Find Topics for Historical Fiction

1. Focus

Introduce Historical Fiction Writing

Display a variety of historical fiction books. Use the sample think-aloud below as a model of how to talk to students about the range of topics in historical fiction. Use the sample books to explain that writers of historical fiction usually have some personal connection to their subjects.

Sample think-aloud. Say: I want to share some historical fiction books with you. The stories in these books are set in different time periods and cover a wide range of topics. The Game of Silence by Louise Erdrich tells the story of a Native American girl from the Ojibwe tribe living in 1850 on an island in Lake Superior. Under the Blood Red Sun by Graham Salisbury is about a Japanese American boy, living in Hawaii in 1941, who witnesses the bombing of Pearl Harbor and then experiences ethnic tension after the United States enters World War II. One Crazy Summer by Rita Garcia Williams tells about an eleven-year-old girl’s experiences of an important moment in African American history during the summer of 1968 in Oakland, California. I find it amazing how authors choose so many different historical time periods in which to set their works. I’m amazed because they have to immerse themselves in what was happening in particular places at particular times.

Say: Writers often have a personal connection to their topics. The authors of the books I just mentioned got their ideas from their family history or state history. Rita Garcia Williams was born in 1957 and would have been eleven in 1968, like Delphine, the main character in her book. The author and her character were both born in New York. On her website, the author says she grew up very aware of the events of the 1960s, which is the subject of her novel. Louise Erdrich is a member of the Ojibwe tribe, which is also called the Chippewa. Nearly all of her books are about Native American characters and aspects of her heritage. Graham Salisbury is not Japanese, but he grew up in Hawaii on the islands of Oahu and Hawaii. It is very common for writers to feel connected to the topics they pick for their historical fiction stories.

Introduce the Purpose and Audience for Historical Fiction

Say: You may wonder about the purpose of historical fiction. Why not just read straight history textbooks or nonfiction books instead? I like to read historical fiction because it helps me understand how people lived and felt long before I was born. As a writer, when you blend history and fiction together in a story, you can bring the past alive in a way that informational writing about historical facts can’t do. I imagine that the audience for historical fiction includes anyone interested in learning about the lives and adventures of people who lived in a particular time and place long ago.
2. Rehearse

Practice Telling Historical Fiction Story Ideas Orally

Invite students to work with partners. Each student should tell their partner about a historical period or event in which they have a particular interest and why. Encourage students to think about historical events, settings, and time periods that have some significance to their family history or culture. The partner listening should be prepared to retell this connection to the class.

Use “Strategies to Support ELs” to assist English learners or other students who need support.

Share Historical Connections with the Class

Invite volunteers to tell about what part of history their partner is interested in. Use one or more of the following questions to engage students in discussion about the practice activity:

Storyteller
• What is your personal interest in this historical period or event?

Listener
• What questions do you have about your partner’s idea so far that you might like to see answered in a historical fiction story about this topic?

3. Independent Writing and Conferring

Say: We come from a wide range of places and cultures, which all existed before we were born. In the next several weeks, we will be making personal connections to historical subjects to help us bring the past alive in our historical fiction.

Encourage students to write a paragraph describing a personal connection they have to any historical time period or a particular event in history.

4. Share

Bring students together. Invite volunteers to share the personal connections they have to historical time periods or events.

Strategies to Support ELs

Beginning
Meet with beginning ELs one on one while other students work with partners. Display illustrated historical fiction books to build the concept of historical fiction. Point to one of the books. Say: This book is historical fiction. This book is about ______. Display illustrations that show the time and place where the story is set. Invite students to tell you the historical time and place by saying “This book is about ______.”

Intermediate
Pair ELs with fluent English speakers during partner practice. Display simple sentence frames on chart paper and model how students can use them to describe a historical period and/or a connection between a historical period or event and their family or culture. For example:

I am interested in ______.
A long time ago, people used to ______.
My ancestors ______.

Advanced
Pair ELs with fluent English speakers during partner practice.

All Levels
If you have students whose first language is Spanish, share these English/Spanish cognates to help them understand the lesson focus: ancestor/el antepasado; connection/la conexión; historical/histórico(a).