

Historical Fiction—New and Old

Historical fiction is the ideal category for intermediate and middle school students. It is based in reality, but it takes readers out of their day-to-day surroundings of school, home, and peers by providing entrée to alternative epochs and situations.

Middle school students are interested in learning more about the world—and not just their contemporary world. They have *briefly* moved from the egocentric interests that have dominated their lives for the first several years of school. They have honed their reading skills, attaining an ability to imagine “*What if. . .?*”

Many of the following books are new releases that tackle unusual historical topics. I have purposely omitted some of the best-known standards, such as Esther Forbes’s *Johnny Tremain*. The omission of a book does *not* imply that it is unworthy or outdated—just that there are newer books on the market. The Scott O’Dell Award for Historical Fiction (<http://www.scottodell.com/sosoaward.html>) offers additional suggestions for award-winning historical fiction.

The Arrow over the Door. Joseph Bruchac. Dial, 1998. 89 pp. This tale of the American Revolution describes the brief encounter between an Abenaki Indian scout and a 14-year-old Quaker, known as a coward because of his peace-loving beliefs. They examine their prejudices, rationalizing and defending their positions as they narrate their stories in alternating voices.

The Ballad of Lucy Whipple. Karen Cushman. Clarion, 1996. 195 pp. The Gold Rush has captivated Lucy Whipple’s mother who’s now moving her family to Lucky Diggins, California. After Lucy’s urbane New England childhood, the tent town’s roughness seems downright uncivilized. There’s no school or library, and worst of all, *no* gold. Cushman’s other historical fiction works are equally suitable to middle school interests and reading abilities. Both *Catherine, Called Birdy* and *The Midwife’s Apprentice*, set in medieval England, are excellent choices.

Bat 6. Virginia Euwer Wolff. Scholastic, 1998. 229 pp. The beginning of each new school year signified a rite of passage for sixth-grade girls from two small Oregon communities. On May 29, 1949, the Bat 6 softball game was remarkable because it marked the game’s 50th anniversary, no one won or lost, and World War II, although long finished, nearly claimed another life.

The Birchbark House. Louise Erdrich. Hyperion Books for Children, 1999. 244 pp. Generations of readers have accepted the “Little House” books without question; this story counterbalances those portrayals of Natives as savages. Loving details of Ojibwa life in 1847 fill these pages as Omakayas’ Ojibwa clan migrates from their winter home to summer camp on an island in Lake Superior.

The Book of the Lion. Michael Cadnum. Viking, 2000. 204 pp. Seventeen-year old Edmund journeys to the Holy Land as a knight crusader’s squire. This action-packed tapestry of sights, smells, sounds, and textures climaxes as Edmund engages

in one of history's most brutal conflicts, the Battle of Arsur. Use with *Soldier's Heart* (Paulsen, 1998) or *The Ramsay Scallop* (Temple, 1994).

Bud, Not Buddy. Christopher Paul Curtis. Delacorte, 1999. 245 pp. The touching journey of orphaned 10-year-old Bud presents a vivid portrait of African American life during the Great Depression. As he searches for his real father, Bud encounters Ticonderoga pencils, vampire bats, hobos, jazz musicians, and occasionally, kindness and loving that overcome his longing for a family.

Bull Run. Paul Fleischman. HarperCollins, 1993. 104 pp. This is a fictionalized account of Bull Run, the first battle of the Civil War, narrated from multiple viewpoints by adults and young people, slaves and soldiers, women and men, Northerners and Southerners.

The Devil's Arithmetic. Jane Yolen. Viking, 1988. 170 pp. Using a time-travel framework, Jane Yolen constructs an agonizing account of Hannah's Holocaust experiences. The images of 1942 Poland, Nazi soldiers, and the death chamber come to life as Hannah realizes her prescient revelations are too horrendous for anyone to believe.

Dragon's Gate. Laurence Yep. HarperCollins, 1993. 273 pp. Otter flees China after killing a Manchu in self-defense. His arduous life as a guest of "Golden Mountain," working to build a railroad tunnel through the Sierra Nevada Mountains, shatters his hopes. But his biggest disillusionment comes from recognizing that his hero-uncle has feet of clay. Sequel to *Mountain Light*.

Esperanza Rising. Pam Munoz Ryan. Scholastic, 2000. 262 pp. Esperanza grows up as a child of privilege on her father's ranch in Mexico. She grows to love the land as her father does. When he is brutally murdered, Esperanza and her mother are forced to flee for their lives. They come to the United States where they become part of a migrant farm worker group. Esperanza must learn how to adjust to all of the changes in her life.

Fever, 1793. Laurie Halse Anderson. Simon & Schuster, 2000. 251 pp. In post-Revolutionary America, epidemics were pervasive and deadly. Accordingly, yellow fever overwhelms Philadelphia in 1793, devastating the city's population. Sixteen-year-old Matilda Cook loses family and friends but manages to persevere and survive. Similarly, *The Poison Place* by Mary Lyons (Atheneum, 1997), which highlights Charles Willson Peale's life, is set in Philadelphia just a few years later.

Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule. Harriette Robinet. Atheneum, 1998. 132 pp. Although slavery ended with the Emancipation Proclamation, freed blacks remained fearful during the Reconstruction period. Pascal and his brother Gideon hope to find happiness through the government's promises of land, and when they establish Green Gloryland, they expect their troubles are truly behind them.

The Ghost in the Tokaido Inn. Dorothy Hoobler & Thomas Hoobler. Philomel, 1999. 214 pp. Seikei is an eighteenth-century Japanese tea merchant's son. His dream of becoming a samurai is denied by his social status. When he witnesses the theft of a priceless ruby, a famous samurai judge drafts Seikei to help solve the crime. To do so, Seikei joins a troupe of kabuki actors. *Demon in the Teahouse* (Philomel, 2001) is the sequel.

Good Night, Maman. Norma Fox Mazer. Harcourt Brace, 1999. 185 pp. When Nazis invade France in 1940, Karin Levi and her brother Marc escape on an American refugee ship, but their mother remains behind. Karin is detained at Fort Ontario, New York, behind barbed wire for the remainder of the war. She continues hoping to be reunited with her beloved maman. Pair with *Journey to Topaz* by Yoshiko Uchida.

Good Night, Mr. Tom. Michelle Magorian. HarperCollins, 1981. 318 pp. Willie Beech is fortunate to be evacuated to the English countryside as German bombs begin falling on London, especially because Mr. Tom's home is free of the fear that imprisoned Willy in London. When a tele-

gram returns him to London, Willie knows war isn't the only thing he dreads.

I, Juan De Pareja. Elizabeth Borton de Treviño. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965. 180 pp. Juan De Pareja's story illuminates the constraints of his existence as a Spanish slave. He risks all by imitating his master, renowned artist Velázquez, because slaves are not allowed to paint. Juan's life reveals the inherent evils of slavery, wherever it may exist. Pair with *The Second Mrs. Giaconda* (Konigsburg, 1975) to compare with Leonardo da Vinci's art. (Advanced).

In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson. Bette Lord. Harper & Row, 1984. 169 pp. In 1947 (aka the Year of the Dog, 4645), Sixth Cousin (aka Bandid) moves from China to a New York City apartment. Before leaving, she officially changes her name to Shirley Temple Wong. Even a name as American as apple pie can't ease the transition; only baseball can fulfill her American dream.

Lily's Crossing. Patricia Reilly Giff. Delacorte, 1997. 180 pp. In 1944, Lily's father is drafted to serve in Europe. She knows her summer and her life will be changed forever. This is affirmed when she meets Albert, a Hungarian refugee, and begins lying about everything that's important.

A Long Way from Chicago. Richard Peck. Dial, 1998. 148 pp. In August, 1929, Joey and Mary Alice arrive at Grandma Dowdell's home expecting two weeks of boredom. They aren't aware of the Depression that grips the nation, only the differences between their big-city Chicago neighborhood and grandma's lackluster, small-town, southern Illinois home. What occurs is anything but tame! The sequel, *A Year down Yonder* (2000), offers more laughs and adventures.

Lyddie. Katherine Paterson. Dutton, 1991. 182 pp. Lyddie, bound-out by her mother, refuses the indignity and runs away to the Lowell textile mills where she teaches herself to read and write. Her hope is to reunite her siblings and save the family farm. *Jip: His Story* (1996) appears to be a distinct novel until the shocking revelations of its final pages. Both books confront issues of slavery as it existed in New England before the Civil War.

The Middle Passage: White Ships/Black Cargo. Tom Feelings. Dial, 1995. Feelings' 20-year effort is a compelling embodiment of the Middle Passage—the terrifying trans-Atlantic journey African captives endured in the bowels of slave ships. Done completely in pen, ink, and tempera—in shades of black and gray—these 64 narrative paintings provide a unique, emotional, and sensory experience for viewers.

Morning Girl. Michael Dorris. Hyperion Books for Children, 1992. 74 pp. Morning Girl and her younger brother Star Boy alternate describing their lives on a Caribbean island, initially during a tremendous storm, then as they view white men for the first time. Taino people emerge as caring, intelligent, and family-oriented rather than ignorant, sub-human savages. Team with *Encounter* (Yolen, 1992) for an interesting examination of the effects of Columbus' expeditions.

Nightjohn. Gary Paulsen. Delacorte, 1993. 92 pp. Sarny is not prepared when a new slave is brought to the plantation she calls home. John is willing to teach her to read, but reading is forbidden for the



slaves. What will happen if either of them is caught? This compelling story of a young girl's struggle for freedom from ignorance puts a very human face on a tragic time in our history.

Nory Ryan's Song. Patricia Reilly Giff. Delacorte 2000. 148 pp. *Nory Ryan's Song* provides an emotion-charged tale of the blight that attacked Ireland's potato crop in 1845, compelling hundreds of thousands to flee their native land.

Number the Stars. Lois Lowry. Houghton Mifflin, 1989. 137 pp. Annemarie's existence during the German occupation of Denmark is tolerable until Jewish persecution commences. When the Nazi soldiers suspect that her best friend is not her sister, Annemarie risks her own life to save her. Pair this novel with these picture storybooks: *The Yellow Star: The Legend of King Christian X of Denmark* (Deedy, 2000) or *The Butterfly* (Polacco, 2000).

Our Only May Amelia. Jennifer L. Holm. HarperCollins, 1999. 253 pp. Ladylike hardly describes May Amelia Jackson, only daughter in a Finnish American family with seven sons. Washington state's wilderness provides May Amelia with abundant, wide-ranging opportunities for trouble as the nineteenth century comes to an end. Both humorous and heartbreaking, May Amelia's story offers a rare view of America's northwest.

Out of the Dust. Karen Hesse. Scholastic, 1997. 227 pp. *Out of the Dust*, a blank verse account of the Oklahoma dust bowl, assails the senses and leaves readers' emotions ragged. In a fire that kills her mother and unborn brother, Billie Jo's dreams also disappear as she watches her father's grief destroy what little is left of their family.

Parsifal's Page. Gerald Morris. Houghton Mifflin, 2001. 232 pp. Piers yearns to leave his sleepy village to quest in the best tradition of chivalry. He learns that such missions are often circular, leading back to oneself—usually bedraggled, older, and considerably wiser. Part legend, part fantasy, part

historical fiction, this book is a humorous, exciting view of Arthurian England.

Pharaoh's Daughter: A Novel of Ancient Egypt. Julius Lester. Silver Whistle/Harcourt, 2000. 182 pp. Lester embellishes the Biblical account of the baby in the bulrushes to create a young Moses, handsome, proud, and quick of temper. The contrast between Moses' biological sister, brought to the palace as his nursemaid, and the Pharaoh's daughter paints a startling portrait of the clash between Egyptian and Jewish beliefs.

The Ramsay Scallop. Frances Temple. Orchard, 1994. 310 pp. Fourteen-year-old Elenor Ramsay dreads the return of her betrothed, Thomas, Lord of Thornham, who has been fighting in the crusades for eight years. Father Gregory's innovative solution for reacquainting the recalcitrant lovers is to send them on a religious pilgrimage from England to Spain.

Sacajawea: The Story of Bird Woman and the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Joseph Bruchac. Silver Whistle/Harcourt, 2000. 199 pp. This is the story of the 16-year-old Shoshoni Indian interpreter, peacemaker, caregiver, and guide who accompanied the Lewis and Clark Expedition from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. Joseph Bruchac relays this story of bravery and foolhardiness by alternating chapters, one in Sacajawea's voice and the next in William Clark's. Excerpts from Clark's journal provide authentic detail.

The Shakespeare Stealer. Gary L. Blackwood. Dutton Children's, 1998. 216 pp. Orphans have never fared well, and such is the case of Widge, whose master Dr. Bright orders him to copy the newest script of an up-and-coming playwright, Will Shakespeare. Being a real country boy, one of the biggest obstacles Widge faces is surviving in the city of London. Other journeys to Elizabethan England include a sequel, *Shakespeare's Scribe* (2000), *The Playmaker* (J. B. Cheaney), and Susan Cooper's time-travel winner *King of Shadows*.

A Single Shard. Linda Sue Park. Clarion Books, 2001. 152 pp. Tree-ear, a twelfth-century Korean orphan who scavenges the trash to feed himself and his handicapped companion, Crane-man, discovers the masterpieces that seem to rise effortlessly from master-potter Min's wheel. Tree-ear breaks one of Min's most delicate creations and pays for it with his toil, tears, and heartbreak.

The Slave Dancer. Paula Fox. Bradbury, 1973. 176 pp. Slave traders shanghai Jessie, a poor white boy possessing the ability to pipe a lively tune, from his New Orleans neighborhood. On board the ship, he is forced to play so the slaves will exercise and remain strong on their extended journey from Africa. Pair with Tom Feeling's *Middle Passage*.

Soldier's Heart: A Novel of the Civil War. Gary Paulsen. Delacorte, 1998. 106 pp. Charley Goddard can't wait to enlist in the First Minnesota Volunteers. But once there, the violence and horrors he experiences change his life forever. Read Avi's *The Fighting Ground*, which tackles the same problems during the Revolutionary War.

Stepping on the Cracks. Mary Downing Hahn. Clarion, 1991. 216 pp. Margaret and Elizabeth can only imagine what their brothers are experiencing as soldiers, fighting in World War II against Hitler and his allies. But they learn that bullies exist outside Germany, and that wars are often fought on a personal level. Scott O'Dell Award. This book pairs well with Bette Greene's *Summer of My German Soldier*.

Stick and Whittle. Sid Hite. Scholastic, 2000. 202 pp. A 16-year-old orphan and a Civil War veteran join forces in a classic wild-West adventure that includes a dramatic kidnapping and even more

remarkable rescue. Pair this with *Sunshine Rider: The First Vegetarian Western*.

Under the Blood-Red Sun. Graham Salisbury. Delacorte, 1994. 246 pp. December 7, 1941—Pearl Harbor Day—changes the life of Tomikazu Nakaji, a Japanese-American resident of Hawaii. Tomi catapults from being a kid, worried about baseball, to head of his family. Now his major task is locating his father and grandfather who are imprisoned by the government.

The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963. Christopher Paul Curtis. Delacorte, 1995. 210 pp. Humor and tragedy merge in this family story of the weird Watsons. Kenny narrates his day-to-day interaction with younger sister Joetta and their ever-rebellious teenage brother, Byron. The Civil Rights Movement and the real-life bombing of a Birmingham, Alabama, church become more poignant in contrast with the Watsons' hilarious adventures.

Year of Impossible Goodbyes. Sook Nyul Choi. Houghton Mifflin, 1991. 171 pp. While World War II rages, Sookan and her family watch helplessly as Korea is destroyed by Japanese military. Even when the war ends, there is no relief because Russian troops replace Japanese soldiers.

The Year of Miss Agnes. Kirkpatrick Hill. McElderry Books, 2000. 115 pp. A gentle narrative of Alaskan school and village life among the Athapascan people. Miss Agnes Sutterfield is the most unusual teacher the one-room school has ever known. She reads *Robin Hood* aloud, convinces the children they, too, can become teachers and physicians, and best of all, she doesn't hate the smell of fish.

Linda M. Pavonetti is assistant professor in the Reading Department of Oakland University. She can be reached at pavonett@oakland.edu.