

Teaching History through Fiction

A Manifesto by C.M. Huddleston

Study the past if
you would define
the future.
(Confucius)

Oh, yes the past can
hurt. But the way I see
it, you can either run
from it.
Or learn from it.
(Rafiki in “The Lion King”)

I consider being one who loves history to be a gift - a very special gift direct from God. I learned most of the history I know from bad teachers of the past, great authors who wove history into their fiction stories as plot, characters, and/or background and from pure history books. As a child, I read anything and everything that I could find where the story was based on the past. I remember as a teenager, a day when I had run out of books to read, the library was closed, and I was desperate, so, I pulled Major Alexander P. de Seversky's *Victory Through Air Power* off the shelf of books belonging to my father and read it. My husband, a retired Army officer and military historian, is still amazed that I read that book as a teenager.

Often I read books I didn't quite understand due to not knowing / understanding the history/setting of the book. I didn't understand the Civil War when I read *Little Women*. I actually thought the characters lived in some other country called New England. Yet, reading Alcott's book led me to read more about the Civil War—and well one thing led to another. How can you understand Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* without understanding the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl? So you see, I sought out history, despite the poor teachers of history I encountered in grade school, middle school, and on into high school, to understand what I read in books.

Only in my junior year of high school did I encounter a really good teacher of history and then only for a few months. That teacher made history come to life each and every day, for as long as it lasted. Can you imagine a history teacher that makes the triangle trade something exciting? He did, at least until pneumonia took him out of the classroom for six long months. I suffered through student teachers and substitutes for the remainder of the school year. I returned to my old ways of enjoying history—BOOKS!

You may well be asking by now what all this has to do with writing time-travel novels for middle grade children? That should be obvious by what I have just told you—poor teachers who can make even the most exciting history boring. We don't need to teach children dates; they can Google what year something happened. Despite sounding trite, I firmly believe we need to make history come alive if we are to teach children about the past. And what better way, at least in my mind, is there than to see the past through the eyes of another child, a person their own age. Make history an adventure into the past, not just a retelling.

Take them to the Battle of Trenton.

Take them to meet a young Theodore Roosevelt in North Dakota.

Take them 3,000 years into America's past
to live with American Indians.

Let them meet famous people.

Let them hear the Declaration of
Independence first read in 1776
on a town square in Savannah, Georgia.
(Did you know the man who read it aloud was
none other than Archibald Bulloch,
Theodore Roosevelt's great-great grandfather.)

Put them in a life and death struggle in a
small fort in Kentucky in 1778.

Yet, there is one caveat. I have to make it real, correct, true. Yes, I am altering history by inserting this fictional child from our time into a past event, but I don't change history. I make my character's role simply one of observing, and their interactions so inconsequential that history has forgotten them entirely. Oh, I almost forgot, there is one other extremely important thing about my books, I do my best to tell history accurately. I research, I read, I try to understand, I map events, and I learn first before I tell a story. I use primary sources, as many as I can find. I use old newspapers, old letters, and old journals. There is no use in teaching made up history! Even the archaeology carried out by my main character's mother and my descriptions of prehistoric life are based on my more than 25-year career as a registered professional archaeologist.

I'll continue to write history in various forms as long as I am able. I love telling stories. I'll keep writing inconsequential history for adults, just because some of the small stories from our past are the best. I'll also keep writing history for children. I'll try to make it exciting, humorous, alive, and memorable.

My hope is only that adults make my books available to the children in their lives who will, in turn, grow to love and understand bits and pieces of history which can enrich their lives, their understanding of humanity, and encourage their love of the past.

On this page, I'll introduce you to fiction books that accurately teach history, books mainly written for children. Don't be surprised if an adult book or a really great non-fiction history shows up here as well.