

Considering History through P.O.V. & Narrative Structure, NCTE/ALAN 2009

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History: “the branch of knowledge that records and analyzes past events.”

—Encarta Dictionary, 2009

Standard textbook presentations of history often leave even the most ambitious students feeling bored and dissatisfied. When the past is brought to life through historical fiction, however, students can experience it in a more profound and relevant way.

Below are some suggestions for enriching your students’ knowledge of history (for purposes of this workshop, I’ve focused on U.S. history) while also improving their analytical and writing skills.

1. “Today’s news is tomorrow’s history . . .” examining bias and point of view

- a. Choose a *current* news item/ topic/ article from a reliable print or on-line source that contains some sort of conflict. The conflict can be two-sided and distinct (i.e. an important sports event between two teams or individuals) or multi-faceted and complex (i.e. political and scientific debates about coal-based vs. renewable energy and climate change.)
- b. After everyone has read this item/ article, discuss the writer/ reporter’s *point of view*. Is he/ she objective? Does he/ she have a bias toward one side or the other? How do you know? Do you think it’s possible to give the facts of an event or conflict without also conveying a personal preference for one side or the other?

Writing Activity:

Have the class identify the key players (groups or individuals) in the news story above. Then, ask each student to assume that they are one of the key players in the article. Have them write a letter/ email to the editor, expressing their agreement and support for *or* their disagreement/ opposition to the article as it appears.

2. “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view.”

—Harper Lee

Exploring the effects of Narrative Structure in historical fiction:

- a. As a class, read Jen Bryant’s novel *The Trial*, which focuses on the 1935 Lindbergh baby kidnapping and murder trial and also *Ringside 1925*, which explores the people and issues involved in the Scopes Evolution trial in Dayton, Tennessee.
- b. Have students list at least five ways in which the trials were similar (i.e both set in a small, obscure towns; both widely publicized/covered by the media, etc.) and at least five ways in which they were different (Lindbergh trial had a defendant who was an illegal immigrant accused of murder; Scopes trial was mostly an argument between lawyers over ideology; Lindbergh trial lasted 6 wks; Scopes trial lasted 10 days, etc.).
- c. As a class or in small groups, discuss the ways in which the author’s choice of narration affects the reader’s perception of the real/ historical facts in the case.

1. How would *The Trial* be different if it had multiple narrators instead of just one?
2. How would *Ringside 1925* be different if just one character narrated? Why do you think the author chose the particular narrative structure for each book?

Writing Activity:

Write 2-3 original pages of "historical" fiction in which you imitate the narrative structure and style* of one of these two novels (i.e., *The Trial* uses a single narrator and short, titled, free verse poems; *Ringside 1925* uses nine different narrators and does not use titles, but each narrator has a distinctive "look" on the page) and in which your narrator(s) is/are witnessing one of the following events:

1. a rally for the upcoming (2012) Presidential election;
2. the destruction of the Twin Towers in NYC on Sept 11th;
3. Hurricane Katrina and /or its aftermath.

* Note: You may write in either free-verse poems or in prose.

Additional examples of historical fiction you may want to use with your students:

Books about famous trials:

Chris Crowe. *Mississippi Trial, 1955*. Racism; Emmett Till murder case.

Doreen Rappaport. *Be the Judge, Be the Jury: Lizzie Borden Trial*.

Doreen Rappaport. *Be the Judge, Be the Jury: Sacco & Vanzetti Trial*.

Books with multiple narrators:

Karen Hesse. *Witness*. 1920's rural VT; Ku Klux Klan; racism.

Paul Fleischman. *Bull Run*. U.S. Civil War at Manassas, VA

Sid Fleischman. *The Whipping Boy*. Middle Ages. Class divisions; status.

Nikki Grimes. *Talkin' About Bessie: The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman*; first African American female pilot.