

Why Historical Fiction Belongs in Your Classroom

by Michelle Moran

Historical novels teach psychology, geography, history, and English literacy, all in one addictively entertaining package. But getting today's students into the habit of reading can be tricky—especially when the pages of a novel have to compete with technological advances such as iPhones, MP3 players, PlayStation, and DVDs. After six years of teaching tenth graders, I discovered that the most powerful tool in creating a culture of reading was my classroom library, which began as a collection of books that I had personally read and enjoyed. Each month I would put aside money for books that students requested, and over time my library grew from a collection of a hundred books to nearly seven hundred. Occasionally, a book or two would go missing, but the important thing was that books were being taken home, read, dog-eared, devoured—and English was becoming an exciting subject rather than a purgatory of grammar worksheets.

For many of my tenth graders, it was historical novels that had them coming to me even after the school day had ended. They wanted to ask if Henry VIII had *really* sent Anne Boleyn to the chopping block after failing to give him a son; if three hundred Greeks had *really* slayed eighteen thousand Persian warriors before being killed themselves, as depicted in Steven Pressfield's *Gates of Fire*. I wondered: if their reading at home sparked such enthusiasm, why not extend it to the curriculum as well? Here, then, are a few ideas that have worked in my classroom, or in those I saw firsthand.

Geography Historical fiction authors all use geography to place their novels on the world stage. James Michener's historical fiction does a superb job of evoking a sense of place in time. As a semester project, ask students to do extended research on a particular region or country. They will then have three responsibilities: First, read the James Michener novel that addresses their region

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(such as *The Source* for Israel, *The Covenant* for South Africa, and *Utah* for the forty-fifth state). Second, give a short presentation to the class, describing the ten most interesting facts, ideas, or events they came across (a large-scale, detailed map or diorama of the novel would greatly enhance this talk, and you may want to make this a requirement). Third, and most difficult, write a ten-page “missing chapter,” where the characters in the novel interact during an event that Michener did *not* cover—the beauty of this project is that the students must first learn their country’s history before they can spot what is missing.

World History From Lisa See’s look at the lives of nineteenth-century Chinese women in her novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, to my own novel *Nefertiti*, about the Egyptian queen who was nearly erased from history, historical fiction authors have crossed the globe in their books. I have seen historical fiction used in the classroom to spark debates about politics, religion, and power. There are as many lesson plans for teaching historical fiction in the world history classroom as there are history books. If a teacher decides to assign a novel about ancient Egypt, for example, students can explore the Egyptians’ beliefs about the afterlife and the cosmos. As an enrichment exercise, the teacher may want to team up with a biology class to look more closely at DNA testing, organ storage, and mummification. And what about having a physics or mathematics teacher talk about tomb and pyramid construction? This type of team-teaching can work wonders in helping students see how history is cross-curricular.

European History For a European history unit, what about taking on the Napoleonic Wars by using Bernard Cornwell’s *Richard Sharpe* series? If your class has twenty-four students or fewer, then the prolific Cornwell can keep them supplied with a different novel apiece. Each student can briefly tell the story of his or her particular novel in the series, proceeding in chronological order from *Sharpe’s Tiger* (Seringapatam, India, 1799) to *Sharpe’s Ransom* (Peninsular Campaign, 1813). As a geographical addition, how about a large-scale mural or map where students come together and retrace the flow of assaults, voyages, and battles from the entire series?

English Literature From the time I adapted historical fiction into my curriculum, I saw a significant change in the way my students began approaching their history classes. Teachers started asking me what I had done to create such avid history learners when history wasn't the subject I was teaching. And that is the brilliance of well-written fiction. Teachers who assign historical novels are allowing students to engage not just with literature, but with history, geography, and often science as well. There are dozens of creative units for historical fiction. After reading a novel, why not ask your students to draw a comparison of what is historically accurate with what represents artistic license? Students can then adapt this information into an author's "afterword" for the book. In another writing exercise, a teacher might ask the students to rewrite a scene from the point of view of a minor character. And if the novel is set overseas, why not have the students create a glossary of the foreign words that the author has used?

If students present their work, expect and encourage vigorous debate. After all, that's what we're here for. Oh, and to get paid to read and talk about the books we love. Not a bad deal at all.

About the Writer

Michelle Moran taught English literature for six years at Rialto High School, part of a low-income school district in California where the majority of the population consists of English language learners. Her debut work, Nefertiti: A Novel, was released in July 2007 by Crown. Visit her Web site at www.michellemoran.com.

By Michelle Moran:

Nefertiti: A Novel

by Michelle Moran

Love, betrayal, political unrest, plague, and religious conflict—*Nefertiti* brings ancient Egypt to life in vivid detail. Fast-paced and historically accurate, it is the dramatic story of two unforgettable women living through a remarkable period in history. “Beautifully written and completely engrossing, this first novel should enjoy wide readership.” —*Library Journal*

Crown, HC, 978-0-307-38146-0, 480 pp., \$24.95

Suggested Reading in Historical Fiction

The Clan of the Cave Bear

by Jean M. Auel

Through Auel’s magnificent storytelling we are taken back to the dawn of modern humans, and with a girl named Ayla we are swept up in the harsh and beautiful Ice Age.

Bantam, TR, 978-0-553-38167-2, 480 pp., \$14.95

Bantam, MM, 978-0-553-25042-8, 528 pp., \$7.99

The March: A Novel

by E.L. Doctorow

Winner of The National Book Critics Circle Award

Winner of The Pen/Faulkner Award

“An Iliad-like portrait of war as a primeval human affliction . . . [welds] the personal and the mythic into a thrilling and poignant story.”—*The New York Times*

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7615-1, 384 pp., \$14.95

Random House, HC, 978-0-375-50671-0, 384 pp., \$25.95

Random House Audio, Unabridged CD, 978-0-7393-2135-5, \$39.95

Teacher’s Guide Available

The Gates of Rome Emperor: Book 1

by Conn Iggulden

This is Book one in a series of four which *Booklist* magazine hailed as a “...highly (and authentically) detailed, fast-paced, and elaborately plotted saga based on the life of the greatest Roman of them all, Julius Caesar.”

Dell, MM, 978-0-440-24094-5, 480 pp., \$6.99

Genghis: Birth of an Empire by Conn Iggulden

“Iggulden turns to another of history’s great conquerors, Genghis Khan, for a new series of brilliantly imagined and addictive historical fiction. . . . [He] weaves a spellbinding story of an exotic and “unforgiving land” and the enigmatic young man. . . who sets out to tame it. This is historical fiction of the first order.” — *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

Delacorte, HC, 978-0-385-33951-3, 400 pp., \$25.00

Paperback forthcoming February 2008. Do not order before 2/26/2008.

Dell, MM, 978-0-440-24390-8, 592 pp., \$6.99

The Walking Drum

by Louis L’Amour

L’Amour has been best known for his ability to capture the spirit and drama of the authentic American West. Now he guides his readers to an even more distant frontier—the enthralling lands of the 12th century.

Bantam, MM, 978-0-553-28040-1, 480 pp., \$5.99

Lay That Trumpet in Our Hands

by Susan Carol McCarthy

Winner, 2003 Chautauqua South Fiction Award

Inspired by real events, this 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

Teacher’s Guide Available

The Last Town on Earth

by Thomas Mullen

Winner 2007: James Fenimore Cooper Prize for Historical Fiction

Set against the backdrop of one of the most virulent epidemics that America ever experienced—the 1918 flu epidemic—Thomas Mullen’s powerful, sweeping first novel is a tale of morality in a time of upheaval.

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7592-5, 432 pp., \$13.95

Random House, HC, 978-1-4000-6520-2, 416 pp., \$23.95

Teacher’s Guide Available

Chesapeake

by James A. Michener

Michener, one of America’s best-loved novelists, brings history to life with this 400-year saga of America’s great bay and its Eastern Shore. Following Edmund Steed and his remarkable family, who parallel the settling and forming of the nation, *Chesapeake* sweeps readers from the unspoiled world of the Native Americans to the voyages of Captain John Smith, the Revolutionary War, and right up to modern times.

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7043-2, 888 pp., \$15.95

Fawcett, MM, 978-0-449-21158-8, 1,024 pp., \$8.99

Queen of the Realm

by Jean Plaidy

In this “memoir” by Elizabeth I, legendary historical novelist Jean Plaidy reveals the Virgin Queen as she truly was: the bewildered, motherless child of an all-powerful father; a captive in the Tower of London; a shrewd politician; a lover of the arts; and eventually, an icon of an era.

Three Rivers Press, TR, 978-0-609-81020-0, 480 pp., \$14.95

For more titles by Jean Plaidy, visit www.randomhouse.com/highschool

Gates of Fire: An Epic Novel of the Battle of Thermopylae

by Steven Pressfield

At Thermopylae, a rocky mountain pass in northern Greece, the feared and admired Spartan soldiers stood three hundred strong. Theirs was a suicide mission, to hold the pass against the invading millions of the mighty Persian army.

Bantam, TR, 978-0-553-38368-3, 400 pp., \$15.00

Bantam, MM, 978-0-553-58053-2, 480 pp., \$7.99

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan: A Novel

by Lisa See

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

A language kept a secret for a thousand years forms the backdrop for an unforgettable novel of two Chinese women whose friendship and love sustains them through their lives. “Achingly beautiful, a marvel of imagination of a real and secret world that has only recently disappeared. It is a story so mesmerizing that the pp. float away and the story remains clearly before us from beginning to end.”—Amy Tan

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-6806-4, 288 pp., \$13.95

RH Audio, Abridged CD, 978-0-7393-3467-6, \$14.99

Reader’s Guide Available

The Killer Angels: A Novel of the Civil War

by Michael Shaara

Winner of The Pulitzer Prize

Shaara’s award-winning Civil War classic remains as vivid and powerful as the day it was originally published.

“My favorite historical novel . . . A superb re-creation of the Battle of Gettysburg, but its real importance is its insight into what the war was about, and what it meant.” —James M. McPherson, Author of *Battle Cry of Freedom*

Modern Library, HC, 978-0-679-64324-1, 368 pp., \$22.95

Ballantine, HC, 978-0-345-44412-7, 368 pp., \$25.95

Ballantine, TR, 978-0-345-40727-6, 400 pp., \$13.95

Ballantine, MM, 978-0-345-34810-4, 384 pp., \$7.99

Random House Audio, Unabridged CD, 978-0-7393-0905-6, \$39.95

Teacher’s Guide Available

Gods and Generals

by Jeff Shaara

With *Gods and Generals*, Jeff Shaara gives fans of *The Killer Angels* everything they could have asked—an epic, brilliantly written saga that brings the nation’s greatest conflict to life.

“Though the story of the Civil War has been told many times, this is the rare version that conveys what it must have felt like.” —*Chicago Sun-Times*

Ballantine, MM, 978-0-345-42247-7, 512 pp., \$7.99

Ballantine, TR, 978-0-345-40957-7, 512 pp., \$14.95

Ballantine, HC, 978-0-345-40492-3, 512 pp., \$27.95

Random House Audio, Abridged CD, 978-0-553-75640-1, \$27.50

Teacher’s Guide Available
