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MEDIA REVIEW

Fiction in the Classroom: Literature and History

Schwebel, Sara L. (2011). *Child-Sized History: Fictions of the Past in U.S. Classrooms*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press. 255 pp., $69.95, hardback and $34.95, paperback, ISBN-13 978-0-826-51793-7.

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Written for a broad audience, Sara Schwebel's *Child-Sized History* covers considerable ground—and breaks new ground—by examining the use of widely distributed novels and trade books in elementary and middle-grade language arts and social studies classrooms. These works of historical fiction hold the potential to interest and motivate students in the study of the past as a result of their narrative structure, readability, and rich character development. However, Schwebel argues, teachers often treat historical fiction as another source to provide the factual content of history, and these novels are often employed as stagnant sources of "truth" just as the textbooks they supplant or supplement. In her book, Schwebel makes a compelling and clear case that historical fiction should be taught critically and viewed as a reflection of a particular time and place; she suggests that because these novels and trade books are in fact products of particular historical contexts, they should be viewed as sources to be analyzed, questioned, and corroborated. This approach—"viewing historical novels as both literature *and* history and as both primary sources and historiographical markers" (p. 8)—can, Schwebel argues, not only develop students' understanding of history as a discipline but also cultivate thoughtful citizens (p. 9).

Schwebel opens by chronicling the pedagogical and cultural shifts that led to the widespread adoption of historical fiction in the 1980s. She argues that historical novels grew in popularity due to the convergence of three trends: multiculturalism and changing tides in American politics, the authentic literature movement, and the interdisciplinary middle school model. As publishers

made an effort not to offend any readers in the Civil Rights era, history textbooks became particularly bland, depicting an increasingly "flat" accounting of events. As a result, educators sought alternative options that appealed to both the political left and right. Historical fiction, Schwebel argues, fit the bill. She asserts that the "left" (e.g., "solidly Democratic" California) bought into historical fiction because it "granted agency to historically underrepresented groups . . . and broached tough political issues," while historical fiction also passed as "conservative" by "eschewing sex, violence, bad language, and punishment-free disobedience" (p. 26). Philosophies toward reading instruction also influenced the use of historical fiction. By the 1980s, the whole language approach to reading instruction had regained popularity and teachers sought books that children would enjoy, signaling a shift from phonics books written for specific instructional purposes to more lively "books written for children" (p. 22). Also around this time, as a result of an initiative promoted by the National Middle School Association, middle-grade educators were searching for interdisciplinary resources that could help them link traditionally separate fields. The convergence of these influences, Schwebel argues, increased the popularity of historical fiction, as it offered a way to link literature and history, infuse diversity into the curriculum, and interest students engaged in whole language instruction.

In Chapters 2–4, Schwebel chooses three topics from U.S. history—portrayal of Indians, war novels, Black and White Americans—to offer a historiographic and literary critique of select trade books. These topics, Schwebel notes, were selected in part due to their prominence in the "master narrative" of history:

> Europeans arrived in the New World, tamed the wilderness, and replaced "primitive" tribes; war established Anglo-Americans as an independent people, forged a common culture and purpose, and solidified the national values of freedom and democracy; and the eradication of slavery enabled the nation to embrace diversity and recognize, at last, the common bond shared by all Americans. (p. 8)

In each of these three chapters, Schwebel conducts a literary and historical analysis and critique of popular historical novels and trade books, building her case that while historical fiction is widely used and appeals to young adolescents, these works should be taught critically, "with attention to their role in an ongoing and at times contentious debate about the American past and its meaning in the present" (p. 121).

In Chapter 2, Schwebel asserts that most books depict caricatured Native Americans as "mythic" beings living outside the developed White world who ultimately "vanish" in order to make room for the "us" in the master narrative (p. 49). In this storyline, there is no perpetrator of genocide because there is, in

effect, no victim. As such, Schwebel contends that these works of historical fiction must be carefully analyzed and contextualized rather than accepted at face value. For example, Schwebel evaluates Scott O'Dell's (1960) *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, the sixth-best-selling children's paperback of all time. *Island* is the tale of a 12-year-old Native girl who becomes stranded on an island off the coast of California when European traders kidnap the remaining members of her village. Schwebel notes that the author, O'Dell, cites *Robinson Crusoe* (in which the protagonist is also isolated on an island) as an inspiration for his book. Schwebel describes the shared storyline between the two books as ironic, because whereas Crusoe was a Brazilian plantation owner who benefited from imperialism and lived his time on an island as an adventure, O'Dell's Native protagonist, Karana, faces crushing isolation as a result of colonizing Europeans. Instead of providing a Native perspective, O'Dell fits Karana into an existing mold through which a national tragedy is turned into a story of personal triumph. Also, Schwebel points out, the Native American woman on whom Karana was based actually died seven weeks after being "rescued" from the island, undercutting the self-actualization narrative *Island* depicts. Schwebel concludes that *Island* serves as an example of how Europeans have marginalized Native Americans, romanticizing their systematic resettlement and "disappearance." In contrast, Schwebel offers alternative works by Native authors, such as Joseph Bruchac's (2002) novel *The Winter People*, which provide a more authentic Native narrative through relying on Native sources and perspectives. She advocates for using different novels in order to present multiple perspectives so that students can learn to recognize and systematically analyze the depictions of Indians across different sources. Schwebel concludes that *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and other novels still have a role in the classroom but must be understood as teaching "American myth" and must be coupled with other resources in the teaching of "Native history" (p. 70).

In Chapter 3, Schwebel explores the influence of historical context on depictions of U.S. wars in historical fiction. She categorizes novels in this chapter in three chronological groups: those written around WWII, those written between the Vietnam War and 9/11, and those written in the past decade. When the book was written often dictated whether the tale was one glorifying or problematizing U.S. participation and the extent to which those fighting were heroes, victims, or something in between. Esther Forbes's (1943) *Johnny Tremain*, the tale of an orphan who joins the Patriot cause, serves as an example of the first generation of war novels in which the writer focused on the "great men" of history by favoring John Hancock and Sam Adams over the title character (p. 74). This first-generation book epitomizes an approach in which the master narrative embodies a "heritage approach," presenting the United States as a land of freedom and the Patriots as unquestionably good (see VanSledright, 2002). The second generation of novels reflects a shift toward "pacifist arguments," as war is critiqued through protagonists' misgivings with their own

involvement, as in Christopher Collier and James Lincoln Collier's (1974) *My Brother Sam is Dead.* In her discussion of this novel, Schwebel points to the importance of historical context and the positionality of the authors. She cites essays written by the Collier brothers in which they explained that their own concerns with American participation in the Vietnam War influenced the storyline in which their protagonist, Tim Meeker, suffers great personal loss during the American Revolution and ultimately becomes disenchanted with the cause. Schwebel characterizes the third generation of war novels as merging the first-generation principles of freedom with the second-generation questioning of motives but adding new layers through the inclusion of more diverse characters and perspectives. For example, in M. T. Anderson's (2006) *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation*, the title character is a slave who eventually fights for Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment when it becomes clear that the freedom of the American nation will not lead to his freedom. Schwebel observes that the mixing of personal and national freedom in this novel problematizes the master narrative of American independence, placing *Octavian Nothing* within the third generation of novels. According to Schwebel, such third-generation novels have not been widely adopted; she attributes this partly to their more recent publication and partly to the more mature and complex themes (e.g., slavery) they portray.

Chapter 4 reviews fiction depicting Black and White characters. Schwebel focuses her analysis of these works by exploring character development and the role of "voice" in fictional narratives. She summarizes historical fiction from the mid-1900s as works by White authors "designed to cultivate empathy among young white readers who were assumed to view the racial other with fear, disgust, and worse" (p. 129). In Theodore Taylor's (1969) *The Cay*, for example, a WWII torpedo strike leaves 11-year-old Phillip Enright stranded on a raft with Timothy, a Black West Indian man. While Phillip's blindness, a result of the blast, leads him to "overcome" his racism, skin color remains a marker of social status. Even though Phillip learns to see Timothy as an equal, the boy's superiority is ultimately upheld when Timothy dies in the process of shielding Phillip during a hurricane. Schwebel points out how novels like *The Cay* often depicted "breaking the color line" as a marker of great personal achievement but fail to provide any meaningful perspective from Black characters. Also, these works avoided addressing the ongoing systemic oppression that created the literary conflict in the first place. And, she notes, much of this work presents Black experiences through the lens of White perspectives. Schwebel points to Christopher Paul Curtis's (1995) *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* as one historical novel in which the perspective of Black Americans is represented without the filter of a White protagonist. *The Watsons* tells the story of an African American family living in Michigan who plan a trip to visit family in Birmingham, Alabama, in order to set their pyromaniac son, Byron, straight. Byron and the whole family are terrified when their first Sunday in Birmingham is the day of the historic bombing of the

Sixteenth Avenue Baptist Church. Schwebel praises *The Watsons* for the voice provided to the Black experience through its Black protagonists. While the author, Curtis, "romanticizes and exaggerates the safety and security of the urban North" (p. 128) when he depicts the violence of Birmingham, Schwebel identifies *The Watsons* as a novel in which an African American author provides readers an opportunity to "experience" events through the eyes of an African American protagonist.

These three middle chapters of *Child-Sized History* offer a series of focused and fascinating critiques that showcase the ways in which historical fiction can provide powerful lessons about the role of historical context, perspectives, subtext, positionality, interpretation, and more. The core of the book, these well-researched, compact chapters offer a rich resource for teachers and teacher educators alike by modeling deep, critical reading of historical fiction. Schwebel achieves the purpose outlined in her introduction, clearly demonstrating that these historical novels and trade books can be viewed as both literature *and* history and modeling how they can be viewed as primary sources *and* historiographical markers (p. 8). This section of the book is a fantastic resource to share with anyone interested in the use of historical fiction in social studies classrooms.

In Chapter 5, Schwebel shifts gears to explore the following question: "How did the historical fiction that forged a middle-grade canon come to be taught in ways that largely ignore the novel's participation in contested debates about the meaning of the American past?" (p. 131). She seeks to make the case that that historical fiction is not taught critically due to a complicated mix of contextual issues, including the current policy context (NCLB) that demoted social studies in elementary and middle-grade classrooms and emphasizes "literacy instruction" and "reading first" rather than historical thinking, teacher education programs and history courses that fail to teach historical thinking and thus graduate teachers who view history as heritage, and the use of historical fiction in language arts classrooms in which teachers and students need scaffolded supports in order to better understand historical fiction as both literature and historical interpretation. Schwebel calls for changes that, she argues, will help transform the pedagogical uses of historical fiction (p. 151). She argues that the Common Core (and other standards) should expand their definition of "literacy" to include and promote historical thinking through the use of trade books and novels. She asserts that in teacher preparation, professors of history and education should collaborate and emphasize explicit attention to historical thinking, historiography, and the reading of historical texts (fiction and nonfiction) critically. In order to better scaffold teachers' use of historical fiction, she recommends that novelists and professional historians be encouraged to offer contextual essays or "author's notes." Finally, Schwebel suggests that empirical research exploring different aspects of the use of historical fiction to promote historical literacy be conducted—research that can inform both policy and classroom instruction.

While Schwebel makes interesting and appropriate points, this chapter raised some questions about how to *achieve* the changes she suggests. For example, Schwebel outlines a persuasive argument that teachers need additional training to teach in ways congruent with her vision. As Freeman and Levstik (1988) asserted, “literature alone will not give children a sense of history, but it can plant the seed of interest to be nurtured by a good teacher” (p. 336). It is well established in research on social studies that many teachers do not receive sufficient training in the epistemology of history and face challenges in how to translate the “doing of history” into the classroom (e.g., Fehn & Koeppen, 1998; Hartzler-Miller, 2001; Slekar, 1998; VanSledright, 1996). Teacher educators have been struggling with this for decades, and there have been many attempts to build courses that bridge history content, historiography, and pedagogy (e.g., Adler, 2008; Fallace, 2007). Similarly, many of the *Teaching American History* professional development grant experiences offered in the past decade or so have grappled with this issue, with decidedly mixed results (e.g., van Hover, 2008). Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that teachers have many different purposes and objectives for teaching history in the way they do—and that even high-quality preparation in history and epistemology does not necessarily change the way teachers make decisions (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Grant, 2003; van Hover & Yeager, 2007). We had hoped that Schwebel would reference this research and build on it, and we wanted suggestions specific to implementation—programmatic “action items”—so to speak. Also, some of the existing resources in the social studies field that explore the use of historical fiction—Levstik and Barton’s (2011) *Doing History* or Sandmann and Ahern’s (2002) *Linking Literature with Life*, for example—were not explored or cited.

While Chapter 5 raised concerns about overgeneralizations and the challenges of enacting change, the excellent “Afterword” deals with specific implementable ideas. This section offers classroom applications, including the use of historical novels to stimulate research topics, promote historical reading, and explore historiography. The pedagogical applications provide a great starting point for teachers and teacher educators to think, in practical terms, about how to use historical fiction in ways that promote historical thinking. Schwebel also includes appendices, one that describes how she assessed nationwide trends in middle-grade historical fiction and one that lists historical sources that could be used with novels referenced in the book.

In summary, *Child-Sized History* is an interesting and provocative book that prompted each of us to conduct separate field trips to libraries to revisit certain books, sparked conversation about how we can better use historical fiction in our secondary methods course, and, in the case of the first author Paul, generated minor marital strife. As it happens, Paul left his of copy of *Child-Sized History* in the living room where his wife, a fourth-grade teacher, found it. She completely, totally, and absolutely disagreed with Schwebel’s assessment of John Reynolds Gardiner’s (1980) *Stone Fox* and offered a passionate defense of

how and why she used this book for language arts instruction. As a result, Paul spent an hour one Saturday evening debating the usefulness of critiquing "children's literature" from a historical vantage point and whether everything had to be "read into" and analyzed. As the heated response from Paul's wife indicates, Schwebel's work certainly has the potential to encourage debate and reflection and raise useful questions for the field while also providing a very practical resource for teachers and teacher educators. In short, *Child-Sized History* is a well-written, original, thoughtful work that adds to the literature and extends how we think about and use historical fiction.

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