbook when exploring what the chapters in such a book might look like if African Americans, Native Americans, or Mexican Americans were writing the textbook. These new ways of thinking not only make history fascinating and sometimes shocking, but also tap into adolescents' natural urges to challenge authority, reject the status quo, and make the world a better place.

Finally, although critical perspectives can be taken on just about any text, it's best to start by encouraging critical literacy with interesting texts that contain some controversial content. In this way, readers will naturally be attracted to the text in question because of its inherent interest. They will also be able to more easily identify the author's intent; what is favored and marginalized; what other perspectives are available on the topic; and what action to take.

## **APPROACHES TO ACQUIRING THE HABIT OF CRITICAL COMPREHENSION**

Though it is appropriate to suggest ways to get started thinking about how to free up the minds of your students in social studies, it is dangerous to suggest that teaching approaches which are successful in one setting with one teacher will

\*\*\*\*\*

*Excerpted from **RHI: Promoting Active Citizenship**, a publication of Random House, Inc. To request a complimentary copy of RHI, email [highschool@randomhouse.com](mailto:highschool@randomhouse.com), subject: "RHI: Citizenship"*

be equally successful in other settings. Any approach described below will be only a starting place to work on critical comprehension.

### **Making Challenge a Natural Habit**

Many people naturally acquire skills like critical analysis just by having conversations with people who are proficient at politely challenging the status quo. When this “knowledgeable other” makes critically astute comments over time, listeners may eventually acquire similar patterns of thought. Whether this happens over the dinner table, at cafés, or during long trips in the car, a skilled critical thinker can affect the thought patterns and responses of a willing learner. Similarly, teachers who model critically literate behavior as they teach will effectively set the stage for classes rich in critical thinking.

For example, after reading a text to the class about how the cold war was a competition between the communist and capitalistic economic systems, a teacher might challenge the ideas in the book by providing a counter-textual argument suggesting that capitalism and communism were only pretexts for first-world nations to dominate developing countries, taking out their raw materials, profiting from their cheap labor, and acquiring a market to sell one’s goods in. If this kind of challenging occurs in a single lesson or a week’s worth of lessons in a classroom, students will probably not integrate critical literacy into their daily skill set. However, if teachers use the skills frequently when responding to daily information, students will learn these techniques naturally.

### **Problem-Posing Questions**

As efforts to introduce critical literacy into classes progress, one may wish to provide students with a standard question or list of questions that will help to identify power relations in a text:

1. What or who is favored in this text?
2. What or who is marginalized?
3. What are other perspectives on this topic?
4. What action would you take to create justice?

\*\*\*\*\*

*Excerpted from **RHI: Promoting Active Citizenship**, a publication of Random House, Inc. To request a complimentary copy of RHI, email [highschool@randomhouse.com](mailto:highschool@randomhouse.com), subject: “RHI: Citizenship”*

These questions could be used, for example, when examining the ideas in the movie *300*, an action/adventure film about ancient Greek Spartans who fought to stop an overwhelming Persian army in Thermopylae in 480 b.c., a topic sometimes studied in sixth-grade classrooms. Based on the questions listed above, it appears that proud warriors and the Greeks are favored, whereas making peace, negotiation, and Persians are marginalized. Other perspectives about the Spartans might have depicted the combative and ruthless life of King Leonidas culminating when his family grieves his beheading in a battle after which his head is paraded around on top of a pole. In contrast to the original story, this alternative version of the story foregrounds the disgrace and sadness that surrounds war, thus questioning the idea of war as an effective solution for resolve conflicts between people. Students might also examine the Persian King Xerxes' perspective as he seeks to avenge what he perceives as the casual assassination of the peace negotiators he sent to the Spartan King Leonidas. To answer question number four, students might contrast the nature of war with the movie's depiction of war and present their findings to the class and to their families. They might also write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper (or to a blog) concerning the role of the movie in glorifying such a horrible human event.

The questions and resulting discussions can be powerful tools to aid active viewers and readers in comprehending not only the literal meaning of the text, but also in helping them recognize the work that texts do to persuade people to believe in certain ways.

### **Multiple Characters in History**

While history textbooks and historical fiction can provide a useful starting point for an understanding of historical events, teachers and students can continue by investigating the perspectives of a range of different kinds of people for any single historical event. Students can be assigned different characters to play, and then small groups can be assigned to assemble data for their characters.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Excerpted from **RHI: Promoting Active Citizenship**, a publication of Random House, Inc. To request a complimentary copy of RHI, email [highschool@randomhouse.com](mailto:highschool@randomhouse.com), subject: "RHI: Citizenship"*

Throughout their research, students should prepare some diary entries, a fact sheet, and a reference list of primary and secondary sources. Depending on the age and skill of the students, teachers will have to either provide information for them, give them a list of Web sites, videos, and readings, or let students go to explore the library and Web on their own. In most cases, if teachers allow students to explore the Web, they will have to guide the students on how to search using a search engine like Google, Ask.com, or Yahoo.

After teachers provide some mini-lessons about searching for information, organizing the information, and writing up the different formats of the information, they should meet with the different groups of students to assess their progress and to provide encouragement and guidance. This activity would culminate in a short skit or oral presentation, in which students would dress up as their characters and perform in front of the class.

For example, if a fourth-grade class wants to study the California gold rush, the teacher could allow students to choose from among different perspectives on that time period, each of which would be represented by a distinct character—a Chinese man, a Native American, a Californio woman, a teenage girl from Boston who came by ship, Joaquin Murietta, a shop owner, and a man in search of gold. If the class forms a rubric on what makes a quality assignment for each of the different segments referenced above, they will be much more thoughtful and goal oriented when they do their gold rush character assignments. To wrap things up, do a dress rehearsal in front of the whole class and then invite parents in to see what the class is doing.

The teacher and the students should make comments about each of the different characters during the presentations so that the class begins to see that history can be told from many different perspectives. By having students in each group play the part of the different ethnic groups and genders, while encouraging them to focus on the differences between the characters, students will be more likely to envision history in multi-perspective, complex ways, thus avoiding the

\*\*\*\*\*

linear (and frankly, suspect) single-perspective treatment that social studies texts often present.

### **Juxtaposing Different Perspectives with Books during Thematic Literature Studies**

During reading times, students can learn about different perspectives by reading and listening to several different books on one historical topic. Famous historical topics, such as the relationships between native and European populations during colonial America, might be a good way to start such a thematic literature study because of the wealth of literature available on such subjects.

First, when teachers select books to read to the students, the book should be one that describes a story about a historical topic from a distinct perspective. Then teachers should provide book sets of other titles that offer different perspectives about the same historical event. After the teacher has given a book talk on each of the titles and has allowed the students to choose one of the titles to read, the teacher can then rotate to meet with small groups of students, guiding them through the reading of the books and preparing them for student-led discussion groups such as literature circles.

For the first twenty minutes each day, read and comment on the text you've chosen to present, modeling what you want students to do when they get into their literature circles. As you're reading, ask questions that disrupt the author's perspective and provoke discussion in a student-led discussion group. Most of the time students could meet every other day to discuss interesting issues in their own book, but every week the students from each group should pair up with a buddy and present a summary of their book to help inspire understanding. This summary should be followed with a discussion about the differences between the perspectives presented in their book and the perspectives presented in the books the others are reading. In this way, the students get to talk about

\*\*\*\*\*

each of the different perspectives on a historical event and understand the historical events in complex ways.

For example, *Trouble River* by Betsy Byars would be a good choice to read aloud. In that book, a boy named Dewey and his grandmother escape attacking natives and float down a raft on the Mississippi. The other titles should have different perspectives on the relationships between Native Americans and European Americans. A book that describes the cooperative yet strained relationship between two boys is *Sign of the Beaver* by Elizabeth Speare. Another reading group could read a couple of shorter books such as *Blue Feather's Dream by Knight*, which describes the natives fears of being pushed out of their homeland. All of these books tell different stories about the relationships between European and Native Americans during colonial times. Taken as a whole, they will give students a sophisticated view of the people's lives during that period.

## **Conclusion**

To prepare students to quickly analyze and evaluate the large amount of information available to them in social studies, teachers should work actively toward helping students develop and hone their critical comprehension skills. If schools only teach the social studies content typically found in standard textbooks, they are leaving students vulnerable to manipulation by texts, movies, or media that may seek to control popular opinion for their own purposes. Schools need to prepare students not just to learn information, but to learn strategies that will help them understand the perspectives behind the way the information is presented and what other perspectives may exist. These tools will not only help close the achievement gap, but they will also be a step in helping all Americans live out the principles of their pledge for "liberty and justice for all."

\*\*\*\*\*

***About The Writer***

GLENN L. DeVOOGD *serves as a professor at California State University, Fresno, where he teaches courses in literacy development, children's literature, and research methodology. Dr. DeVoogd co-authored Critical Literacy: Enhancing Student Comprehension of Texts which is published by Scholastic. A graduate of Muskegon High School, Hope College, and Michigan State University, Dr. DeVoogd taught elementary school in East Lansing for sixteen years.*

**REFERENCES**

Byers, B. (1989). *Trouble river*. New York: Puffin.

Knight. (1998). *Blue Feather's Dream: The dawn of colonial America*. New York: Troll.

Leistyna, P. & Woodrum, A. (1996). Context and Culture: What is critical pedagogy? In P. Leistyna, A Woodrum and S. A. Sherblom *Breaking free: The transformative power of critical pedagogy*.

Speare, E. G. (1999). *Sign of the beaver*. New York: Yearling.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Suggested Reading

**Operation Homecoming:** *Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front, in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families*

Edited by Andrew Carroll

Encouraged by such authors as Tom Clancy, Mark Bowden, Bobbie Ann Mason, Tobias Wolff, Jeff Shaara, and Marilyn Nelson, American military personnel and their loved ones wrote candidly about what they saw, heard, and felt while in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as on the home front.

Random House, HC, 978-1-4000-6562-2, 416 pp., \$26.95

**9 OF 1:** *A Window to the World*

by Oliver Chin

Foreword by Phoebe Gloeckner

In this graphic novel that helps teens make sense of world events, nine fictional high school students reflect on the variety of feelings about the events of September 11.

Frog, Ltd., TR, 978-1-58394-072-3, 112 pp., \$12.95

**Journey from The Land Of No:** *A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran*

by Roya Hakakian

Roya Hakakian recalls her childhood and adolescence in prerevolutionary Iran with candor and verve. The result is a beautifully written coming-of-age story about one girl's attempt to find an authentic voice of her own at a time of cultural closing and repression.

Reader's Guide Available

Three Rivers Press, TR, 978-0-609-81030-9, 272 pp., \$13.00

**Absent**

by Betool Khedairi

Translated by Muhayman Jamil

Told from a young woman's perspective, *Absent* is a novel about Iraqi families struggling to survive during the sanctions in Baghdad.

Teacher's Guide Available

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7742-4, 240 pp., \$13.95

**In The Country of Men**

by Hisham Matar

*2006 Man Booker Prize Shortlist*

"A poetic and powerful account. . . resonant with the details of a Libyan childhood." — *The Wall Street Journal*

Dial Press, HC, 978-0-385-34042-7, 256 pp., \$22.00

Paperback coming February 2008. Do not order before 2/28/2008.

Dial Press, TR, 978-0-385-34043-4, 256 pp., \$12.00

\*\*\*\*\*

**Lay That Trumpet in Our Hands**

by Susan Carol McCarthy

Inspired by real events, *Lay That Trumpet in Our Hands* is a wise and luminous story about a northern family, a southern town, and the senseless murder that sparks an extraordinary act of courage.

Bantam, TR, 978-0-553-38103-0, 288 pp., \$14.00

**Inheriting The Holy Land: An American's Search for Hope in the Middle East**

by Jennifer Miller

In this coming-of-age memoir, Miller presents her perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through interviews with young Israelis and Palestinians and conversations with officials involved in the Middle East.

Teacher's Guide Available

Ballantine, TR, 978-0-345-46925-0, 320 pp., \$14.95

**Enrique's Journey**

by Sonia Nazario

In this astonishing true story, award-winning journalist Sonia Nazario recounts the unforgettable odyssey of a Honduran boy who braves unimaginable hardship and peril to reach his mother in the United States.

Teacher's Guide Available

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7178-1, 336 pp., \$14.95

**My Jim: A Novel**

by Nancy Rawles

*Winner 2006: ALA Alex Award*

*Winner 2006: New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age*

A nuanced critique of the great American novel, *My Jim* is a haunting and inspiring story about freedom, longing, and the remarkable endurance of love, as told by the wife of one of Mark Twain's most controversial characters.

Teacher's Guide Available

Three Rivers Press, TR, 978-1-4000-5401-5, 192 pp., \$12.95

**Last Night I Dreamed of Peace**

by Dang Thuy Tram

Translated by Andrew X. Pham

A story of hope during the height of the Vietnam War, *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* is an extraordinary document that narrates one woman's personal and political struggles.

Teacher's Guide Available

Visit [www.ThuyTram.com](http://www.ThuyTram.com): dynamic interactive website featuring discussion/study guide, message board, Q&A, historical timeline, maps, and cultural context.

Harmony, HC, 978-0-307-34737-4, 256 pp., \$19.95

\*\*\*\*\*

<http://www.randomhouse.com/highschool/RHI/>

**Blood Done Sign My Name: A True Story**

by Tim Tyson

*A 2004 National Book Critics Circle Award Finalist*

*“Blood Done Sign My Name is a most important book and one of the most powerful meditations on race in America that I have ever read.” — Cleveland Plain Dealer*

Three Rivers Press, TR, 978-1-4000-8311-4, 368 pp., \$14.00

\*\*\*\*\*

Excerpted from **RHI: Promoting Active Citizenship**, a publication of Random House, Inc. To request a complimentary copy of RHI, email [highschool@randomhouse.com](mailto:highschool@randomhouse.com), subject: “RHI: Citizenship”