

# Whose History Is It?: Diversity in Historical Fiction for Young Adults



By April M. Dawkins

Before I became a high school librarian, I was a history teacher. I love history—the real people, their stories, the conflicts, the drama. However, I often struggled to help my students love it as much as I did. Many students see history as dry and uninteresting, filled with rote memorization of facts. However, when students can see people who are like them as historical figures who make a contribution to the world, history can become much more impactful.

Once I became a high school librarian, I was always on the lookout for excellent and appealing historical fiction. Finding historical fiction that represented diverse viewpoints, cultures, ethnicities, and religions was difficult. Across the board, prominent recommended reading lists neglect to include diverse authors, viewpoints, and historical figures in a ratio that reflects our society's reality. For example, of the 171 informational texts recommended in the Common Core State Standards, only eighteen are by authors of color. The lives of the poor and non-white are rarely part of the story, despite the fact that more than half of the children in the U.S. today fit into those categories (Gangi and Benfer 2014). Considering the fact that the best readers are those who make personal connections with text, this situation seems to stack the deck against many of the children served by school libraries (Copeland and Martin 2016).

## *Award-Winning Diverse Historical Fiction*

One challenge in supporting diverse historical fiction collections is finding quality historical fiction written for children and young adults. The need for diverse materials has been widely discussed;

however, diversity in specific genres has not really been addressed. Often, school librarians use awards lists to determine which titles should be included in their collections. Therefore, I decided to examine two awards to see if diverse historical fiction titles were being recognized.

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I conducted a content analysis of the Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature (awarded by the Young Adult Library Services Association, <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/printz>) and the Young Adult Library Services Association's Best Books lists for the period from 2000 to 2016 (<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/book-lists/bbya>; <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/best-fiction-young-adults>). I chose to begin with awards issued in 2000 because that was the inaugural year for the Printz Award.

In a typical award year, the Printz will recognize three to five books. During this time period, the Printz recognized a total of seventy-seven books as winners or honorees. Of the seventy-seven, twelve were historical fiction titles. Of those twelve titles,

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seven represented a diverse perspective.

During the same time period, the Best Books for Young Adults (BBYA) recognized a significantly higher number of books. (Note that in 2011, BBYA became the Best Fiction for Young Adults [BFYA]. Prior to that time, the list included both fiction and non-fiction). During those years of fiction and nonfiction recognition, the list included as many as 95 titles. In the first three years of the change to a fiction-only list, the BFYA recognized between 99 and 112 titles. That number decreased significantly in 2015 and 2016 when the list included 58 and 64 titles respectively. From 2000-2016, the list has included a total of 1,459 titles. Of that number, 174 have been historical fiction titles. Of those 174 historical fiction titles, 80 have been diverse .

With both sets of honored books, I examined historical fiction books and recorded the ethnicity and religion of the main characters and the historical and geographic setting of the titles. It is important to note that the diversity in the historical fiction titles on these lists included racial, ethnic, religious, and geographic diversity; however, no historical fiction titles dealt with diversity in sexual identity. Additionally, almost all of the historical fiction titles about African Americans on these lists deal exclusively with slavery, the Civil War, or civil rights.

While the relatively high proportion of diverse historical fiction titles on these lists is encouraging, the overall publication of diverse titles is significantly lower. In their 2015 statistics, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) notes that of the 3,400 books received by the center, only 15 percent reflect diverse perspectives ("Publishing Statistics" 2016). The statistics that the CCBC collects do not reflect the genres included or the authenticity or accuracy of the depictions of diverse people.

### *Finding Additional Sources for Diverse Historical Fiction*

Much of the historical fiction that is published is about European history or about U.S. history from a white perspective. So, where do we look?

The Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison is an excellent general source on children's and young adult books. In addition to collecting publication data they have resources for locating multicultural materials including a list of small publishers who specialize in producing books by and about people of color.

An excellent source for reviews and perspectives about the portrayal of indigenous peoples in children's and young adult books is the American Indians in Children's Literature blog which was begun by Debbie Reese in 2006 (<https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/>).

Because it is often difficult to find non-U.S.-centric historical fiction titles, another place to find diverse historical fiction is the titles that receive the Batchelder Award. This award is presented

annually to an outstanding book originally published outside the United States in a language other than English, and translated into English for U.S. publication (<http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/batchelderaward>).

### *Evaluating Quality in Diverse Historical Fiction*

Once we find diverse historical fiction, there are two areas to examine: the historical aspects and the portrayal of diversity.

#### *To evaluate the historical aspects of the title, consider:*

- Are the historical events rooted in historical fact?
- Are the characters who are real historical figures portrayed realistically?
- Has this author developed an expertise in this time period / location / events?
- If there are little or no actual events or people, are the historical setting and culture accurately portrayed?

#### *In judging the diverse nature of the title, ask:*

- Are the characters portrayed in a stereotypical way? (If so, this may be problematic).
- Is the dialogue authentic?
- Does this author know the culture, religion, ethnicity?
- Does this author identify as a member of the culture, religion, ethnicity?

This final criteria is one that has garnered widespread debate: can someone who is an outsider accurately portray someone else's culture, ethnicity, or religion? Yes, it can be done. However, this is why school librarians need to carefully evaluate diverse materials using the first three criteria listed above.

### *Collaborating with History Teachers*

Having diverse historical fiction in your school library collection is great, but because historical fiction can be a tough sell for teens, librarians must highlight these titles and advocate for teachers to use them. The use of historical fiction in history or social studies classes provides young people with a broader, more inclusive view of history. The first discussion to have in a teacher collaboration is what type of historical fiction they would like to use. Historical fiction can be either novels rooted in a historical period with few if any historical events or figures in them, or the books can portray historical figures and events in a way that provides insight



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into personalities and nuances of the time. You will want to tailor your selections for individual assignments based on the desired outcomes of the classroom teacher.

One of my favorite assignments as a student in a history class involved reading a historical fiction novel. We were studying the Roman Empire, and the teacher had everyone read *I, Claudius* by

Robert Graves. The assignment involved choosing one character from the novel and then conducting research to determine the accuracy of the author's portrayal of that character. A similar project could easily be done in history classes today. Students could examine the historical accuracy of a historical fiction title from multiple perspectives including the characters, geographic setting, and historical events. Characters could be examined from two different perspectives: if the character was a real historical figure, was that portrayal accurate? Or, if the character was not a real person, what was the accuracy of the character portrayal in terms of culture, ethnicity, or religion? This type of research requires students not only to find the historical information, but also to judge the accuracy of the author's usage of historical fact.

Many students are aware of the Holocaust as a historical event, but may not make connections with other genocides that have happened throughout history. In a sociology class that is studying genocide, students might use historical fiction as part of a comparative study of 20th-century genocides, including those in Armenia, Germany, Rwanda, and Cambodia.

A geography class might use a historical fiction title in which the main character undergoes a journey. Students could plot the journey on a map, determine if the descriptions of the physical geography are accurate, and decide if the journey would have been possible in the time allotted in the book by studying the transportation of the period.

### Conclusion

As school librarians, we have the opportunity to help our students become more engaged with history by including diverse historical fiction titles in our collections and advocating for the use of diverse perspectives in history and social studies classes. Tyrone Young, writer and director of the documentary *Filling the Gap*, explains that "history becomes easier to understand when students are able to relate or empathize with the struggles and achievements of other people" (Williams 2011).



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### Works Cited

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Gangi, Jane M., and Nancy Benfer. "How Common Core's Recommended Books Fail Children of Color." *The Washington Post*, September 16, 2014. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/09/16/how-common-cores-recommended-books-fail-children-of-color/>

Williams, Josh. "About Filling the Gap: Written and Directed by Tyrone Young." *School Library Monthly* 28, no. 3 (2011). <http://slc.librariesunlimited.com/Home/Display/1967323>.

## Recommended Titles for U.S. History:

1. *All the Broken Pieces* by Ann E. Burg (Scholastic, 2009) – Vietnam War
2. *Code Talker* by Joseph Bruchac (Penguin, 1999) – Navajo Marines in World War II
3. *Copper Sun* by Sharon Draper (Atheneum, 2006) – Slavery in Colonial America
4. *Day of Tears* by Julius Lester (Hyperion, 2007) – 1859 slave auction in Georgia
5. *House of Purple Cedar* by Tim Tingle (Cinco Puntos Press, 2014) – Choctaw in late 1800 Oklahoma Territory
6. *Outrun the Moon* by Stacey Lee (G.P. Putnam's, 2016) – 1906 San Francisco Earthquake
7. *My Name Is Not Friday* by Jon Walter (Scholastic, 2016) – Slavery in 1860s
8. *The Rock and the River* and *The Fire in the Streets* by Kekla Magoon (Aladdin, 2009 & 2012) – Civil Rights, Black Panthers in 1960s Chicago
9. The Seeds of America Trilogy by Laurie Halse Anderson (Simon & Schuster, 2008-2016) – American Revolution
10. *Under a Painted Sky* by Stacey Lee (G.P. Putnam's, 2015) – The Oregon Trail

## Recommended Titles for World History/Geography:

1. *Blood Red Horse* by K.M. Grant (Walker Children's, 2004) – The Crusades
2. *Boxers & Saints* by Gene Luen Yang (First Second, 2013) – 1905 Boxer Rebellion in China
3. *In Darkness* by Nick Lake (Bloomsbury, 2012) – Haitian Revolution & Haitian Earthquake
4. *Forgotten Fire* by Nick Bagdasarian (DK Publishing, 2000) – 1915-1918 Armenian genocide
5. *A Moment Comes* by Jennifer Bradbury (Atheneum, 2013) – 1947 Partition of India
6. *Over a Thousand Hills I Walk with You* by Hanna Jensen (Carolrhoda Books, 2006) – Rwandan genocide
7. *Prisoner B-3087* by Alan Gratz (Scholastic, 2013) – Holocaust
8. *The Shadows of Ghadames* by Joelle Stolz (Yearling, 2004) – Muslim life in 19th century Libya
9. *Shame the Stars* by Guadalupe García McCall (Tu Books, 2016) – 1915 Mexican Revolution
10. *Silver People* by Margarita Engle (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014) – Building of the Panama Canal