



Historical Association

The voice for history

Using and Writing Historical Fiction in the Classroom Teacher Notes

Authored by Tony Bradman

Why use historical fiction in the classroom?

The answer is simple – the best historical fiction can really bring the past to life, especially if it features interesting, well-rounded characters that children can identify with, and exciting plots that keep them gripped. Good fiction of any kind puts the reader in the shoes of other human beings and explores important themes in life. Historical fiction can show readers the universals of human life, but also how people’s lives in the past differed from our lives today. A good story read in conjunction with other resources can really enhance children’s historical learning, and as with the use of any fiction with classes, it can also help to support literacy.

Opportunities to use historical fiction in the classroom

There are some excellent historical novels that can be used with most periods of history studied in schools. Publishers and writers do look at the National Curriculum and concentrate on producing books that will help cover the periods and themes you’ll be exploring. That said, some periods are still better served in fiction than others. There are lots of books set in the Second World War, for instance, but far fewer that feature the Mayans or even the Stone Age! But with a bit of research, you can probably find a book for most periods you’ll be covering.

My book *Viking Boy* is used extensively to help children – usually in Years 5 and 6 – study the Vikings, as a class reader, or as a book the teacher reads to the children. But the book includes many aspects of Viking culture that can be used as starting points for lots of detailed project work. So, start with the History. For example, in *Viking Boy* there’s a longhouse – how was it built and how did people live in it? There’s a sword, a hall-burning, lots of fighting – who were the Vikings? Where did they come from? What was it like to live in such a violent age? The central character’s parents feature in the early part of the story – how was life different for men and women in Viking culture? I’ve seen artwork based on the story, prequels and sequels,



character explorations, classes acting out the story – all of which enhances the other work the children do.

If you're thinking about using historical fiction with your class, then there are some guidelines it's definitely worth following. First and foremost, you need to make sure that the fiction you use is good – and that means reading reviews, not just on Amazon, but in professional magazines and specialist publications about children's books such as *Books for Keeps*. It's also worth getting recommendations from other teachers. The Historical Association [summer membership resource from 2020](#) is all about Historical Fiction and contains suggestions for class readers mapped to the history curriculum. Of course, you should also look at the winners of the [Young Quills awards](#) on the Historical Association website – the fact that they've made it onto a shortlist chosen by children and then won an award tells you that they're likely to be of high quality!

You should also make sure you read the whole book before you use it with the children. That's the only way you'll find out if it's any good, appropriate for the age range (a book that's hard-hitting and scary might be fine with Years 6 or 7, but not with Years 3 or 4), and set in the right period. For example, my book *Anglo-Saxon Boy* is set in 1066, at the end of the Anglo-Saxon period. If you want to cover the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon period, then you'll need another of my books, *Winter of the Wolves*!

What to think about when setting a historical fiction writing task

If you want to get the children to write a historical story, then a good place to start is to suggest they set it in a period you're already studying. So, if you're using a novel as a class reader, you could suggest a story which fleshes out a minor character, or looks at an event from a different or unusual point of view. Michael Morpurgo's story *War Horse* struck a chord with many readers because it looks at the terrible carnage of horses in the First World War in a way which illuminates the suffering of the whole conflict.

Good ideas for historical stories grow out of reading and thinking about history, but also talking about it, so it's worth setting aside some time simply to do that. Stories are always about people, and a good place to start is by asking questions of the history and the people of the past society you are studying. What was it actually like to live in a particular period? What problems, threats and challenges did people face? It's worth bearing in mind that a story needs a central character who has to deal with their life being thrown out of balance in some way – a Viking raid in which your parents are killed, living through a time of plague, being evacuated from London at the beginning of WW2 or being in the centre of a huge event. The challenges could be more domestic and personal, but the bigger the challenge, the more dramatic and exciting the story is going to be.

Once you've got what feels like a good idea for story, you need to do some research – books, TV programmes and films and the Internet are good starting points. You should certainly use this as an opportunity to talk about the quality and usefulness of any sources you use, especially on the Internet. Again, questions are the way to go – who has written or created this source? Is it someone who has an interest in writing or presenting the history in

a certain way? History is often written by the winners. What about the viewpoint of the losers, or those who have been excluded from history? Visits to museums, galleries and sites of historical interest can help too.

Then you need to think about striking a balance. I want my stories to be accurate, but I always feel that I need to know enough to make the history feel convincing without weighing it all down with information I've gathered from research. It's fiction, so ultimately you have to start making stuff up – against a realistic background, of course!

Writing and revising your story

I'm a great believer in planning a story before I actually start. For me, the structure of a story is really important. I think a story has a beginning, a middle and an end. In the beginning we meet the central character and find out what their problem is. In the middle they try to solve the problem, and (if it's a good story!), it gets worse. Then eventually the character works out what to do – and the ending is where it's all resolved.

In my experience children really enjoy talking about this and soon understand it. There are lots of examples of stories that work this way – fairy tales, classic stories, films – *Star Wars* is a very good example. This structure can be used as a template in which they can plan their stories, and that often leads to great ideas for scenes, action and dialogue. Those two things are very important – stories always work better when the characters are talking and doing things! Too much description and introspection can slow it all down.

It's also worth emphasising that editing is a process all professional writers go through. In fact, in my opinion, the best writers are those who edit themselves and spend most of their time revising what they've written! I firmly believe that you can always make any piece of writing better with revision. Again, questions help – is my story clear and easy to follow? Is the dialogue something somebody might actually say, especially in the period you've chosen to write about? Is everything consistent and tied up at the end?

Supporting pupils to find the right idea

The one question people always want to ask writers is – where do you get your ideas? That's no surprise – it does seem like a strange, mysterious phenomenon. How on Earth did Philip Pullman come up with the idea for *Northern Lights*? Did it just pop into his head, complete with daimons, armoured bears and a storyline involving a colossal struggle between good and evil? Or was there just a tiny seed out of which it all grew?

Only Philip could tell you, and the truth is that different writers get their ideas in different ways. For some a visual image or an object sets them thinking. For others it's a character who seems to walk into their minds and refuses to leave until the writer begins to tell a story which that character can inhabit. Sometimes a whole story seems to leap fully formed from the subconscious. At other times a tiny idea will lead to others, and it's almost like a

detective following clues in a mystery.

If you dig a little deeper with most writers, you'll find that ideas seem to grow out of a combination of *observation*, *experience* and *thought*.

Observation of the world around you – and particularly of people – can show you the strangeness and individuality behind even the most ordinary faces. Just spending some time eavesdropping on conversations on public transport or in queues for the supermarket check-out can be enormously valuable – and very enlightening. Stories are about being human, and the more you observe the people around you the better. Many writers also read a lot of non-fiction – history and science books for example! It's another way of coming across something that might spark off an idea. In the 1950s children's historical novelist Rosemary Sutcliff famously came across a mention of the Eagle from a Roman Legionary standard being found in an excavation at Silchester. From that she weaved an absolute classic about a young Roman seeking the standard of his father's legion which went missing north of Hadrian's Wall, *The Eagle of the Ninth*.

Experience is important because you and your pupils are human too, and their own (albeit short) past and memories can be great material for stories. Most writers quarry their lives for material, even if only to infuse their fictional characters with the tang of genuine thoughts and feelings, and of course some people write successful memoirs. But for fiction writers ideas can sometimes come when a new experience sparks a memory of an old one and puts it in a new light. Many children's writers find that having their own children or visiting schools brings back memories of their own childhood and sets them thinking. A great idea can also be a new slant on an old one, a universal theme filtered through one particular individual's experience, which can also include the books you've read and everything you've done. There are many tales of good versus evil, but *Northern Lights* could only have come from Philip Pullman's unique experiences and thinking.

Thought is important for most writers. Obviously, thought plays an important part in deciding whether an idea is a good one, and then in shaping it. But it is possible to think up an idea – many professional writers are asked to do that all the time, whether it's for a series of children's books for a specific age range, or for a TV soap storyline. Indeed, many professional writers would say that one of their main sources of inspiration is studying their bank statement. The secret is to have read lots (or watched lots) in the particular field they want to write for, and to think about the kinds of stories that are used.

The more you study stories with pupils, the more easily you'll see that there are particular types of story that come up again and again. The 'fish out of water' idea – the new detective on the squad, the new kid on the block, the new girl in class. The 'what-if' story – what if there was a secret entrance to another world at the end of your street, what if a pig in a picture book could actually fly? The 'love story' – boy or girl meets boy or girl, one loses the other and then gets them back – but that can be used as the basis for a school friendship story, too; pupil makes friend, pupil loses friend, pupil gets friend back. Once pupils get into the habit of thinking about stories in this way, and meshing them with their own experiences and observations, the possibilities become endless.

The important thing, of course, is to cultivate an open mind with pupils, one that is receptive to ideas, to get into the habits of observation and thinking. Try getting pupils to have a notebook and pen with them at all times for a while – if they don't write that great idea down they'll probably forget it! Just leave them there for a while. You'll find that when you go back to them with pupils, some will seem very thin, or instantly reminiscent of an already existing book or famous story. That doesn't have to be a problem – so long as it's not a straight copy, why not get them to have a go at something that's a different take on it?

Pupils might also find that some ideas just won't go away. At this stage it's probably best not to force it, so don't try to get them to start writing yet. If they have an idea like this, just allow them to play with it, spin it out, ask questions about it – who is the story about? Where is it set? What might happen? Who else might be in it? Children's writer Adele Geras says this is the best part of the whole process, the playful, creative stage when the more you relax into your idea the better it will be. And another children's writer – Jacqui Wilson – echoes that, saying that it can be like a childhood fantasy game, the kind you might have played when you had an imaginary friend (or several!).

But what happens when a pupil can't seem to make progress with an idea? How can you tell if a particular idea is the right one? It can be a hard decision. Probably the most difficult part of all is that a pupil might not discover that the idea isn't right until they've written most of the story. This is common and many writers find that the final product of their work might have moved a long way from the first idea. So it's important to let them know that they need to be prepared to adapt their idea if at all necessary.

Another problem can be that they might have lots of ideas that seem good, but that don't go anywhere, stories that peter out after great beginnings, or whose endings are contrived. Some writers feel that the idea is just the beginning and that it would kill their interest in a story if they knew the ending from the start. But others say that some of the best ideas come with the seeds of their resolutions already in them, or even just a hint that the ending is in the beginning. The great film director Billy Wilder – who made *Some Like It Hot*, *The Apartment* and many other classics – once said that if you have a problem in the last act of your story, then the problem is in your first act. By that he meant that in all the great stories there's an intimation of where they're taking you, if not how.

And if you sense any of that in something they come up with, however tenuous – then you can probably say that they have the right idea. Maybe even one that could end up being as big as *Northern Lights*...!

Character

Creating interesting characters is at the heart of any fiction writing. We read fiction to experience other people's lives and discover more about the human condition, whether our interest lies in crime stories, adventure, science fiction, romances or gritty realism. Even in hard-core science-fiction it's the characters that matter – what would *Star Trek* be without

Captain Kirk and Mr Spock?

There are some general principles in creating character that apply across the board – it's usually much better to show characters in action and talking rather than to rely on describing them or telling the reader what they're doing. Good characters are usually like the tip of an iceberg – their creator knows as much about them as God (or their mother) would, but we only see what is necessary for the story. The invisible part seems to lend weight to them, though. And really great central characters tend to change and grow emotionally in their stories. Consistency is absolutely vital too – characters can be surprising in what they do, but there should always be some sense that their actions are consistent at a deep level, that they're not acting out of character or chronological time.

One point to bear in mind is that it's not essential to come up with a complete, perfect description of what your characters look like. It can help to make a character more concrete in the reader's mind to provide some small detail and historical aspects such as clothing in order to bring the character to life in the mind's eye, but think of it as casting an actor in a film. Luke Skywalker might have had dark hair, not blonde, but he would still be the same person. In most stories, unless some aspect of a character's physical appearance plays an important role – a scar perhaps, or Shrek's looks, or the colour of someone's skin – the details don't matter all that much. We're more interested in Harry Potter's courage and resourcefulness than the colour of his hair or his eyes!

Plot

There's a lot of confusion about plot. It's a word that's often used inter-changeably with other terms to describe aspects of storytelling, such as storyline or narrative. But the word plot is a technical term, and we should use it to describe something specific. And the easiest way to understand this technical use is to start off with some simple definitions.

Most people have a sense that 'plot' implies some sort of 'plan' – a writer deliberately arranging the events of a story for specific effects, perhaps even moving scenes around to maximise tension and surprise. That's a very big part of what plot is all about, as we'll see a little further on. But if that's all there is, why don't we just use the word 'plan'? A plot is a plan, of course – in the Gunpowder Plot, for instance, Guy Fawkes and his co-conspirators planned to blow up the Houses of Parliament. But what made their plan a plot was the fact that they wanted to keep it secret.

There's another sense in the word plot, too. We use it to describe a piece of land marked out for a specific purpose, usually constructing a building of some kind. So if we combine these two definitions we see plot as a secret plan which marks out a particular territory. And that's what we mean when we use it to describe an aspect of storytelling. The plot of a story sets a framework within which the world of the story can be built. And a good plot – one in which everything comes together to deliver the effects the writer is after – should be hidden, a secret part of the story.

In contrast, a storyline is much more straightforward. It's a term that comes from TV writing and describes the actual events of a story in a sequence, rather like pearls on a string – this happens, that happens, and so on. It's almost indistinguishable from the word narrative. You can weave a plot out of a storyline or a narrative, but they're not the same.

Take *The Lord of the Rings*, for example. It contains many storylines – each character has a narrative, a sequence of events they either set in motion or suffer. Frodo becomes the ring bearer, heads off on his quest with his companions, becomes separated from most of them, continues with Samwise, reaches Mount Doom and manages to save the world.

But there's a large element of plot involved. Somebody called Gollum is mentioned in an early chapter. He seems like a fairly minor character in what is a massive story (over 1000 pages!), a creature who once had the ring of power, lost it and is now obsessed with it, pursuing whoever is the ring bearer now. He appears at odd times, but gradually he becomes more important, and finally plays a vital role in the story's resolution. Tolkien could have simply brought Gollum into the story towards the end, but by including him very early on – and dropping a few small clues here and there about his possible importance – he gives us both a shock of surprise and recognition at the same time. When you read the ending, you're surprised by what happens, but then you realise how appropriate it is.

That's how plotting works. You can tell a story in a straight line, with one thing happening after another and characters only appearing when they have a role to play. But it's much better to tease the reader by slipping in some clues and hints, or characters who might not be what they seem, or by foreshadowing major events that will come later in the story. Again in *The Lord of the Rings*, when we meet Strider we're not sure if he's a good guy or a villain, and that sets up tension, making us want to read on and find out more. In that sense withholding information from the reader is also part of weaving a plot. Strider turns out to be Aragorn, a great hero and king in waiting. But if we'd known that from the beginning the story would have lost an enormous part of its suspense and surprise. After all, isn't that what we read stories and watch movies for?

Of course, plotting a story can be quite difficult when a pupil might not have any idea of how their story is going to end. So how can they put the right clues in at the beginning or in the middle? Some writers finish the story then go back and re-arrange the storylines to hide certain aspects, or insert clues early on once they've completed a draft and worked everything out. Even writers who plan their stories in detail often change things, and the truth is that great plotting is a dark art, only learned by trying to make plots work. But there are ways of making it easier.

Firstly, remember that plot grows out of character. If your pupils have a good central character, with a real problem to face or conflict to overcome or a specific goal to follow, then it should be fairly straightforward to devise actions that the character will take. Those actions will lead to reactions from other characters, and so on. But all those actions and reactions should be consistent with the kind of characters they are and the time in which the story is set. As soon as sight of that is lost, characters will become puppets, and the story will feel unreal and contrived. It's taking the easy way out – it's much easier to think up what feel like dramatic scenes on their own than to create living characters. But it's often

the kiss of death for a story.

Secondly, it's vital not to give too much away, especially at the beginning of the story. That might sound paradoxical – isn't plot all about giving hints and clues? But that's the point – it's about teasing readers, making them interested in the fictional world and characters, hinting that there are thrills and spills and surprises to come. The temptation to start a story with huge chunks of exposition and character description is strong, but must be resisted at all costs.

And thirdly – study plot in all its forms with pupils. Try to be aware in your class reading of what the writer is doing. Watch out for those early clues and hints, and try to follow them through the story. Do the same with films you see and TV programmes. Stories told on screen are often very plot-driven – they have to be to hold an audience's attention. Reading crime or adventure fiction is also a good way to study plot – it's all in the clues!

Good luck!



Authored by Tony Bradman

Tony Bradman is the author of over 200 books and previous winner of the Young Quills award for children's historical fiction.

