

**INTEGRATING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE  
INTO THE UPPER ELEMENTARY SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM:  
THE JAPANESE INTERNMENT DURING WORLD WAR II**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

There exists a significant body of research on the role of narrative in the development of children's historical understanding. This research, combined with the current emphasis on integration of various subject matter, has caused scholars and educators to look closely at the value of using children's literature in the social studies curriculum. Children's historical fiction has the potential to make history more appealing and meaningful to students, with stories which focus on the human and moral aspects of historical issues.

The focus for this study is the Japanese internment in North America during World War II. The selection of this historical episode may be explained by its popularity in recent children's historical fiction, the need to educate students in British Columbia about a topic of local concern, and the potential for the issues surrounding the internment to stimulate classroom discussion and critical analysis. A brief historical summary of the events leading up to the internment is provided in chapter two of this study. In addition, examples of children's literature focussing on this topic are summarized and critiqued.

Chapter three examines the value of historical fiction in children's social and intellectual development. From a social perspective, stories, unlike traditional textbooks, provide emotional and imaginative appeal to children, and promote a sense of identity with the past through believable characters and compelling plots. From a cognitive perspective, many researchers believe that historical fiction is more effective than expository text in developing time and causation concepts, in enabling children to memorize and recall historical facts, and in fostering critical thinking.

Chapter four explores the need for careful evaluation of children's historical fiction. Story components such as setting, plot, characterization and

style each play a role in determining if historical novels and picture books portray the past in an accurate and fair-minded manner. Examples from the children's literature on the internment illustrate how teachers and students can critically evaluate and judge historical fiction.

Chapter five concludes this study by exploring the concerns regarding the use of children's literature to teach history. Research indicates that children respond to history through literature on a highly emotional level and often do not recognize the subjective nature of stories. Teacher mediation is crucial in helping children critically examine fiction for accuracy and bias. This study provides teachers with recommendations for making critical inquiry and analysis an integral part of the classroom environment whenever children's fiction is used to explore historical topics.

To my son Matthew, whose sound afternoon sleeps allowed me to complete this thesis in time, and to my husband Dan, without whose enduring and unselfish support it could never have been undertaken.

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## **Chapter One**

### **OVERVIEW**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past two decades, a significant number of studies have considered how to make the teaching and learning of history more stimulating, meaningful and effective for young students. Many researchers (Brozo & Tomlinson 1986; Cianciolo 1981; Downey & Levstik 1988; Lehman & Hayes 1985; Levstik 1986, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1993; Richgels, Tomlinson & Tunnel 1983, 1993) have identified children's literature (fiction and non-fiction) as a valuable tool in enhancing the way we teach history.

Narrative, as found in children's trade books, is considered by these researchers and many other educators as an excellent literary form for presenting history to children, superior by far to the traditional history textbooks so commonly used in the past. In recent years there has been a proliferation of case studies and journal articles focussing on the inherent value of integrating children's literature, particularly historical fiction, into the social studies curriculum.

These studies are convincing and encouraging for teachers who enjoy using picture books and novels to teach history. However, in their enthusiasm for promoting children's literature as an alternative to dry textbooks, most researchers (with the exception of Lehman and Hayes and Levstik), have neglected to address the importance of critical analysis with regards to children's historical fiction. Children's literature, like any piece of historical writing, must be read and considered from a critical point of view for its ability to portray the past in an unbiased and balanced way. This is particularly true when the historical events are complex and the issues surrounding the events

sensitive in nature. Levstik (1989, 1990, 1992) in particular found that upper elementary students often become so emotionally engrossed in the historical story told through popular novels that they are no longer willing or able to question the truth of historical fiction. The danger is that without teacher intervention or mediation (Levstik, 1992) students will not become critical readers of historical fiction. If children are to develop a mature sense of historical judgement through historical fiction, they need the tools and the opportunities to systematically question and evaluate their sources of historical "truth", whether that is found in the traditional history textbook or in a particularly convincing and moving historical novel.

### **Focus of the Study**

This study will consider the Japanese Canadian/American internment during the Second World War both as a model historical period which can be taught to students at the upper intermediate grades, and as a popular theme in recent children's trade books (including picture books, novels and non-fiction). There are three main reasons for choosing this particular period of history.

First, the Japanese Canadian internment is a significant part of our national and local <sup>1</sup> past which has been neglected by both history textbooks and curriculum writers for many years. It was not until recently that elementary history textbooks began to address this sensitive and awkward episode in our history. This author believes there is a definite need to educate young people about this aspect of our local heritage and history which affected so many lives. A deep and critical understanding of the events and issues surrounding the internment will not only help students understand this historical topic, but will also provide them with the skills to fairly and critically evaluate other historical

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<sup>1</sup> "Local" in the context of this study refers to B.C. The history of the internment is particularly pertinent to students living in the lower mainland, Fraser Valley and the interior of B.C. where the camps were located.

events and to appreciate the complexity of both historical and current events which continue to shape our world.

Second, while many history textbooks tend to down play the significance of the internment, this event has been a popular theme in children's literature over the past twenty-five years. Children's books about the internment appeared thirty years after the bombing of Pearl Harbour (and the beginning of the evacuation on the west coast) with the publication of Yoshiko Uchida's *Journey to Topaz* (1971), and sequel *Journey Home* (1978) and Shizuye Takashima's *A Child in Prison Camp* (1971). The success of these three books may have encouraged other writers to tell the story of the internment in a variety of different ways. During the 1980s and 1990s many more children's books appeared including *Behind Barbed Wire* (Davis, 1982), *The Eternal Spring of Mr. Ito* (Garrigue, 1985), *Naomi's Road* (Kogawa, 1986), *The Journey* (Hamanaka, 1990), *The Moon Bridge* (Savin, 1992) *Baseball Saved Us* (Mochizuki, 1993), and *I Am An American* (Stanley, 1994). The internment continues to be a popular theme in children's stories, providing social studies teachers and students with a wealth of trade books to explore when dealing with this topic.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the internment of the Japanese in Canada and the United States provides a historical topic with enough complexity and sensitivity to warrant considerable debate and in-depth analysis within the classroom. True to the nature of history, the events which led to the internment of so many Canadian and American citizens involved many complex and opposing viewpoints. It is vital that children learn to appreciate the complexity of the past and avoid considering historical events in clear-cut terms of right or wrong, or the historical players in simple terms of good and evil. The

children's books examined in this study offer a rich learning tool in social studies, provided they are read and evaluated critically by both teachers and students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is threefold: to outline the rationale for integrating children's literature in the social studies curriculum; to provide educators with a critical review of current children's literature which deals with the Japanese Canadian and American internments during World War II; and to propose specific recommendations for classroom practice whenever children's literature is integrated into the social studies curriculum.

### **Procedure**

The first part of the study (Chapter Two) examines the theme of the Japanese internment. A brief historical background to this period is provided, followed by a detailed and critical examination of current children's literature about the internment. Children's literature reviews from well known journal sources, as well as the author's own assessment of the books have been used for evaluation purposes.

The second part of this study (Chapter Three) includes an overview of current educational theories, research and case studies in the areas of social studies pedagogy; a discussion of the history and value of narrative as an effective learning tool; and a rationale for integrating children's literature into the social studies curriculum as a more meaningful way of teaching and learning about historical events. Throughout this discussion examples of children's literature about the internment (reviewed in Chapter Two) are used to support the research.

The third part of the study (Chapter Four) takes a more cautionary tone by

examining certain limitations inherent in children's stories as tools for teaching history. Readers are provided with a general set of criteria for evaluating children's historical fiction. The criteria for evaluation is based on such categories as historical accuracy<sup>2</sup>, setting, plot, characterization and writing style. Once again, key examples from the literature on the internment reviewed in Chapter Two will be included for clarification and emphasis. As well, this chapter examines key moral issues relating to historical narrative, including the subjective nature of fiction and the recent trend toward historical presentism in popular representations of historical events.

In the fifth and final chapter, specific recommendations are outlined for the use of historical fiction within the classroom, highlighting the importance of teaching children to be critical readers who can analyze and critically evaluate stories about historical events.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the term 'historical accuracy', as it relates to fiction, must be understood in a broader sense than 'absolute truth'. Fiction writers take certain liberties with history, inventing characters, scenes and dialogue as they create their story. However, responsible historical fiction writing must avoid distortion of historical facts and any creative inventions must be plausible and remain true to the spirit of the past. For the purposes of this study, 'accuracy' implies a faithfulness to historical facts.



## Chapter Two

### THE JAPANESE CANADIAN INTERNMENT

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The internment of some 22,000 Japanese Canadians during World War II has been referred to by one Canadian historian as the "sad story about the vile treatment of one group of human beings by another" (Broadbent, 1992, p. 2). Others, including historians, politicians and Japanese Canadian and American citizens often refer to the evacuation and deportation as one of the most shameful and regrettable events in the history of both Canada and the United States. On September 22, 1988, the Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney formally apologized to Japanese Canadians in the House of Commons with his Redress Settlement speech which began:

Nearly half a century ago, in the crisis of wartime, the Government of Canada wrongfully incarcerated, seized the property, and disenfranchised thousands of citizens of Japanese ancestry. We cannot change the past. But we must, as a nation, have the courage to face up to these historical facts. (Omatsu, 1992, p. 25)

Along with this long awaited apology, Japanese Canadians were offered financial compensation for the losses they incurred during the war. Similar actions were taken by the American government just one month prior to the Canadian Redress Settlement. On August 10, 1988, the American Congress passed Public Law 100-383 which was followed by an official apology and commitment to financial compensation for former Japanese Americans internees (Savin, 1992).

In order to fully understand this period in our history, it is necessary to first place the internment in its proper context by examining the political climate of the early part of this century in both Canada and the U.S., as well as the global

historical events which preceded the evacuation orders.

Many historians have argued that the evacuation policy during World War II must be viewed in light of the decades of prejudice and racism towards Japanese immigrants and citizens that existed in both Canada and the United States prior to the war.

The uprooting of Japanese Canadians in 1942 was not an isolated act of racism, but the culmination of discriminatory attitudes directed towards them from the early days of settlement. The war itself offered the opportune moment for many powerful politicians, business and labour groups, and individuals in B.C., to attack the social and economic base of the thriving Japanese Canadian community, under the guise of national security. Indeed, for many decades before, Japanese Canadians, as well as Chinese and Indo-Canadians, had been constantly harassed by many racists in B.C. (Miki & Kobayashi, 1991, p. 17)

Japanese immigrants settled along the west coast of Canada and the U.S. in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Denied the right to enter mainstream professions by the governments of the day, many Japanese settlers established themselves within the resource industries. They quickly became successful in the fishing, lumber and farming industries where they were willing to work long hard hours. Their economic success did not go unnoticed by Canadian and American Caucasians who began to resent the Japanese competition. A period of anti-Asiatic racism began which would last for many years in both Canada and the United States (Adachi, 1976). Riots began in B.C. in the late 1800s and reached an ugly climax in 1907 when whites from the Asian Exclusion League marched through Japan town in Vancouver, breaking store windows and destroying homes (Miki & Kobayashi, 1991). In the U.S., wide-spread racism began with "The Yellow Peril" slogan in the early 1900s which promoted racist fantasies about a Japanese invasion of America. Anti-Orientalism gripped the nation and led to the proliferation of stereotypes and labels for the Japanese

such as "heathens" and "Dirty Japs". As fear and resentment of the Japanese immigrants rose, particularly in the cities of Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles, there followed a series of riots, picketing of Japanese businesses, appeals for white boycotts and for segregated schools for Asian children (Davis, 1982). Politicians in both Canada and the U.S. did little to discourage this racist hysteria; instead they profited from it by promoting racist policies in their campaign speeches (Roy, 1969; Hamanaka, 1990). Laws were passed in both countries which restricted citizenship and land ownership by persons of Japanese descent. Although many second generation (Nisei) Japanese Canadians and Americans had been born in North America, they were still denied the right to vote.

However, it must be noted that the widespread fear and resentment towards the Japanese in North America was also fuelled by more global events, and in particular by the aggressive militaristic policies of Japan herself during the 1930s. Horrified North Americans watched newsreels of the brutal Japanese Army attacks and invasions of South East Asia. In 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria and by the following year had begun a large scale aggression against China. This aggressive military action caused Japan's relations with her neighbouring countries to deteriorate as the decade progressed. By 1937, Japan was spending almost 50% of her budget on armament and the U.S. in particular saw an increasingly militarized Japan as a serious threat to America's own interests in the Pacific (Browne, 1972, p. 104). By the end of the decade, Japan occupied almost the whole of China. In 1941, after the fall of France by Hitler's armies, the former French territory of Indochina fell to the Japanese. The United States and Canada condemned these militaristic policies and entered into a war of words with Japan. American and

Japanese diplomats began negotiating in Washington in an effort to relieve tension and improve relations between the two countries (p. 104).

Then, to the shock and disbelief of North Americans, the Japanese Air Force bombed the U.S. Naval base in Pearl Harbour, Hawaii on December 7, 1941. This surprise attack destroyed almost all the American ships and planes stationed at Pearl Harbour and killed or wounded over 3500 American soldiers (Davis, 1982, p. 4). Within hours, Japan staged a series of invasions on other American, French and British bases in Malaya, Thailand, Guam, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Philippines. Within weeks Japan had almost full military control of Asia.

On December 8, 1941, just one day after the attack on Pearl Harbour, President Franklin D. Roosevelt officially declared war on Imperialist Japan. A surge of patriotism followed in the U.S.; Americans were anxious to sign up to fight against the Japanese. There was also an explosion of hatred in Canada and the U.S. against all things Japanese and a renewed surge of racism against Japanese Canadians and Americans. Rumours spread quickly in this atmosphere of fear and hysteria. Stories of supposed Japanese spies living along the west coast worsened the situation. People began to look suspiciously at the Japanese Canadian fishermen and farmers (some of whom were second or third generation Canadians) as potential saboteurs and spies working in favour of the Japanese forces. Japanese communities in both countries, anxious to prove their loyalty, condemned the attacks, burned ties with their ancestral homeland and volunteered in the war effort. Their efforts, however, were largely ignored by most Canadian and American politicians who, driven by wartime fear and hysteria, began calling for the removal and internment of any "enemy aliens" who might pose a threat to national security (Adachi, 1976;

Miki & Kobayashi, 1991).

In the United States F.B.I agents began rounding up prominent members of the Japanese communities within hours of the Pearl Harbour attack. By the evening of December 7, 1941 over 700 Japanese "aliens" had been arrested and within four days that number rose to 1,370 (Davis, 1982, p. 8). Anyone of Japanese descent with economic or political connections to Japan was considered dangerous and liable for arrest.

By February of 1942 the American government was conducting spot raids on Japanese homes, had declared certain coastal areas to be restricted areas where the Japanese were forbidden to enter and had imposed curfews on Japanese citizens. However, anti-Japanese feelings were by now in full swing and the public and key politicians clamoured for even greater security measures. On February 19, 1942 President Roosevelt signed Executive Order No. 9066 which officially gave the War Department the authority to enforce evacuation orders against Japanese Americans. The fate of over 120, 000 Americans of Japanese descent was sealed and the Relocation program had begun (p. 37).

In Canada similar security measures were taken by the government against the Japanese. By early 1942, fishing boats were impounded, newspapers closed down and any suspicious items (cars, cameras, radios, firearms, etc.) were confiscated in searches by the R.C.M.P. Curfews and restricted areas were established for the Japanese in the same way they were in the U.S. On January 14, 1942 the Canadian government passed Order in Council PC 365 which removed all male "enemy aliens" from designated protected areas and moved them to road camps near Jasper Alberta (Miki & Kobayashi, 1991, p. 22). In February, after passing Order in Council PC 1486,

the Canadian government invoked the War Measures Act which effectively stripped the Japanese of their Canadian birthright (officially labelling them as "Enemy Aliens") and initiated a series of actions against them including expulsion from protected areas (within 100 miles of the B.C. coast), seizure and sale of property and finally internment or exile back to Japan. In some cases, Japanese families were given as little as twenty four hours to vacate their houses (p. 25).

In both Canada and the United States, the Japanese were initially removed from their homes and sent to temporary centres at fairgrounds, racetracks, parks and other large, unused spaces. Horse stalls, makeshift shacks and old livestock buildings were used as temporary housing. In Vancouver, Hastings Park was used as the clearing site until arrangements could be made to move the Japanese to more permanent camps. The conditions in these temporary holding grounds were deplorable. In the U.S. the camps were surrounded by barbed wire and patrolled by armed military police. The Japanese Americans were treated like prisoners of war in these overcrowded "Assembly Centres" (Davis, 1982). In Canada, while the temporary centres were not as heavily patrolled by the military, the Japanese Canadians suffered the same indignities as their neighbours in the States; the centres were overcrowded and the lack of privacy, food and sanitation made living conditions primitive (Adachi, 1976).

Meanwhile, both countries were busy making arrangements to prepare permanent internment camps for the Japanese. By the summer of 1942, the Japanese Americans were transported by train or bus to ten relocation camps in the states of Arizona, California, Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, Colorado and Arkansas. Although these sites were euphemistically called "wartime

communities", they were privately referred to as concentration or internment camps. The camps were heavily patrolled with barbed wire fences and full time watch tower guards under orders to shoot any person who tried to escape. The American permanent camps, located in desolate areas with severe climates, were not much more comfortable than the temporary centres had been. Overcrowded army barracks and giant mess halls provided Japanese families with little in the way of privacy or even the most basic of comforts (Davis, 1982).

In Canada, the Japanese internment centres were set up in small ghost towns (former Gold Rush sites) in the interior of B.C. While these relocation centres were more like small communities than the prison camps set up in the U.S., the living conditions within the camps were just as overcrowded and lacking in basic sanitation, especially during the first few months as the B.C. Security Commission scrambled to complete the housing centres. While the Japanese Canadian internment experience was in some ways less of a prison sentence than that of the Japanese Americans, the Japanese in Canada suffered perhaps greater financial and personal loss than the American internees. The land and personal property of Japanese Canadians had been seized by the government without any financial compensation. As well, the Japanese Canadians were forced to pay for their own internment and, in some cases, families were separated during the incarceration. In the U.S. the Japanese kept the proceeds from the sale of their own property, had food and housing provided in the camps and were incarcerated in family groups (Miki & Kobayashi, 1991, p. 51).

When the war ended in 1945, the camps in both countries were closed. Not one Canadian or American of Japanese descent was ever convicted of a war crime. The Japanese Americans were free to return to their homes along

the west coast. Most reestablished their communities and businesses. In Canada, however, the injustice towards the Japanese did not end so quickly. Instead of allowing the internees to return to their homes, the policies of "dispersal" and "repatriation" were put into effect. Japanese Canadians were no longer welcome to move back to their former communities on the coast; instead they were given the choice of either relocating east of the Rockies or being deported to Japan. Most Japanese Canadians decided to stay in Canada and rebuild their lives in cities out east, despite the humiliation of the internment camps. It was not until 1949 that Japanese Canadians were permitted to return to the west coast (p. 49).

### **THE JAPANESE INTERNMENT IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

Many authors and historians have noted the silence that prevailed within the Japanese communities in the decades following the internment. Most Japanese Canadians and Americans rarely spoke of their experiences in the camps and accepted their shame in silence. It was not until the 1970s that the Japanese in both Canada and the United States began to speak out about the injustice inflicted upon them during the war and demand not only formal apologies, but also financial compensation. Committees for redress were formed and a decade of struggle followed, during which time hearings were held, personal and often shocking testimonies were heard, and key politicians in both countries were lobbied. It was not until the late 1980s that the demands made by Japanese Americans and Canadians were met.

It may also be argued that a certain silence existed regarding the internment in other domains, particularly in education. In the years following the war, the forced evacuation, suffering and personal losses of so many Japanese Americans and Canadians were mentioned only briefly in history text books and



the theme did not appear at all in children's literature. However, the redress movement in both countries would break that silence and mark the beginning of a number of historical novels, picture books, autobiographies and non-fiction books for children which explored this sensitive and dramatic period in our history.

The following pages contain a brief summary and review of the children's books used in this study. The summaries and critiques serve as points of reference for the more in-depth discussions regarding the value of narrative (Chapter Three) and the criteria for selection of historical fiction (Chapter Four). These picture books, novels and non-fiction trade books were recommended to the author by educators, librarians and children's literature critics. The books were selected primarily on the basis of their relevance to the historical topic: they deal directly with the issue of the Japanese internment in Canada or the United States during World War II. These books were also chosen for their accessibility to teachers in British Columbia; while some titles may not be available in every school library, all are accessible through public libraries and/or children's book stores. All of the books are appropriate, in terms of reading and interest levels, for use with upper elementary students.

The books have been divided into three categories of American Fiction, Canadian Fiction and Non-Fiction Books for Children, and are listed in chronological order within each category. The emphasis will be on the first two categories; non-fiction titles and brief reviews are included only as suggested supplementary resource materials during a unit on the internment.

### **American Fiction**

#### ***Journey to Topaz* (Yoshiko Uchida)**

In 1971, exactly 30 years after the bombing of Pearl Harbour, Yoshiko

Uchida published this semi-autobiographical novel fully entitled *Journey to Topaz: A Story of the Japanese American Evacuation*. This was the first children's book about the Japanese internment to appear in the United States. The story of the Sakane family, told through the eyes of 11-year-old Yuki, is based on the author's personal experiences as a young child during the war.

The story begins in Berkley, California in December, 1941. The Sakane family listens with shock and horror to the news bulletin announcing the bombing of Pearl Harbour on the radio. They begin to worry about how this horrible attack will affect them. Within hours, the F.B.I. appear at the Sakane home to conduct a search. Yuki's father, who works for a Japanese firm, is escorted away and held in a prisoner-of war-camp in San Francisco. After a dismal Christmas without their father, the family learns they will soon be evacuated away from the west coast along with all other Japanese Americans. Within months, the Sakanes must sell most of their personal belongings and prepare themselves to leave their home and friends. In April of 1942 Yuki, her mother and 18-year-old brother Ken are herded off to a temporary assembly centre at Tanforan Racetrack to be housed in a crowded horse stall and surrounded by barbed wire and guarded watch towers. After a few months the family is once again uprooted and transported to a more permanent camp at the Relocation Centre in Topaz, Utah. The Sakanes eventually adapt to life in the camps, despite the harsh desert climate, overcrowded conditions and threat of disease. Yuki makes new friends, attends school and is finally reunited with her father. The story ends when the family is granted special permission to leave the camp and move to Salt Lake City.

*Journey To Topaz* was well received by critics in the early 1970s, primarily because of the vividness and intimacy with which Uchida wrote this

tale of her own childhood. One critic wrote, "The impact of the story probably derives its force from the actually remembered experiences of the author and her family" (Horn Book, 1971, p. 615). Yet the story itself, based on what must have been for Uchida very painful 30-year-old memories, is told with remarkable fairness to all people involved. No attempt is made by the author to simplify the events, or to portray history in a biased manner with stereotyped characters. In fact, Uchida consistently counter-balances the racism and anger of some California residents with the generosity and kindness of many other white Americans. The Japanese American characters are particularly believable as they struggle between feelings of bitterness and resentment towards the American government who has betrayed them, and a solemn desire to prove their loyalty to the United States.

### ***Journey Home* (Yoshiko Uchida)**

Published in 1978, this sequel to *Journey to Topaz* continues the story of the Sakane family after their departure from the internment camp. They are living in a boarding house in Salt Lake City, waiting for an end to the war, the return of Yuki's brother Ken, and permission to return to California. The U.S. Army finally revokes the Exclusion Order against the Japanese on the west coast. The family returns to Berkley and is sponsored by the hostel set up in their former Anglican church.

The return home is a painful one for Yuki and her family who, like their Japanese friends, continue to be victims of racism and hatred even after the end of the war. Old Japanese temples, churches and gardens have been vandalized. Japanese businesses, sold in haste before the internment, are now too expensive to buy back. Racist comments towards the "Japs" are still common utterances. There are no jobs or houses available to "enemy aliens"

returning from camps, so the Sakanes decide to pool their resources with friends from Topaz in order to open up a small grocery. Fire caused by arsonists almost destroys the store one night; however, with the help of kindly neighbours, the Sakanes manage to maintain both their business and their hope for a brighter future in America.

Like her first novel, Uchida's *Journey Home* lacks any of the bitterness or resentment one might expect from such painful childhood memories. The author has once again endeavoured to write a story in which both Caucasian and Japanese Americans are fairly and realistically portrayed. The kindness to Yuki's family extended by the Olssens next door is particularly significant when one learns that their only son was killed by the Japanese. Uchida is also careful not to portray all the Japanese characters in the story as flawless; through the character of Uncle Oka the reader recognizes that feelings of prejudice and resentment were also harboured by the Japanese towards the whites, particularly in post-war America. Throughout the story, however, the emphasis is on understanding and acceptance rather than hatred or bitterness. This is essentially a story about forgiveness and hope for a better future.<sup>3</sup>

### ***The Moonbridge* (Marcia Savin)**

This historical novel, published in 1992, appeared some ten years after the publication of *Journey Home* and, like the earlier novel, the events take place in California. *Moon Bridge* differs from Uchida's novel, however, because

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<sup>3</sup> Yoshiko Uchida also wrote an autobiography in 1982 entitled *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family*. This book chronicles, in a much more detailed manner, the events portrayed in her two earlier works of fiction. Because *Desert Exile* was written for an adult audience, it will not be included in the discussions which follow in the next two chapters of this study. However, teachers should be aware of this book as a potential resource for the classroom when planning a unit on the internment or when reading either of Uchida's historical novels for children.

it is told from the point of view of Ruthie, a Caucasian girl, who experiences personal loss when her best friend Mitzi must move away and live in an internment camp.

The first part of the novel explores the friendship which develops between Ruthie and Mitzi. It is 1941 in San Francisco and, following the bombing of Pearl Harbour, many of the children in Ruthie's school are angry and resentful of the Japanese. Mitzi Fujimoto suffers taunts, threats and isolation from the other students in her new school. Even Ruthie's beloved teacher Miss Lewis seems to hate the Japanese. Only Ruthie is willing to befriend this small Japanese American girl. The two eventually become close friends.

As the violence and threats against the Japanese in Japan town increase, and rumours of evacuation spread, Mitzi's family must begin to make preparations to leave California. Without warning, Ruthie's best friend is suddenly gone, taken away to a temporary camp at Tanforan Race Track. The two girls write frequently at first, but then all correspondence is cut off when Mitzi's family is taken to a more permanent internment camp in Arkansas. Ruthie wonders if she will ever see her best friend again. Years pass and Ruthie faithfully continues to write letters to her Japanese friend, even though they can never be mailed to her. When the war ends, Ruthie finally receives a letter from Mitzi and the two arrange to meet at the moon bridge in the old Japanese Gardens. Both girls have changed significantly after four years of adolescence, but the bond between them still remains.

There are frequent period references throughout *Moonbridge* to the historical events and issues surrounding the war and the internment and the author has attempted to recreate, with as much detail and accuracy as possible,

a realistic picture of wartime San Francisco. Unfortunately, Savin spends too much time at the beginning of the novel on tedious passages about common school yard occurrences, including the manipulation and cruelty of Ruthie's little friends towards the new Japanese student. Most of the characters in the story appear rather flat: the children, with the exception of Ruthie, are unbelievably heartless and Ruthie's and Mitzi's parents seem more like banal stereotypes than real people. Even though Savin attempts to create a balance between racist and non-racist whites through the characters of Miss Lewis and Miss O'Connor, their opposing attitudes towards the Japanese and the speeches they deliver to the class seem a little too deliberate. Even the characterization of Ruthie and Mitzi has been criticized by some. In the Kirkus Review one critic wrote: "the two girls are little more than types (the good, understanding American; the bewildered victim of malicious government policy) while their friendship seems contrived to depict the casualties of the home front; the sentimentality never blossoms into genuine emotion" (Kirkus Review, 1992, p. 1260). *Moonbridge* lacks both the emotional impact and the historical significance of Uchida's earlier novels.

### ***Baseball Saved Us* (Ken Mochizuki)**

In this beautifully illustrated picture book published in 1993, Mochizuki tells the story of a young boy's family living in a Japanese internment camp during World War II. The story is told in the first person narrative, from the point of view of Shorty, a small boy who describes, with simplicity and child-like innocence, the series of events that forced his family to leave their home in California, as well as life in the camp that "wasn't anything like home".

The story, inspired by actual events, highlights the building of a baseball field in camp to provide recreation and a sense of purpose to the Japanese

families interned. Everyone in the camp contributes to the project. The grown-ups and children work together to build the field and bleachers. Bats, balls and gloves arrive from friends back home, and the mothers in the camp even make uniforms from old mattress covers. Soon the field is ready and there are baseball games all the time. Shorty practises hard, but he isn't that good. The other kids tease him and Shorty even senses that the guard in the watch tower is taunting him. Finally, in the last championship game of the year, Shorty musters up all his inner strength and determination and proves his ability to everyone by hitting the winning home run.

Back home in California, after the war, Shorty faces discrimination of another kind. Children in school won't talk or eat lunch with him, and on the baseball field he must not only prove his competence, but ignore the racist jeers from the spectators. The end of the story leaves the reader with the feeling that Shorty will eventually overcome all of these obstacles and in the process will have gained dignity and respect for himself.

This picture book is sure to appeal to upper elementary readers. The story is simple and yet the messages about racism, discrimination and courage are clear and effective. The themes of injustice and proving oneself will be easily grasped and appreciated by students. Furthermore, the book is faithful to the history of the internment and detailed enough to serve as an interesting complement to the novels and non-fiction resources available for older grades.

### ***The Bracelet (Yoshiko Uchida)***

In 1993, Uchida draws once again on her own childhood experiences to create a story, this time in picture book form, about separation, friendship and the power and importance of memories. Uchida's text is brought to life even more vividly for young readers by Joanna Yardley's gentle watercolour

paintings; each illustration captures the mood and emotions of the story as it progresses from Emi's empty house on the coast to the dismal, horse stalls and barren landscape at Tanforan Race Tracks.

This story is similar to the one told in Uchida's *Journey to Topaz* except that historical details have been simplified. Emi (based on the character of Yuki's friend in the earlier novels) is a young girl whose family is forced to leave their home in Berkeley because of the war against Japan. Emi's father is sent to a prisoner-of-war camp in Montana, while the rest of the family is shipped off to Tanforan to await removal to a more permanent camp in the desert. Just before Emi leaves the empty house, her best friend Laurie Madison gives her a beautiful gold bracelet as a going away gift. Emi is touched by the gift, but saddened by the realization that she may never see Laurie again.

When the family must finally leave their home, Emi feels lonely and abandoned. The detention centre is crowded and frightening, with "soldiers carrying guns and bayonets standing at every doorway". Emi and her family are sent to Tanforan where they are assigned to a dark, dirty army barrack as a temporary home. As the family attempts to clean up their living quarters, Emi discovers she has lost her beloved bracelet. Even with the help of her sister and mother, Emi cannot find it anywhere. Heartbroken, Emi feels she has lost the one special object that will help her remember her best friend. But as Emi begins to unpack her suitcases the next day, she realizes that memories of Laurie are saved forever in her mind and can be recalled at any time. Emi learns that one doesn't need photos or mementos to remember special people and places; memories are kept safely in the heart.

While the emphasis in this picture book is clearly on the message of friendship and love surviving hardships such as separation, Uchida explores



the political and historical events of the war and the internment throughout the story. The dismal setting and bittersweet story of loneliness and shame is clearly established by Uchida's text, and further enhanced by the sombre tones used in Yardley's illustrations. The last page of the book features an "Afterword" by the author which describes, in simple terms, the events leading up to and following the 1942 internment. This afterword includes an explanation of the official apology and symbolic restitution to Japanese Americans made by the U.S. government in the 1980s. Clearly, the evacuation and internment are still deeply rooted memories for Uchida, and the historical facts surrounding those events retain their importance in this picture book published over twenty years after *Journey to Topaz*.

Like Mochizuki's *Baseball Saved Us*, Uchida's picture book is ideal historical fiction for providing a complementary illustrated story when one or both of Uchida's novels (or any of the other novels on the internment) is read with older students. The historical events concerning the internment camps will need some further explanation, but the underlying themes of losing friends, moving away and loneliness are familiar ones to children of all ages. Children will enjoy and perhaps even identify in some way with Emi's story.

### **Canadian Fiction**

#### ***A Child In Prison Camp (Shizuye Takashima)***

Like Yoshiko Uchida, Takashima based her novel on her own childhood experiences during World War II. Published in 1971, *A Child in Prison Camp* is written in the first person narrative, from the point of view of a child living through the events. The author chose to write the novel in the present tense and in a style that is both poetic and autobiographical.

The novel begins with the sudden evacuation in March 1942. The

Takashima family, like so many other Japanese Canadians living in B.C. during the war, are sent away to an internment camp in the interior. Though the camp has no barbed wire or guarded watch towers, the conditions for Japanese Canadian internees are deplorable. There is no electricity, no running water and no privacy for families who must live in cramped conditions. The novel chronicles the three years the Takashima family spent in New Denver. The author shares not only the painful memories (racism, war and the frustration and anger of some Japanese Canadians), but also the many small pleasures Shichan (Shizuye) experienced as a child (the natural beauty of the Kootenay area, hot chocolate on a cold winter night, and special Christmas festivities).

*A Child in Prison Camp* is beautifully written in simple, child-like prose. The images of life in the camp are very clearly described and characters are well developed. Shichan's father is particularly believable as he struggles to overcome his own anger at the Canadian government who has betrayed him. There are painful family arguments and divided loyalties; Shichan's father wants to return to Japan, but her mother and sister refuse to leave Canada.

Details of life in the camp are historically accurate and the author takes great measures to include specific dates and important historical events. However, *A Child in Prison Camp* is more of a memoir written in poetic form than a historical novel which would appeal to elementary school children. The text, while beautiful and moving, is a somewhat disjointed series of childhood images. The novel lacks a strong, linear plot line which is so appealing to young readers. Sarah Ellis, writing for *The Hornbook Magazine*, claimed that Takashima's novel presented "a problem in audience" since, it had "none of the surface familiarity of time and place that such "middle-aged" children so often find necessary" (Hornbook, 1984, p. 379). *A Child in Prison Camp* is a

wonderful read and the watercolour illustrations are delightful, but without strong encouragement and teacher intervention, it is unlikely that children on their own would appreciate Takashima's childhood recollections or really grasp the historical context in which the novel was written.

### ***Naomi's Road* (Joy Kogawa)**

In 1981 Kogawa wrote *Obasan*, an adult novel based on her own childhood experiences as a Japanese Canadian interned during the war. *Naomi's Road*, published in 1986 and written specifically for children, is a simplified version of the story told in *Obasan*.

The book begins with a letter from the author to the children about to read the story. In the letter Kogawa explains, in very simple terms, the events leading to the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II. The rest of the story is told in the first person narrative by the child Naomi herself.

The story begins with happy, childhood memories of life in Vancouver where five year old Naomi lives with her mother, father and brother Stephen. One day Naomi's mother must leave for Japan to care for a sick grandmother and an aunt (Obasan) comes to live with the family. Naomi tries to understand her mother's absence and her father's explanations of "war", but she is confused by the sudden changes affecting her life. Stephen is beaten up by classmates, there are "black-outs" and then Naomi's father mysteriously leaves the family as well.

Eventually, Obasan and the children leave on a "holiday" by train to the interior of B.C. When they arrive in Slocan, Naomi realizes that the old, dusty house in the middle of the woods with its narrow bunks and dead insects is her new home. The story continues with a series of adventures and descriptions of life in the camp. Naomi attends school, fights with Stephen against racism and

discrimination, makes friends and gradually grows accustomed to her new life. When the war ends, the family moves to a farm in Granton, Alberta. Naomi continues to wait for her mother and father to return.

*Naomi's Road* is similar to *A Child in Prison Camp* in that it is told from the point of view of a young girl, using the first person narrative and the present tense to create the true voice of a child who is living the events, but who has a limited understanding of their meaning. *Naomi's Road* differs from the earlier novel, however, in its use of a very simple, linear narrative, rather than the lyrical, poetic style and disjointed images used by Takashima. For this reason, children will likely be able to better understand and appreciate the story told in *Naomi's Road*, even if the historical context and Kogawa's sometimes sophisticated symbolism are somewhat unclear.

#### ***The Eternal Spring of Mr. Ito (Sheila Garrigue)*<sup>4</sup>**

This is the story of a young English girl named Sarah who is sent to live with her Aunt Jean and Uncle Duncan in Vancouver during the Second World War. She befriends the family gardener Mr. Ito, who teaches her about the Japanese culture and particularly the graceful art of bonsai growing. When the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbour and Hong Kong in December 1941, Sarah's world changes abruptly. Her cousin Mary's fiancé is killed by the Japanese and Sarah's family become bitter. Gentle Mr. Ito is fired from his position and Uncle Duncan, in a fit of rage, destroys almost the whole collection of beautiful bonsai trees, severing forever his ties with the friend and former soldier who once saved his life. Sarah, however, is determined to maintain a relationship with Mr. Ito and his family and even risks a trip to Japan town where violence and

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<sup>4</sup> Sheila Garrigue is an American author, but her novel has been included in the Canadian Fiction section of this discussion because the story takes place in Vancouver and focusses exclusively on the Japanese Canadian interment.

vandalism against the Japanese Canadians have become commonplace.

It is not long before the Canadian government reacts to Pearl Harbour by confiscating Japanese Canadian property and sending all families of Japanese Canadian ancestry to internment camps in the interior of B.C. Mr. Ito's family is sent to Slocan, but Mr. Ito himself decides to await death in a cave near Jericho Beach. There he teaches Sarah about the importance of understanding, spirituality and hope in a world torn apart by war.

This is a beautiful story and well written as a historical novel. While some of the minor characters seem a little flat (i.e., Uncle Duncan), the characters of Sarah and Mr. Ito are particularly well developed and believable. Garrigue has written a novel which is not only faithful to the historical events and the 1940s Vancouver setting, she has also endeavoured to present her readers with a fair and unbiased interpretation of the events. Young readers may sympathize with Mr. Ito and his family because they are such beloved characters, but the pain of Uncle Duncan's family, and other white Canadians who suffer personal loss during the war, is no less poignant.

### **Non-Fiction Books for Children**

Although this study looks primarily at historical fiction and its role in teaching children about the past, the following three non-fiction books on the internment are included in this section because of their narrative style texts, authentic documentation (photos, newspaper articles, political documents) and outstanding illustrations. These books offer both teachers and students supplemental resource material of a quality and appeal to children not found in traditional textbooks.

#### ***Behind Barbed Wire (Daniel S. Davis)***

This non-fiction book, published in 1982, is written in narrative style with

a young audience in mind. Although there is no plot line, Davis brings historical facts to life with exciting, dramatic descriptions of the events that led to the internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans during the war. The text is carefully researched, clear, detailed and interesting to read. Newspaper accounts and military and political documents are included. In addition, Davis has enhanced his text with beautiful black and white photographs from the National Archives in order to illustrate, in a very authentic way, the every day hardships for Japanese Americans in the internment camps.

*Behind Barbed Wire* was well received by the critics in the 1980s. They applauded the sensitivity with which Davis wrote his text, as well as the clarity and precision of his writing. It should be noted, however, that Davis's treatment of this aspect of history is clearly sympathetic towards the Japanese Americans. Teachers using the book should make students aware of this position or bias and strive to find other resources to present the topic from other angles. (More discussion on this issue will be included in the final chapter of this study.)

### ***The Journey (Sheila Hamanaka)***

In this beautifully illustrated picture book published in 1990, artist Hamanaka has enhanced her text with reproductions of the panels included in her original, twenty-five foot mural. The painted mural, created over a period of seven years, tells the dramatic story of her own family and other Japanese Americans who were evacuated during the Second World War. The book is a progression of images which narrate the history of discrimination against the Japanese, the internment and finally the postwar claims for redress. The painted images are powerful and clearly sympathetic to the suffering and humiliation experienced by the Japanese during the war. The text includes not only a factual narrative explaining the war and the events leading the

internment, but also personal anecdotes from Hamanaka's own family experiences.

Some critics have applauded Hamanaka for her "well researched and uncompromising text" (Horn Book, 1990, p. 349), while others have criticized the overwhelming bitterness and bias apparent in the text and images. Hamanaka attacks the media, the police, the military, several prominent politicians and all white Americans who perpetrated the anger and racism towards Japanese immigrants and citizens before, during and after the war. One critic from the *Centre for Children's Books Bulletin* had this to say about *The Journey*. "The text is a relentless condemnation, unfortunately weakened by undocumented controversial statements . . . overstatement . . . and unexplained references." Not only did this critic find fault with the historical accuracy of Hamanaka's book, the reviewer condemned the strong moralizing tone in the text and illustrations of *The Journey*. "Like much overtly political art, the artist's mural . . . and the book it inspired are deliberately didactic. While the scenes depicted should not be forgotten, this largely lacks the individual vision that truly leads a reader/reviewer to informed empathy . . ." (Centre for Children's Books, 1990, p. 162).

Clearly, this book makes a decisive statement about a politically sensitive episode in American (and Canadian) history. However, despite the bias and the didactic tone apparent in *The Journey*, Hamanaka's book should be included as a striking, personal and visually powerful resource supplement when exploring the history of the internment. Children may be shocked by the gruesome pictures and strong text, but they will not close the book without being in some way affected by this period in history. Once again teacher mediation is necessary in order to help children read this book critically and develop their

own informed opinions.

### ***I Am An American (Jerry Stanley)***

This book, published in 1994, is the most recent children's trade book on the Japanese internment. Jerry Stanley's text is written in a straightforward, simple style and enhanced with authentic black and white photographs. This non-fiction book takes a narrative approach in retelling the history of the internment by featuring on the true story of Shiro Nomura, a Japanese American high school student whose family was interned during the war. The book chronicles Nomura's life from his childhood in San Francisco, to the internment camp at Manzanar, a labour farm in Montana and back to California where, after the war ended, Nomura eventually married and started a family. The story of Shiro Nomura is of course accompanied by a factual account of the important historical events that marked the years between 1941 and 1945.

The title of the book is significant since it echoes the central and recurring theme of the book; Nomura and others were Americans not Japanese, despite the fact that their loyalty to the United States was doubted during the war and they were associated too closely with their Japanese ancestors. Stanley is undoubtedly sympathetic to the plight of Nomura and other Japanese Americans interned during the war, and particularly critical of the racism that afflicted the west coast of the United States. Throughout the book, the hateful words of several whites, prejudiced against the "Japs" before, during and after the war, is powerfully illustrated by the personal stories of several Japanese Americans.

*I Am An American* is an interesting, clear account of the history of the internment and is recommended as a valuable non-fiction resource when teachers are exploring any of the historical fiction books cited above. However,



like other examples of fiction and non-fiction material, this book illustrates the difficulty of remaining unbiased and objective where sensitive historical issues are concerned.

The children's literature discussed in this chapter offers a rich variety of themes to explore within the classroom. Reading these stories about the Japanese internment will undoubtedly generate discussions on issues such as racism, prejudice, discrimination, immigration, family separation, friendship, survival, community spirit and courage. These historical fiction books also deserve consideration by educators as interesting and valuable social studies resource materials. Recent research in narrative has provided an argument for using historical fiction as a complement to traditional textbooks. The next chapter examines the role and value of story itself, and specifically the value of narrative in teaching history to young people.

## Chapter Three

### THE VALUE OF NARRATIVE IN THE HISTORY CURRICULUM

#### INTRODUCTION

The realm of children's literature has benefited from significant development in the 20th century. From the classics of the Victorian Age, to the Age of Realism during the 1960s, literature specifically for children has been published at an incredible rate, particularly when one compares the numbers of children's books on the market today with the scarcity of children's fiction available prior to the 1900s (Egoff & Saltman, 1990). Today the variety of subject matter, style and presentation of books for children is remarkable. One trend in children's literature which seems not only to have endured the test of time, but also grown in popularity as a genre with both children and educators is historical fiction. Authors like Geoffrey Trease, Rosemary Sutcliff and Leon Garfield wrote historical novels for children during the first half of this century. Their stories of the Vikings, ancient Britain and 18th century London became classics in children's literature and paved the way for today's children's authors to explore a variety of historical themes in literature (Egoff & Saltman, 1990). Over the past few years, children's authors have taken advantage of a changing social climate and increased intellectual freedom in children's publishing by offering new perspectives on certain historical periods (Tunnel, 1993). A number of historical books for children which have appeared in the last two decades explore issues such as the American civil war and the emancipation of the Black slaves, Apartheid in South Africa, and the two world wars (Tunnel & Hudson, 1993).

Parallel to this growth of variety and richness in children's literature, has been an increased awareness and understanding in the field of education of

the value of narrative itself. Eager to expose their students to stories, many educators fill their classrooms with children's books, read aloud daily, share stories and encourage children to become avid readers themselves, to develop an appreciation for story and for the crafts of story telling and writing. Until recently, this phenomenon had been limited to the language arts curriculum. Specific blocks of time were allotted to language development and it was during those periods that stories were read, shared and written by teachers and students. In general, other subject areas such as mathematics, science and social studies were taught separately using, almost exclusively, textbooks and other non-fiction material. Today, this situation is changing significantly. Teachers, particularly at the elementary level, are beginning to realize the importance of integrating subject matter. Moreover, many educators are becoming aware of the value of using children's fiction as a powerful tool in enhancing the teaching of subject areas other than language arts. This trend towards integration of historical fiction is particularly true in the area of social studies where an increasing number of teachers are using children's trade books to reinforce and bring to life some of the major periods in history (Tunnel & Ammon, 1993).

The first section of this chapter examines the history of narrative and the value of story in the development and education of children. The second section begins with a brief overview of the development of historical fiction and a definition of this particular genre of children's literature. Finally, the value of historical fiction in the classroom (as distinct from traditional textbook material), is explored, focussing on the contributions to social and cognitive development made by integrating historical fiction into the social studies curriculum. The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the value of using story, and specifically

historical fiction in the form of trade books, in enriching the teaching of history. Throughout the chapter, examples of the literature about the Japanese internment (discussed in Chapter Two) will be cited in order to highlight certain key points.

### **THE VALUE OF STORY**

It is the task of stories, by the harmony of their vision, to help us find our own connections within and without. They should provide us occasions to judge ourselves, and they should nourish us that we may grow even more human. (Paterson, 1993, p. 68)

Historically, humans have always been involved in storytelling.

Storytelling itself is an ancient tradition, dating back to the earliest of times. It may in fact be the oldest of all the arts. Stories were the “primary means for the oral transmission of a people’s history and for communicating the nature of their institutional structures, cultural practices and spirituality” (Common, 1986, p. 246). We know that men and women in early tribes created and used story in order to teach important information and provide moral guidance to the young, to explain and interpret phenomena and probably to entertain others. Stories were told, retold, remembered and handed on to future generations in what we now call the ‘oral tradition’. Much of this oral tradition has been lost, but many educators have attempted over the past few years to revive the art of story telling within the classroom. Betty Rosen, author of *And None of it Was Nonsense* (1988), sees narrative as the heart of classroom practice. She illustrates, through her own classroom stories, the power and possibilities of using the oral tradition within the classroom to develop language skills, to encourage creativity and communication among students and to provide opportunities for the development of critical thinking. In his postscript to *And None of it Was Nonsense*, Harry Rosen claims that the impulse to story telling is

already present in every student, and that "a story telling culture in the classroom refines and enlarges upon that impulse" (Rosen, 1988, p. 168).

Many teachers are conscious of the importance of providing children with opportunities for listening to stories and for developing their own talent as story tellers. Bob Barton and David Booth refer to this trend in education as creating within the classroom "a community of storyers, those who create and recreate stories to make new meaning and help structure the events of their lives" (Barton & Booth, 1990, p. 9). In *Stories in the Classroom*, they emphasize that the value of shared stories today is of no less importance than it was in earlier times to tribal communities. In fact, Barton and Booth argue that story should be at the heart of all classroom teaching. They feel strongly that teachers need to preserve the oral tradition in their classrooms, creating new generations of story tellers who will continue to develop and perfect this art form.

But why should teachers tell, read and talk about stories? What is the worth or value of 'story' in the context of an educational environment? The answer is as complex and rich as the history of story telling itself. Much has been written by educators and academics in the past few years about "narratology" (Rosen, 1988, p. 171), and the importance of putting greater emphasis on story in the curriculum. For the sake of simplicity and brevity, this study summarizes the research on story into four main themes: the universality and influence of story, the affective nature of stories, the socializing value of stories, and the ability of narrative to enrich and extend intellectual development.

The story form is a cultural universal. People everywhere enjoy stories (Egan, 1986, p. 2). In addition to the worldwide appeal of stories, it has also been argued that the influence of story on human development is universal.

Stories reveal situations of life and human emotions common to people all over the world. Good stories allow the audience to identify with characters from fictitious worlds, from the past, present and future. Stories transport readers or listeners to other worlds which may appear exotic and foreign, but in the end stories also communicate how similar personal situations are to the experiences of other individuals. In this way, stories may cultivate a greater understanding for all human experience. Individuals make sense of their own lives through narratives which describe events in the lives of fictional characters. As Alasdair MacIntyre explains, stories are more than mere amusements or entertainment; they have the potential to promote insight into human behaviour and ultimately provide us with a better understanding of ourselves (quoted by Egan, 1992, p. 55). Barton and Booth believe that the power of narrative is so significant that stories we hear as children may stay with us, as part of our subconscious well into adulthood. "Stories can cause us to raise profound questions and shape the landscape of our minds for the whole of our lives" (Barton & Booth, 1990, p. 12). The power of story then lies in its universal appeal and its ability to provide opportunities for making meaning of our lives.

Stories also have the power to affect us on an emotional level. Egan believes that, by engaging our emotions, stories are "the tool we have for showing others what it is like to feel like we do and for us to find out what it is like to feel as others do" (Egan, 1992, p. 55). The emotional responses of fictional characters to situations in stories allow children to recognize and understand the complexity of their own feelings. Stories about death, loss, conflict, loneliness, excitement or joy allow children to experience and deal with emotions vicariously through the characters' actions. It is difficult to teach

children how to react emotionally to situations in their own lives, but narrative can validate important feelings by revealing emotions. Stories can sadden, disturb and frighten. However, they can also be a source of comfort, reducing anxieties, nourishing hope and providing children with a better understanding of their own feelings.

Narrative also plays an important socializing role in children's lives. Not only do stories help to make meaning of our own lives, they also provide positive role models and guidance in shaping our relationships with others. By allowing children to identify with the emotional experiences of fictional characters, stories also help children develop greater empathy and understanding for others. Stories can be an invaluable means of encouraging children to treat others with greater respect. While certain stories admittedly have the power to influence readers in a negative way (by encouraging racism for example), others can play a positive role in the social development of young students by combating prejudice and encouraging tolerance and a sense of justice (Egan, 1992, p. 55). It is the responsibility of educators, therefore, to carefully select stories and to ensure that children attain a deep understanding of stories which deal with such themes as racism and prejudice.

Finally, stories play a significant role in the intellectual development of children. In interpreting the work of Jerome Bruner, Rosen explains that narrative is one of two fundamental modes for thinking, learning and making sense of the world. (The other mode is logico-scientific, or what Bruner refers to as "paradigmatic.") To a certain extent, we view the world narratively and organize our experiences by and through stories (both fictional and personal) (Rosen, 1988, p. 169). Through stories, children develop a sense of narrative and thus the ability to understand and make meaning of experiences.

Furthermore, it has been argued that elementary school educators should emphasize the narrative, rather than the logico-scientific branch of human thought. While young children may not have highly developed "formal operational concepts" (according to Piagetian theory), they do come to school with imagination, creativity and a fairly distinct sense of story-form, all of which can be stimulated and developed through stories. Rather than concentrating on logico-mathematical capacities beyond the level of a child's intellectual development, stories enrich and nourish those intellectual activities which are already predominant in young children (Egan, 1992, pp. 21-23). Stories also help develop in children important language skills (verbal and written), critical thinking and analysis (through interpretation of the story), as well as memory (the ability to recall events).

### **HISTORICAL FICTION: BACKGROUND AND DEFINITION**

A great deal has been written about historical fiction as a genre, but academic research focussing on children's historical fiction has been a fairly recent phenomenon. This is most likely due to the fact that historical fiction for children only began to flourish during the second half of this century (Egoff & Saltman, 1990, p. 106). The earliest examples of children's historical fiction were plagued with lengthy passages of moral and instructional lessons. The stories themselves were often so weighed down by overwhelming amounts of gratuitous dates, historical facts and unfamiliar vocabulary, that enjoyment of the plot was difficult. This moralistic and pedantic interpretation of past events continued to characterize children's historical fiction up until the 1970s. Since then, historical novels for children have undergone significant changes, moving away from presenting history in idealized terms to concentrating on complex issues presented from varying perspectives. Several novels by different



authors may feature similar episodes from history, providing children with more reading options and a more balanced and relevant view of history (Tunnel, 1993, p. 82).

Today historical fiction for children is defined not by the *quantity* of historical information presented, but rather by the *quality* of historical setting. Experts in children's fiction distinguish the true historical novel as one which is "wholly or partly about the public events and social conditions of the time about which it is written", as distinct from the costume novel which simply chooses a setting from the past as set decoration (Townsend, 1965, p. 226). True historical fiction has a worthwhile story to tell and that story must use its period setting as an integral and necessary means of developing its characters and plot. Successful historical novelists bring the past to life through believable characters, exciting plots, well researched and plausible portrayals of past events and, above all, stories which capture the interest, imagination and hearts of young readers. "Historical novels for children do more than just transmit facts; they help a child to experience the past; to enter into the conflicts, the suffering, the joys, and the despair of those who lived before us" (Huck, 1979, p. 465).

### **THE VALUE OF FICTION IN TEACHING HISTORY**

History has often been described as the story of our collective past. History is essentially the story of people, their fears, their conflicts, their joys and the changes in their lives which form endless fascinating tales. While there is some evidence of narrative being used by historians to order and assign cause and effect to events in the past (Levstik, 1993, p. 67), historical texts have traditionally been written in a very impersonal style, highlighting dates, important events and significant changes, rather than the people affected by

those events and changes. For years the teaching of history in school has relied primarily on historical textbooks and other non-fiction material. Furthermore, formal instruction in history was reserved until junior high where it was believed students were at a cognitive level (according to Piagetian stage development) to fully comprehend these historical texts. Younger students, studies showed, did not have the capacity to think hypothetically and deductively in history until the secondary level (Levstik, 1993, p. 66). Others argued that children lacked the abstract concepts of chronological time and causality. Researchers have since criticized these stage theories of development and begun to examine more closely how children actually learn history. The result of this research has led many educators to the close connection between narrative and history. Researchers have suggested that a grounding in stories, with an emphasis on the human aspects of history, is the beginning of historical understanding and can be used with even very small children (Egan 1979, 1986, 1992; Levstik 1986, 1989). Young children, according to Egan, arrive at school already equipped with the conceptual tools and the sense of causality necessary to understand the most profound stories of our past. "From observing how children make sense of fantasy stories, we can see that they do have available conceptual tools that can make history meaningful. They may lack a logical conception of causality, but they clearly have available the sense of causality that holds together stories and moves them along" (Egan 1986, p. 14). The body of research in narrative has provided much support, not only for introducing the teaching of history into the elementary curriculum, but also for the increased use of fiction in teaching historical concepts. It seems only natural that educators have begun to use children's historical fiction as an effective means of supplementing textbook

materials and bringing history to life through fascinating, well written stories.

Recent professional literature provides a diverse and appealing rationale for the integration of children's trade books into social studies, particularly for the teaching of history. The argument in favour of children's trade books draws mainly on the appeal of story itself, as well as the contributions to social and intellectual development made by integration of narrative within the history curriculum. In the discussion which follows, comparisons will be systematically made between traditional text book materials and narrative as found in children's literature. It is not the intent of this author to criticize textbook authors or to propose the complete elimination of textbooks in elementary schools. Clear, expository writing in the form of history textbooks has a valuable place in the classroom. However, by illustrating the important differences between textbook and trade book writing, it is hoped that readers will appreciate the important contributions which narrative can make in teaching history.

### **The Appeal of Narrative: A Question of Style**

From a very early age, children enjoy a good story. Recent research suggests that when historical information is embedded in a compelling story it is much more interesting and memorable than when it is presented in lists or conventional, expository history texts (Egan, 1992). Even textbook publishers are aware of the strength and appeal of narrative; the current trend in many history textbooks has been an attempt to bridge the gap between expository writing and narrative by inserting brief narrative episodes and personal stories throughout the text. However, researchers have criticized this trend by pointing to the poor structure and lack of coherence in the new "mixed" texts. Certain studies have also found that children may find it even more difficult to recall essential information from this new integrated format than from pure expository

writing (Richgels, Tomlinson & Tunnell, 1986, p. 162). Furthermore, it has been argued that the inclusion of narrative on the part of textbook editors has more to do with attracting children's attention and providing entertainment through cleverly boxed and illustrated "stories" than with providing essential information (Tomlinson, Tunnell & Richgels, 1993, p. 58). Increased criticism of history textbook materials by academics, researchers, teachers and curriculum planners in recent years has caused attention to shift to trade books, particularly children's historical fiction.

Much of the research on the value of historical narrative has attempted to examine and compare the writing styles of traditional history textbooks and children's trade books (Holmes & Ammon, 1985; Tomlinson, Tunnell & Richgels, 1993). The research has outlined some important differences between the two types of writing. These differences primarily concern the degree to which a particular text emphasizes humanizing details, and incorporates a richness of vocabulary and writing styles. Comparisons between narrative history and expository writing may contribute to a better understanding of why historical fiction is often more appealing, and more effective in transmitting information to children than traditional textbooks.

### **A Focus on Details**

Traditional history textbooks tend to condense, abstract and generalize facts and information about history. Because textbooks must cover a lot of information in a small amount of space, they compress information and diminish detail, leaving children with a dry and lifeless account of the past. Take, for example, the following passage on the Japanese internment found in *Exploring Canada*, a popular B. C. textbook for grade five students:

In the 1940s, Canada was helping to fight a war against Japan. During this war, the Canadian government made Japanese

Canadians move away from the west coast. The government was afraid that Japanese Canadians would help Japan win the war. They had to give up their houses, land, fishing boats and personal belongings. Many had to live in special camps, separated from their families. They were not free to come and go as they wanted. Some were forced to work on roads and farms. Yet, of the 21,000 people involved, 13,000 had been born in Canada and another 3000 had become Canadians. Most of the others had lived in Canada for 25 to 40 years. (Bowser & Swanson, 1985, p. 306)

It is unlikely that any student who reads this passage will have gained any real understanding of or appreciation for what happened to Japanese Canadians during World War II. Not only is the text vague in its retelling of historical events (it is not clear which war is being referred to or why Canada was involved), it is also devoid of any kind of detail which would encourage children to take an interest in the topic.

Historical novels for children emphasize the human side of history, giving a sense of life as it was lived, or might have been lived, at an earlier time. In part, historical fiction accomplishes this task by concentrating on the minute details, or the particulars of what individuals saw, heard, said and thought. "It is in the small details of everyday living that the past is made understandable" (Arbuthnot & Sutherland, 1972, p. 494). Compare, for example, the brief textbook mention of "special camps" in the passage above, with the detailed descriptions of the internment camps from these two children's historical novels:

Yuki was glad to see that their new room was bigger than the horse stall, measuring about eighteen by twenty, but it was just as bleak. There was nothing in the room except three army cots. The inner sheet rock walls hadn't yet been installed, so dust had filtered into the room from every crack in the siding and around the windows. It covered the floor, gathered in drifts in the corners, and hung in the air so that Yuki could taste it in her mouth. (Uchida, 1971, p. 98)

This camp wasn't anything like home. It was so hot in the daytime

and so cold at night. Dust storms came and got sand in everything, and nobody could see a thing. We sometimes got caught outside, standing in line to eat or to go to the bathroom. We had to use the bathroom with everybody else, instead of one at a time like at home. (Mochizuki, 1993, p. 4)

These details enable children to visualize the past and develop a deeper understanding not only of the experiences of real people, but of history itself. Cynthia Stearns Nelson refers to this deeper understanding of the past as "historical literacy" (Nelson, 1994, p. 552). She believes that "immersing students in the time period, the location, and the culture of the people allows students to see history as real life." This immersion in literature, which exposes students to past cultures, facilitates what she refers to as "a journey of discovery" (p. 552). Children must understand that there is more to the historical past than the dates, names and places mentioned briefly in textbooks. History, in the minds of students, should create images of real people in real situations. The purpose of historical fiction, according to Charlotte Huck, is not to provide an exact chronological understanding of history, but rather to "develop an awareness of people living in the past" (1979, p. 466).

### **Richness of Vocabulary and Variety of Writing Styles**

Textbooks, it has been argued by many, lack the richness of vocabulary and structure that one finds in children's trade books. This is due, once again, to the need for compression of facts and information faced by textbook editors. It may also stem from an obligation to create texts which correspond to the suggested reading levels and vocabulary of children at certain grade levels. Regardless of these constraints, researchers have criticized what they see as the lack of voice, style and coherence which results when textbook authors must use a limited vocabulary and impersonal narrative tone in writing about past

events.

Trade book authors, freed of the constraints of space, vocabulary and narrative style, are able to develop richer, more interesting texts and greater variety in their writing styles. Historical fiction writers can feature strong, fully elaborated descriptions of people, places and events, and explore the consequences of actions and the inner thoughts of people who experienced historical events first hand. This passage from Takashima's novel illustrates how presenting even young readers with a rich, challenging and often provocative vocabulary creates a more illustrative and sensual reading experience:

The strong, summer July sun is over our heads as we near the familiar Exhibition grounds. But the scene is now quite different from the last time I saw it. The music, the roller coasters, the hawkers with their bright balloons and sugar candy are not there. Instead, tension and crying children greet us as we approach the grounds. A strong odour hits us as we enter: the unmistakable foul smell of cattle, a mixture from their waste and sweat. The animals were removed, but their stink remains. It is very strong in the heat...As we draw close to the concrete buildings, the stench becomes so powerful in the hot, humid heat, I want to turn and run. I gaze at my mother. She only quickens her steps. It seems as if we are visiting the hell-hole my Sunday school teacher spoke of with such earnestness. (Takashima, 1971, pp. 8-9)

The use of the present tense, first person narrative and dialogue between characters is also common in children's novels and lends a sense of vitality and immediacy to the writing that is absent in textbook writing. Consider, for example, how these three literary devices used in the following passage illustrate, in a very intimate way, the effects of war and human rights injustices on a young child:

We don't have a bathhouse here. Our bath is a round tub. Getting water is such hard work, especially in winter. We put on our boots and coats, and out we go with our buckets. The hole

always gets frozen over and Uncle has to chop it open with long-handled axe. I can hardly lift the heavy pails. The water sometimes spills down my boots and my feet get itchy and bumpy and red.

After we all take our baths, Obasan washes the clothes in the same water. They hang outside in the icy wind, stiff as cardboard. It's so cold your face stings and your eyelids freeze.

I hate it here. I hate it so much that I want to run away. So does Stephen.

"Why can't we go away?" I ask Uncle. "Even if we can't go back to our first house, can't we go back to Slocan?"

"Someday. Maybe someday." Uncle says. But "someday" never comes. (Kogawa, 1986, p. 64)

## **Contributions of Historical Fiction to Social Development**

### **History as a Humanistic Discipline**

History is often described as the story of human events. With this philosophy in mind, many scholars have criticized textbooks, and their "exasperatingly arid chronicle of names and dates" (Craig, 1989, p. 120) for their dehumanizing approach to history. Some researchers have claimed that textbooks take a "top-down" approach to history, emphasizing only facts and dates. If individuals are given any attention at all, the focus is primarily on world leaders, revolutionaries and the 'great' people involved in global events. Children's literature, on the other hand, most often adopts a "bottom-up" approach to history, exploring the human side of history and describing, in an intimate way, how the lives of common people are affected by historical events (Tomlinson, Tunnell & Richgels, 1993, p. 52). The emphasis in the writing of historical fiction is on "human motives, problems and consequences of human actions" (p. 52). This "bottom-up" approach to history is evident in all of the historical novels featured in this study; the internment of the Japanese Canadians and Americans is presented either from the point of view of Japanese children and their families who experienced the camps first hand (as



in the novels of Uchida, Takashima or Kogawa), or from friends and supporters of the Japanese left behind to worry when the Japanese were suddenly taken away (as in Garrigue's and Savin's novels). Children need to understand that history is a study, not just of famous people and events, but of all humanity.

(Historical fiction books) dramatize the courage and integrity of the thousands of "common folk" who willingly take a stand for what they believe. History does not record their names, but their stories are frequently the source of inspiration for books of historical fiction. (Huck, 1979, p. 466)

Textbook versions of history also tend to treat the past from an impersonal, general point of view by featuring anonymous groups of people (i.e. "the Japanese Canadians") rather than individuals. Historical novels, on the other hand, take a more close-up and personal approach to history by concentrating on one or two key individuals who represent a larger group. The emphasis is on "real human beings dealing with their own problems in their own time and in their own way" (Craig, 1989, p. 124). Egoff and Saltman (1990) believe that because children have an even greater need than adults for self-identification, the hero or heroine of the past must have some immediacy for young readers of historical fiction (pp. 104-105). Stories have the power to help children develop a sense of identity with the past through believable characters (often children themselves) whose experiences are influenced by real historical events. A historical novel like *The Eternal Spring of Mr. Ito*, for example, is particularly appealing to children because of the strong, well developed characters through which the story of the internment is told. Students cannot help but sympathize with dear Mr. Ito and his gentle wife who represent the victims during this episode in history. The character of Sarah, as the child heroine, effectively illustrates that children, as much as adults, participate in and

can even have a certain control over historical events.

Craig believes strongly that history should be viewed as a "humanistic discipline" one which "deserves to be presented in a humane way, as a story about human beings in circumstances told with grace and energy" (1989, p. 132). History is more than a collection of great political and economic decisions; it must also incorporate the stories of ordinary people. By reading about peoples' lives in the past, particularly in stories which explore children's roles in history, students gain a sense of personally belonging to their society, of somehow fitting into a broader scheme of life and time. Children can then begin to see their own lives in relation to those of the past. Educators believe this strong identification with characters and past events will lead students to a deeper sense of chronology and time, and eventually to a greater understanding of their own place in history. Children will then come to view change as natural and an essential part of life. "Stories about the past may . . . develop a feeling for the continuity of life; they will help children to see themselves and their present place in time as part of the *living past*" (Huck, 1979, p. 465).

### **The Affective Dimension of Narrative**

Historical literature provides emotional and imaginative appeal to children. Stories of the past convey the affective dimension of human experience. Reading novels of real-life human conflicts often has a humanizing effect on children, causing them to empathize with the characters who experience hardships or injustice (Heinly & Hilton, 1982, p. 22). Because of their strong identification with literary characters in historical fiction, children come to feel the pain, joy, fears and hopes of the fictional people in the stories they read. Many educators believe this humanizing effect extends beyond the

pages of books, helping children develop a greater tolerance and understanding of others in their own everyday experiences. "The affective nature of children's literature helps students become vicariously involved with the lives of people who are different from themselves and to develop an empathy with and an understanding of values, beliefs, and aspirations of a variety of people and cultures" (Savage & Savage, 1993, p. 32).

Finally, like story itself, historical fiction illustrates the universality of human experience. Stories of the past help children understand that, while past situations may be vastly different from our own, "such fundamental qualities as human needs and relationships remain the same" (Huck, 1979, p. 466). The hardships endured by characters in the novel are often not so different from those experienced by human beings in our own time. Wars continue to be fought, national borders change constantly, famine is widespread, and persecution and prejudice continue to plague many people. Through historical fiction, children become aware of the interdependence of humankind (p.466), realizing that we have all been affected by the decisions and actions of the past and that the decisions and current actions of our times will affect future generations. This realization helps students develop a greater appreciation and respect for the study of history and for the people who were a part of it.

History speaks to our individual and collective humanity. It keeps us connected to our ancestors and enables us to understand and appreciate the minds, mores and experiences of others. History provides a sense of common heritage at the same time that it presents the origins and development of our diversity. History promotes a conscious and critical sense of citizenship in national and global communities. (Epstein, 1993, p. 5)

## **Contributions of Historical Fiction to Intellectual Development**

### **Time/Causation Concepts**

It was once believed (primarily by Piaget's followers) that young children lacked the concepts of time and causality needed to be successful students of history. Children's thinking, it was argued by these cognitive developmental theorists, was controlled by immediate experiences only during the early years. Therefore, concepts such as the 'past', 'cause and effect' and others basic to historical understanding could not successfully be taught before adolescence. However, many researchers and educators, including Egan, have since challenged Piaget's theory, claiming that young children do indeed display the concepts needed to learn history and that, in fact, "it is both possible and desirable to teach history to young children" (Egan, 1982, p. 439).

Once this debate was put to rest, the question then remained: What is the most effective way to teach history to young children? Egan has concentrated primarily on the story form; he believes that the simple concepts children develop from hearing and reading stories (a sense of past time, good versus evil, power vs. weakness, oppression, ambition, revolt etc.) are essentially the same concepts needed for even very young children to develop adequate historical understanding (Egan, 1982, 1983). Researchers who value the integration of children's fiction in the history classroom, have adopted Egan's strong belief in the story form as the key to developing historical understanding. Downey and Levstik (1988) found that the form of discourse used in learning materials may determine to a large extent whether children develop important historical concepts. This research, as well as studies by other educators, has led Levstik and Downey to the conclusion that "narrative has been particularly related to the development of time and causation concepts" and that "narrative

provides a temporal scaffolding for historical understanding that is accessible even to quite young children" (p. 338). Narrative, in the form of stories, provides children with a familiar framework from which to interpret historical facts and may be a more effective means of developing historical understanding in young children than the decontextualized information often found in history textbooks. Narrative transforms chronology (a list of events) into history (an interpretation of events). When children are absorbed in a good historical novel, concepts such as 'before and after', 'cause and effect', 'good and evil' are naturally embedded in the story. Not only, it would seem, is history more engaging when it is incorporated in a good story, but the facts and chronological order important to historical events fall into place more naturally as children progress through a narrative format (Levstik, 1990).

### **Memory/Recall**

Many researchers and educators have also argued that history taught through stories is committed to memory more easily than past events which are explained and even illustrated through textbooks. Just as we remember vivid events plotted into a story better than we can remember lists or directions (Egan, 1992, p. 11), so do we recall stories told in historical novels more effectively than we remember dates, names and unrelated bits of information from history texts. As with concepts of time and causation, the key to memory and recall seems, once again, to lie in the form of discourse. Levstik (1986) quotes a number of studies in which a clear connection between narrative discourse and memory were found; these include a study by White and Gagne (1979) which concluded that connected discourse leads to better memory for meaning and improved recall, as well as studies by DeVilliers (1974) and Levin (1970) which found that readers process words in connected discourse more

deeply than in lists or disconnected sentences. The connected discourse of literature, these studies suggest, makes history not only more comprehensible, but also more memorable. Trivial facts from the textbook will soon be forgotten, but stories stay with children for a long time. In good historical fiction facts, dates, names and information are deeply embedded into the fabric of the story. Students are more likely to remember important historical facts when they are an integral part of a memorable story, than when they appear in lists to be memorized from a history text book.

### **Development of Critical Thinking**

The study of history, it is currently held, involves more than the recall of specific facts about past events (Tunell & Ammon, 1993, p. viii). Learning about history requires thought, imagination and active reflection on the part of the students. The important goal in learning history is not so much the memorization of facts as it is the understanding of larger concepts. Historical fiction provides the opportunity for the development of critical reading and thinking. When children are exposed to a variety of historical fiction books, rather than a single textbook, they have the opportunity to view history from different, and often opposing perspectives. Students must use their own judgement and higher thinking and reasoning abilities to make sense for themselves of past events as they are portrayed in the stories. In this sense, children move beyond learning facts toward a more meaningful and personal understanding of history itself. Critical reading and thinking in connection with historical fiction is explored in greater detail in Chapter Five.

### **CONCLUSION**

Some scholars, educators and historians might object to the discussion up to this point, arguing that history is a fascinating and exciting enough story in

itself and does not need to be brought to life through children's novels. Granted, history can be a captivating subject of study for children and historical truth (from textbooks) is often even stranger and more intriguing than fiction written for children. However, the argument here is not with whether the subject itself is exciting enough to entice young students, but rather with the methods we have traditionally used to teach history. In the past, educators have approached the subject of history primarily through dry, fact-filled textbooks, a pedagogical approach which has been less than riveting for children. What this chapter has proposed is the integration of children's historical novels into the history curriculum in order to make learning about history a more compelling, humanizing and personally satisfying experience for students. Children need to be able to visualize the past in some meaningful way. Stories about people living through real events from our past help children to develop a deeper understanding of historical events and a greater appreciation for the human dimension of history, a perspective which has generally been neglected by traditional textbooks.

A second point which needs to be made is that the author is not suggesting a total rejection of all non-fiction material or the exclusive use of children's novels to teach young students about historical events. Just as memorizing facts without context was of limited value, so studying qualities of human experience with no supportive framework of factual material is not pedagogically sound either (Blos, 1993, p. 11). As with any new approach to teaching, we have to proceed with caution, even in our enthusiasm. Historical novels, although generally well researched and believable in their portrayal of past events, use historical fact only to the extent that it helps place the story in a specific time frame, shape the lives and decisions of its characters and provide

a background for an exciting plot. Children's trade books can be a wonderful supplement to history textbooks, and an excellent springboard for helping students make the imaginative leap into the past, but they cannot and should not replace good historical research and writing.

What is being proposed in this study is a balanced approach to the teaching of history, using children's historical novels as a supplement to textbooks, films and other non-fiction material. Stories have the potential to stimulate children's interest and curiosity in history, extend their knowledge of the past and help them relate historical events to their present day situations. Novels, with descriptions of how people behaved and reacted to historical events, with the hundreds of minute details about how people ate, dressed, fought, worshipped, celebrated and died, with a constant emphasis on the personal, human dimension of history allow children to experience the past in an immediate and sensual way that no textbook alone could accomplish. Like any good piece of literature, a historical novel for children, written with honesty and accuracy, can lead us to an improved understanding of the world and our place in it. Joan Blos, author of several award winning historical picture books and novels for children, sums up the true value of literature when she says: "literature participates in the overarching goal of all of the humanities, which is to answer that deceptively simple question: what does it mean to be human?" (1993, p.15). We have a powerful and invaluable resource at our disposal when we integrate children's historical novels into our history curriculum.

The next chapter in this study examines children's historical fiction from a more critical approach, highlighting specific criteria needed to evaluate children's historical novels for accuracy, and for unbiased and plausible representations of the past through setting, character, plot and style. In addition,



specific attention is paid to whether authors exhibit sensitivity to historical issues in their writing and, most importantly, how the ethical or moral context supported by narrative in historical fiction affects children's interpretation of history.

## Chapter Four

### CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING CHILDREN'S HISTORICAL FICTION

#### INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter examined recent research supporting the theory that narrative, and particularly historical fiction, is not only more appealing to children than conventional history textbooks, but also more effective in teaching students about historical events. On a social level, the research indicates that story, through the medium of children's historical fiction, is effective in promoting children's appreciation for the human side of history, empathy for those who contributed to or lived through significant historical events, and sense of connectedness with the past. On a cognitive level, researchers argue that historical fiction is more effective than traditional non-fiction resources in developing the concepts of time and causation which are so vital to historical understanding. In addition, some argue that historical information, embedded in compelling stories, may be better committed to memory and easier to recall than information presented in textbook form.

One of the most enthusiastic supporters of children's fiction as a teaching tool in the history classroom has been Linda Levstik of the University of Kentucky. Levstik has conducted classroom studies and written research papers since the 1980s on the appeal and educational value of children's historical fiction. In her early research, Levstik was confident about children's trade books being integrated into the history curriculum. In an article written in 1986 she made positive statements about narrative being used to teach history. These assertions, based on her own classroom observations as well as research in discourse analysis and schema theory, included the ideas that narrative "is a potent spur to historical interest" and that it helps children "make

sense of history" (Levstik, 1986, p. 2). Furthermore, Levstik believes that the connected discourse format of literature allows young readers to process words "more deeply than when the same words appeared in sentences or lists" and "to organize and interrelate elements in the text" (p. 2). In an article published two years later and co-written with Matthew Downey, Levstik expanded on the positive benefits of using historical fiction to teach history, referring to theories of cognitive psychology which claimed that narrative helped even very young children develop historical time concepts including causal and temporal relationships (Downey & Levstik, 1988, p. 338).

However, there is a certain degree of caution evident in Levstik's writing, even in these earlier studies. While she promotes the use of historical fiction, she warns educators about becoming too zealous in using children's fiction in the history classroom. Early on in her research Levstik made several important discoveries about how children respond to historical literature. A brief look at Levstik's findings is worthwhile before establishing the criteria for evaluation of children's historical fiction.

### **Children's Responses to Historical Fiction**

In Levstik's 1986 study, grade six students were asked to respond to historical novels they had chosen on the theme of World War II. Their personal responses to the literature took the form of journals and sharing with the teacher or with peers in discussion groups. Certain tendencies became apparent in the children's comments, attitude and behaviour towards the historical fiction they read. Their responses appear to correspond closely with what scholars have observed in children's behavior and general learning strategies.

### **Fascination with the Extremes of Human Experience**

In his argument defending the benefits of using story to teach children,

Egan (1992) provides some insight into what characteristic of stories is so appealing to students. Stories deal with basic and powerful emotions which are completely familiar to even young children. However, what engages children's imaginations, according to Egan, are the stories (real or fictional) which depict extremes in human behaviour. Children are fascinated by the shocking examples of human extremes in the *Guinness Book of World Records*, and with television shows depicting mysteries of nature or amazing achievements (Egan, 1992, p. 72). Children are also naturally drawn to stories of heroic deeds, passionate battles against evil forces, or shocking human injustice.

Even the most casual observation of the kind of knowledge that most readily engages students' imaginations during these years shows that it is about the extremes and limits of human experience and the natural world: the most courageous or the cruelest acts, the strangest and the most bizarre natural phenomena, the most terrible or the most wonderful events. (p.72)

Children's interest in strange and macabre events is also evidenced by the incredible literary appeal and popularity of horror books, such as R.L. Stine's *Goosebumps* series.

According to Levstik (1986), this fascination with the border areas of human experience explains why young readers find historical fiction so compelling. While other forms of literature deal with human emotions, historical fiction is particularly fascinating to children because it provides young readers with real examples of human extremes. "Children demonstrated continued interest in history as it relates to human response to fear, discrimination, and tragedy. History provided them with real instances of human bravery or tragedy within a relatively safe framework"(p. 12). In Levstik's study, the children's responses to historical fiction provide further proof that children are naturally compelled by the "Unwished-for Worst" (the human capacity for evil) and the

“Hoped-for Best” (the human capacity for good) (1989, p. 115).

### **The Search for the Truth**

The students in Levstik’s study were enthusiastic about the historical fiction they had chosen to read. When asked to explain why they had enjoyed the novels, they talked about being moved, inspired, and angered at times by what they had read (Levstik, 1986, p. 10). This type of response was particularly common when children had read stories where humans responded with extraordinary bravery or extreme inhumanity. However, the students’ responses also indicate that their interest in historical fiction was based to a large extent, on what they perceived as their own personal and necessary quest for the truth. In each of these studies the children explained their interest in historical topics in terms of needing to know about a topic, of wanting to learn the truth or what really happened (Levstik, 1990, p. 850). This search for the truth was also evident in the students’ behaviour. Many of the children in the study, even those known to be reluctant readers, were willing to read more extensively on the same topic and eagerly accepted the suggestions of the teacher for further independent reading, even when the material suggested was more difficult (p. 11).

For Levstik, this search for truth is a positive corollary of using fiction to teach history, since it stimulates children’s interest in historical matters and motivates them to read and learn more on the same topic. However, Levstik also acknowledges the danger in children assuming that truth will always be found in narrative forms of historical writing, and in having students use historical fiction as the standard against which other information is measured. “The textbook was judged in contrast to the historical fiction, with the fictional narrative as the ruler against which nonfiction was evaluated” (1989, p. 118).

Students must learn to develop their own standards for evaluation of all historical material, and particularly historical fiction. With practice and guidance, students will come to appreciate the idea that truth in history is subject to many factors, including personal biases of both writer and reader, and to judge what they read with a critical eye.

### **The Emotionally Charged Context of Literature**

The emotional context of historical fiction is a recurring theme in Levstik's writing and becomes for her an ethical question. She believes that the deeply felt emotional response of children to historical fiction "places a double obligation on authors and teachers to create and select historical narratives that are both good literature and careful, accurate history" (Levstik, 1990, p. 851). The authors have a responsibility to write ethically defensible historical fiction. Historical novels should, among other things, avoid oversimplifying historical events or stereotyping characters, both of which could bias children's interpretation of the events and lead to an unbalanced view of history. Teachers have a responsibility, according to Levstik, to mediate between children and historical literature, ensuring that students recognize the subjective nature of historical fiction and learn to judge historical novels critically. This type of intervention is necessary if children are to develop a mature historical understanding (Levstik, 1990, p. 852).

The "double obligation" of which Levstik speaks forms the basis for this and the following chapter. This chapter outlines certain criteria against which any historical novel should be evaluated. The purpose of the chapter is to provide teachers with general guidelines for selecting historical novels, and to offer further criticism and a more in-depth review of the historical novels about the Japanese internment. The final chapter examines the role of the teacher in

integrating historical fiction in the classroom.

### **THE HISTORICAL ACCURACY OF CHILDREN'S FICTION**

History, it may be argued, is a human rather than an exact science. It is difficult for any historical writing, whether it is through textbook or narrative form, to present events in a completely unbiased manner. Writer Erik Haugaard has argued that even the most qualified historians can only achieve a "partial resurrection of the events which make up history" (1979, p. 700) since everyone, including professional historians, view the past from a certain perspective or position which is influenced by their own personal biases.

The subjective nature of historical writing is perhaps even more evident in historical fiction where the author may choose a particular historical episode or time period out of certain personal interests or because of significant cultural or moral issues. Nevertheless, most critics of children's literature agree that good, responsible historical fiction should remain as faithful to the events of the past as possible. Living the past through historical fiction "depends squarely and solely on the writer's evocative skill" (Egoff & Saltman, 1990, p. 103). The best children's authors of historical picture books and novels research the past thoroughly in order to achieve a clear and authentic rendition of the time, place and people of the past. Hester Burton, in describing her self-imposed rules for writing historical fiction has said:

First, I must acquaint myself as thoroughly as I possibly can with the historical period and the event I am describing. . . . My second rule is never to use a famous historical person as the pivot of my story and never put into his mouth words or sentiments for which there is no documentary evidence." (Burton, 1969, pp. 271-272)

Responsible writers of historical fiction should be so thoroughly familiar with the history of the period about which they are writing that they can be "comfortably

creative without making mistakes" (Donelson, 1989, p.189). Historical fiction writers enjoy the freedom to expand or telescope past events, omit or emphasize certain facts, and even go beyond the bounds of historical evidence through invention of characters and dialogue. However, the effectiveness of historical fiction depends on its faithfulness to and respect for historical facts (Egoff & Saltman, 1990, p. 104). Writers of historical fiction should not distort values or facts of the past. "Stories must accurately reflect the spirit of the times, as well as the events" (Huck, 1979, p. 468).

The following explores four story elements which contribute significantly to the historical accuracy of children's fiction: setting, plot, characterization and style. In the final section, the issue of morality in narrative structure is examined as it relates to historical fiction for children.

### **Setting**

The setting for any story involves both time and place. In historical fiction the story takes place in the past. Setting must include all the physical details which enable a reader to sense by seeing, smelling, feeling or tasting what is happening in the story (Van Vliet, 1992). Setting also includes culture and the manner, customs and way of life of a people. Setting helps to create a mood or atmosphere and establish the emotional, social and moral climate. In historical fiction, setting must be an integral part of the story; its primary functions are to give authenticity to the story and to help recreate the past in a detailed and accurate manner.

In his book *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, Kenneth Donelson outlines specific criteria for evaluating children's historical fiction. He focusses particularly on setting and the faithfulness of the text to its historical period. Authenticity of time, place and people is necessary, Donelson believes, in order



for the novel to be believable as a story and accurate as a retelling of history. Readers of historical fiction can judge novels for accuracy and authenticity by looking for certain clues in the story. There should be specific references to well-known events or people "through which the reader can place the happenings in their correct historical framework" (Donelson, 1989, p. 170). Furthermore, the historical setting in a good novel should not merely use "visual appeal" "to compensate for a weak story" (p. 170), but should be an integral part of the story itself.

Among the novels and picture books about the Japanese internment, there are excellent examples of Donelson's authenticity of historical setting. References to the war, the bombing of Pearl Harbour and the evacuation are found in all the stories. In some stories the author chooses to present the historical events in a very direct, almost textbook style, highlighting specific dates and facts, and building the story around the events as they unfold. Others choose a more indirect style of integrating history and narrative.

The direct approach is evident in Takashima's *A Child in Prison Camp*, where the author immediately places her story and her readers in the proper historical context. She begins with the first entry in her journal:

Vancouver, British Columbia  
March 1942

Japan is at war with the United States, Great Britain and all the Allied Countries, including Canada, the country of my birth. My parents are Japanese, born in Japan, but they have been citizens for many, many years, and have become part of the young country. Now, overnight our rights as Canadians are taken away. Mass evacuation for the Japanese! (Takashima, 1971, p. 5)

This introduction might seem didactic to some. However, one must bear in mind that Takashima's book is written in a personal journal style. The historical events become the focal point in little Shichan's life, giving shape to her family's

story. The attention to historical details within the setting is both appropriate and believable for this story.

Other writers, particularly Joy Kogawa, are more subtle in creating a historical setting within the context of their stories. In *Naomi's Road* the setting is created by somewhat vague clues to the historical events which affect the life of a young child. Five-year-old Naomi has only a limited understanding of these events and needs the adults around her to explain what is happening to the family:

"What's war?" I ask.

Daddy tells me that war is a terrible terrible thing. It is the worst and saddest thing in the world. People get hurt and learn to be afraid. It's like the time the burning match made the fire in my room. War is more dangerous even than that. (Kogawa, 1986, p. 13)

Most of the historical references scattered throughout Kogawa's story are presented in this manner, with more attention to the emotional impact of war than to the factual details of history. Young readers, like Naomi herself, may need additional explanation in order to place these references in their proper historical context. Nevertheless, historical details are scattered throughout Naomi's narrative, confirming Kogawa's commitment to making the setting of the war and the internment integral to the story itself:

Later at night, she wakes me up because she's frightened. I'm frightened too. The night light in the hall is out. The street lights are out. Such darkness! This is what Stephen calls a "black-out". The whole city is hiding. If an enemy in an airplane sees us he might drop a bomb. The bomb would make a huge fire and burn the house. Then what would we do? (p. 15)

Yesterday Stephen came running home shouting that the war was over.

"We won we won we won!" he cried. He ran behind the house with both hands high in the air. His fingers were raised in the V-for-Victory sign. He pulled the flag out of the rock garden. Then up he climbed onto the shed and still higher to the roof of the house. The flag

was up as high as it could go. (p.50)

Unfortunately, not all children's historical books and novels are successful in integrating historical references within the narrative in an effective and believable manner. In some cases, the historical setting is insignificant and is used primarily as a sort of theatrical backdrop, adding suspense and excitement to an otherwise dull plot. The historical events have no real effect on the characters; the story could have taken place at another time and place. There are plenty of examples of this type of writing in both children's and adult fiction. However, this decorative use of historical setting does not appear in the novels and picture books featured in this study. In these stories about the internment the central focus is the war and the evacuation of families from the west coast. The historical events are the driving force behind the stories, whether they are told from the point of view of a Japanese protagonist uprooted from his or her home, or of a non-Japanese who experiences the loss of a good friend.

Another criticism made of the setting in historical novels is what children's author and book critic Joan Blos refers to as the "privy observed". This criticism is just one of what Blos calls "characteristic flaws" (1985, p. 38) in children's historical fiction. The "privy observed" refers to an author's use of elaborate descriptions of historical setting, descriptions which are usually shared with the reader by a character in order to make the setting as vivid as possible and illustrate details of daily life. The problem with these detailed passages, according to Blos, is that they become too cumbersome, add nothing to the story and are somewhat awkwardly forced into the text for the sake of creating a setting from the past. To test for this type of flaw readers must ask themselves whether an equivalent amount of detail would have been reported

by a character to describe the setting in a contemporary novel. This superfluous use of details may be the problem with Marcia Savin's novel *Moonbridge*.

There are a number of references to the wartime setting, but these gratuitous passages of daily life add nothing to the story; their inclusion in the text is awkward, inconsequential and slows the pace of the story:

Ruthie's bedroom was at the back of the house. They sat on her bed, a four-poster. Mitzi ran her hands down one of the four maple posts. Each had a top scored like a pineapple.

"This bed used to be my parents'," Ruthie said. "But when my daddy started at the shipyard, my mother bought them a new bedroom set and I got this."

Mitzi wanted to see the new set so they went to Ruthie's parents room. The furniture there had straight lines. (Savin, 1992, p. 66)

It is difficult to believe that any young reader would be interested in this comparison of antique and "modern" 1940s bedroom furnishings. It is doubtful that a similar description would have been included in a contemporary novel.

Responsible and talented historical children's authors provide readers with vivid and authentic renditions of the time and place being featured in their stories. Succinct descriptions of daily life and references to well known events and people allow the reader to place the story in its proper historical context. However, trivial, detailed passages make the text of a historical novel tedious and lengthy. Above all, the historical setting should be an integral part of the story, powerful enough to be the driving force behind the characters' actions and illustrative enough to leave the reader with the feeling that they have lived, at least for a while, in a different time and place. In so doing, a well-written children's historical story can provide young readers "with a sense of historical understanding and realism that otherwise would be denied to all but the professional scholar" (Irwin, 1971, p. 3).

## Plot

Books of historical fiction are not exempt from the requirement of telling a good story. They should not just sugar coat history, but tell a story that is interesting in its own right. The unique problem of historical fiction is how to balance fact with fiction. (Huck, 1979, p. 468)

In historical fiction, as in any good children's book, there has to be enough adventure, excitement and suspense to move the story forward and maintain the interest of young readers. Historical novels and picture books are perhaps more challenging to write than other types of children's fiction since the author has the dual obligation of both informing *and* entertaining the reader. The writer must carefully balance the obligation of teaching about the past with the need to entice children with a lively and well told story.

In her article, *Yesterday Comes Alive for Readers of Historical Fiction*, Patricia Cianciolo, quoting from Wolfgang Iser (1978), identifies three basic elements which should be achieved in historical fiction writing. The first element is a "precise description of the past." This element relates to setting, which has already been discussed in this study, but may also extend to plot (Cianciolo, 1981, p. 453). The past may be illustrated as much by the characters' actions as it is by the author's references to the past and description of setting. Action, adventure and suspense are paramount both in maintaining the interest of young children and in bringing the past to life for them in a meaningful and captivating manner.

Of all the books on the Japanese internment discussed, Sheila Garrigue's *The Eternal Spring of Mr. Ito* provides one of the best examples of the use of fast-paced plot to describe and dramatize the past. Sara's quest to return the bonsai quince to the Ito family takes her from the security of her Uncle's home in Point Grey, to various locations in the province, each of which

is described in detail by Garrigue in order to create a vivid picture of British Columbia in the 1940s. Sara's adventures are characterized as much by the elements of danger and excitement, as they are by Garrigue's descriptions. Early in the novel Sara travels alone on the streetcar to Vancouver's Japan town where she experiences for herself the impact of war on the small Japanese community:

Finally she turned from Granville onto Powell. It was as if Saturday had become Sunday. Powell was empty. Empty of traffic. Empty of people. Her footsteps rang off the sidewalk as she passed little shops and restaurants formerly bright with colored lights and paper lanterns. Unexpectedly, she felt as if she were in alien territory, an intruder who didn't belong and wasn't welcome. She felt eyes watching her from shadowy interiors, but their owners ducked out of sight as she went by. Her heart began to hammer and she'd begun to wish she hadn't come when she found herself in front of the Cho-Cho-San restaurant. Relieved, she ran up the narrow stairs to the Ito's apartment. (Garrigue, 1985, pp. 78-79)

Later in the novel, Sara bravely climbs the cliff face in an effort to save her dog Fearless. In doing so she eventually discovers Mr. Ito's hideout in the cave:

The cave was hidden from below by the jut of the ledge. On either side of its rainbow-shaped entrance, two big rocks stood like sentries. Sarah stared at them. They didn't belong here on the sandy cliff face. Someone had worked hard to haul them up from below. She crept carefully along the narrow ledge toward them, trying to ignore the sea below, now licking at the base of the cliff. The wind, so gentle down on the beach, was blowing hard on this side of the Point. It whipped her hair onto her eyes and mouth and tugged at her dress. Using her fingers like claws, she clung to the cliff face and edged toward Fearless. (p.107)

Sara's greatest adventure, at the end of the novel, takes her as far as the B.C. interior where she sneaks into the Slocan internment camp disguised as a Japanese girl:

Sara swallowed her, her mouth and throat dry. Her heart pounded. Suppose the Japanese challenged her? Suppose they said

something in their own language and she couldn't reply? Suppose... They had passed by. She couldn't wait another moment. She had to make her move or miss her chance. Taking a deep breath, she fell into step a few yards behind them, keeping her eyes down the way Ernie had told her. Ahead, the Japanese walked silently, looking neither right nor left, ignoring the hostile stares of the townspeople. She had joined them so quietly they hadn't even noticed her. (p.147)

While many of the novels and picture books on the internment such as Takashima's *A Child in Prison Camp* or Uchida's *Journey to Topaz* provide graphic and very personal descriptions of this historical event, few stories come close to such a perfect blend of precise historical setting and enticing adventure as Garrigue's *The Eternal Spring of Mr. Ito*.

### **Characterization**

Every work of history, including every historical novel, has an ideological message. But the novel is above all else an art form concerned with people as they interact with each other and as they develop and change. The people are primary. The novel is worthy of its name, that is, a new thing, when each of its characters, like each of us, is a unique individual, when all have personal histories within the larger history that makes them what they are. (Brodine, 1988, p. 208)

In evaluating any children's story, one of the key areas to examine is character development. This is true of children's historical fiction where well defined, believable characters are important in bringing history to life for young readers (Donelson, 1989). While very young children are often seduced by binary opposites in literature (Egan, 1986), and particularly enjoy a fight between clearly defined good and evil forces, older children are engaged by a more complex story structure (Egan, 1992), presumably one which features characters who come to life as real people. Furthermore, it has been noted by many children's literature critics, that historical fiction writers should avoid creating characters based on stereotypes of heroes and bad guys if they wish their stories to be responsible historical narration (Donelson, 1989, p. 170).

Young readers need to examine and judge characters from the past based on the actions of those characters and the circumstances of the times. If characters are too easily defined as good and bad, or simply as stereotyped representatives of a particular period, the author will have oversimplified the past and failed to stimulate any critical reflection on the part of the reader.

Some researchers believe that children's books generally do not challenge young readers with interesting, complex characters. In a study of children's novels based on the American Revolutionary War, Joel Taxel claims that most novels for young people tend to code their characters according to binary oppositions of good vs. bad or strong vs. weak. Taxel believes that children's literature, rather than promoting critical analysis of historical events and social attitudes with complex characters, instead promotes oversimplified generalizations about history: "books for children often contain clearly defined characters and situations that make it possible to reduce rather than exacerbate conflict, confusion and ambiguity" (Taxel, 1983, p. 64). This statement applies to Marcia Savin's *The Moonbridge* where most characters seem flat and fit too conveniently into categories of good and bad. Ruthie's teacher Miss Lewis seems particularly narrow-minded in her attitude towards Japanese Canadians:

"I didn't call on you, Ruthie. Do you know how many men we've lost in the Philippines? Thousands. And thousands more are now prisoners. The Japs-who have done this-have only one loyalty: to Japan. No matter where they live." (Savin, 1992, p. 153)

Even the character of Miss O'Connor, who demonstrates more tolerance towards the Japanese Americans (and more professionalism within the classroom), is created more out of a need to counterbalance the negative attitude of her colleague than to depict a real person. Miss O'Connor's speeches, while just as didactic and contrived as Miss Lewis', at least allow the



reader to consider the situation from another point of view. Unfortunately, Savin's overly dramatic text makes the elderly teacher seem artificial:

"As some of you know," Miss O'Connor continued, "a number of our friends and neighbors, many of them citizens" - hitting the last word hard - "have been rounded up like criminals to be shipped to God-knows-where only because they or their forefathers happened to be born in the wrong country." (p. 157)

Marcia Savin's bias towards the internment becomes apparent by the way in which she polarizes all of the characters in her novel into obvious camps of good or bad. The good people include Mitzi and all Japanese American victims, as well as a small number of liberal white Americans like Ruthie's family and Miss O'Connor. All other Caucasians in the story represent the bad people; they are America's fear mongers and racists who condoned and even cheered the decision to evacuate the Japanese from the west coast. This stark opposition between the two sides, reflected in the characters' words and actions, has the effect of promoting generalizations about groups of people and about what was right or wrong in this particular historical situation. The development of characters in *The Moonbridge* does little to encourage the reader to think critically and consider the issues from all perspectives.

In historical fiction which features very sensitive, and often personal issues for the author, it must be difficult to avoid portraying certain characters or groups of people in simplistic terms of good and bad. In writing about the Japanese internment, an author of Japanese Canadian or American descent might be very tempted to write about the events with a certain degree of hostility or resentment towards the Caucasians living along the west coast during the war. These feelings could easily, and perhaps unconsciously, be reflected in the author's writing, particularly in the development of certain key characters.

Consequently, it is impressive that the Japanese Canadian and American children's authors featured in this study have not allowed personal feelings to tarnish the quality of their writing. Their stories feature complex characters, both Japanese and Caucasian, who grapple with the issues involved in the evacuation. No one is presented as clearly good or bad. Most characters are simply in shock over what has happened and struggle to maintain some sense of normalcy in their lives and in their relationships with friends and family.

Yoshiko Uchida provides a good example of the kind of writing where characters come to life as real people, rather than shallow stereotypes. In both her novels *Journey to Topaz* and *Journey Home*, Uchida has created well rounded, believable characters with whom children can identify and empathize. Yuki's family and their friends are shocked by the news that they are to be uprooted from their home and sent to live in an internment camp in the desert. Their shock transforms itself into feelings of bewilderment and shame in Yuki and her mother, and into anger and frustration in the male members of the camp. Uchida resists presenting the Sakane family (based on Uchida's own family) and other internees as helpless Japanese victims who stoically accept their fate without any manifestation of emotion. Yuki's brother Ken, for example, expresses the frustration that many young Japanese men felt when faced with the difficult choice between staying in the camp to be with their family, moving east to complete university. Initially, Ken feels a sense of honour in staying to care for his sister and mother, but as time goes by, he begins to resent the confines of the camp and the injustices committed against the Japanese Americans, and grows increasingly more sullen with his family:

Thanksgiving came and went quietly, and although there was turkey at the mess hall, somehow all the sadness that had come to Emi's family kept Yuki from feeling very festive.

Ken, too, seemed discouraged and bitter. "What's there to be

thankful for this year? he asked.

"For being alive and well and together," Mother answered, but Ken didn't seem to care. (Uchida, 1971, p. 123)

Some of the older men in the internment camp are no less angry and resentful. The character of Mr. Kurihara, a first generation Japanese American, is bitter towards the country he feels has betrayed his people; his sentiments regarding loyalty to the old country reflect the feelings of many older Japanese internees:

Mr. Kurihara shrugged. "When this war ends, I may just go back to Japan," he murmured. "At least I won't be an enemy alien there." (p.72)

Even gentle Mr. Toda expresses hostility towards the American government. When the U.S. army asks for recruits among the young Japanese American men, Mr. Toda is among the many disgruntled Japanese who angrily disagree with the idea of the Nisei fighting unit:

"Why should our boys be asked to fight for a country that has put them behind barbed wire?" an elderly voice questioned. Yuki was startled to see that it was Mr. Toda who had spoken . . .

Father was silent for a while, and then he spoke slowly. "Each man must decide for himself, Toda San," he said. "It is a difficult decision to make. But if I were young and a citizen of this country, I think I would do as my country asked. I think I would volunteer."

"Even though your country put you behind barbed wire and treated you as an enemy prisoner first?" Mr. Toda pressed. (p.133)

Uchida manages to quell the anger expressed by some of the characters with the quiet dignity and gentle temperament of Yuki's parents. While her father is absent for much of the story, Yuki's mother helps her daughter and others in the camp to understand and forgive. Her presence in the novel is important for it illustrates the refusal of many Japanese Americans to become bitter and resentful:

Mr. Kurihara had said America was making prisoners of its own citizens, inspecting them, searching them, and herding them like cattle from one camp to another.

But she remembered too what Mother had said back to him. "Fear has made this country do something we will one day regret, Mr. Kurihara, but we cannot let this terrible mistake poison our hearts. If we do, then we will be the ones to destroy ourselves and our children as well. Don't you see?" (p. 90)

Takashima's *A Child in Prison Camp* provides perhaps the best example of realism in characterization and of fair representation of Japanese Canadians. While many of the Japanese authors seem to emphasize only the stoicism, pride and dignity with which many Japanese internees quietly accept their fate, in Takashima's personal story, the Japanese people express genuine feelings of frustration and indignation. The characters in her novel are real and they demonstrate human weaknesses. Some of the Japanese men, including Shichan's own father, begin to drink heavily after they have lost their jobs and homes. They are angry with the Canadian government for separating families, confiscating property and forcing the Japanese Canadians to leave the coast:

Most of the men have been drinking.  
An angry man is shouting.  
The men are dragged violently into the trains.  
Father can be seen. He is being pushed onto the train.  
He is on the steps, turns. His head is above the  
shouting crowd. I see his mouth opening; he shouts  
to his friends, waves his clenched fist.  
but the words are lost in all the noise  
Mother holds my hand tightly. (Takashima, 1971, p.6)

Shichan's father continues to rebel against the decisions of the government and the deplorable living conditions in the camp. He even leads the other men to organize a protest strike against the B.C. Security Commission:

I hear Mr. Kono talking to my father. "It's a blessing our children are healthy and do not mind this. Imagine eating by candlelight. No water."  
Father replies, "We're complaining to the B.C. Security Commission again. We won't give in. We cannot walk a mile for drinking water, with the winter coming." Mr. Kono asks,

"Will they listen?" Father's voice is impatient:  
"They will have to. After all, it's beyond human dignity."  
A strike is called. (p.22)

Conflict is also found in Takashima's novel between members of the Japanese community within the camp. Mr. Mori, a war veteran, who is hired by the R.C.M.P to spy on the Japanese internees, is despised and taunted by the others in the camp:

The old man stares, seems to shrink smaller.  
He curses violently, and spits at my father's feet.  
Father glares, grabs him by the collar.  
I get scared then. I start to cry.  
Mrs. Kono screams. Mother takes my arm.  
Hell breaks loose. "I'll have the R.C.M.P. after you!"  
shouts the old man, as he is dragged away from my father and  
to the other men. Women are shouting and crying. (p.25)

Shichan's father continues to be a central figure in the novel. His resentment and bitterness plague him through the long years in the camp and by the end of the war he is determined to return to Japan, despite protests from other family members. The family finds itself divided over the issue of remaining in Canada or returning to Japan. Shichan must endure endless heated arguments.

Father shouts at mother, "We return to Japan!"  
"But what are we going to do? You have your brothers  
and sisters there. I have no one. Besides, the children..."  
"Never mind the children," father answers.  
"They'll adjust. I'm tired of being treated as a spy,  
a prisoner. Do what you like; I'm returning!" . . .  
All of a sudden I hate that country for having started  
the war. I say aloud, "Damn Japs! Why don't they  
stop fighting?" Father glares. "What do you mean 'Japs'?  
You think you're not a Jap? If I hear you say that again  
I'll throttle you." I see anger and hatred in his eyes. (p. 74)

The intense feelings of Shichan's family and disputes over where they should resettle reflect, on a larger scale, the division between first and second

generation Japanese Canadians, particularly when the war ended and they were forced to choose between Japan and eastern Canada.

Takashima's candid portrayal of her family invites the reader to enter the real world of the internment camps where intimate living quarters fostered lifelong friendships, but crowded conditions and political tension also led to conflict and bitterness. The author hides nothing from us, including alcoholism among the Japanese men, incidents of incest and unwanted pregnancies and passionate family battles. As a result, while her novel is not recommended for young children, older readers will appreciate the complexity of key characters and the openness and honesty with which Takashima has shared her childhood memories.

Other novels, by non-Japanese writers, also feature well rounded, interesting and believable characters. In Garrigue's *The Eternal Spring of Mr. Ito*, the characters of Sarah and Mr. Ito are so deftly created by the author that they come alive as individuals. Sarah is very convincing as a young teenager who struggles between loyalty to her Uncle and his family, and her own personal and moral views concerning the plight of the Japanese. She is ultimately a good character, the heroine of the story, but the means she uses to achieve her end result (hoarding Mr. Ito's special bonsai despite her Uncle, lying to her Aunt when she visits the Itos in Japan town, and running away from the group in Kokanee Creek to sneak into the internment camp) may be interpreted as bad behavior by some. Young readers identify easily with Sarah and enjoy her sense of adventure, her courage and her steadfastness in the face of challenging moral issues.

Mr. Ito is such a convincing and beloved character that some students, after reading the novel, may find it difficult to remember that he was only a

fictional man. During a study of Garrigue's novel, conducted by the author,<sup>5</sup> it became apparent that students, even though they had been reminded repeatedly of the fictional nature of Garrigue's work, had convinced themselves that Mr. Ito and his family were real people who had lived in Vancouver during the time of the Japanese internment. Furthermore, Mr. Ito was such a memorable character for some young readers that they continued to refer to him when discussing characters from other novels. Well after the study of *The Eternal Spring of Mr. Ito* was complete, students from the class continued to regard Mr. Ito as the model against which other characters were compared and judged. Mr. Ito's appeal to children is perhaps best explained by his bravery, gentleness and wisdom. One of the most touching and memorable scenes in the novel takes place in the cave where Mr. Ito has decided to end his life rather than face the humility of the internment camps. Sarah and he enjoy a philosophical discussion about life during which Mr. Ito explains the need for tolerance and understanding between different people in the world:

"What happens after we die, Mr. Ito?" . . .

"Ito thinking heaven just a word. Mean perfect happiness. But perfect happiness come in different ways to different peoples. You Christian, Sara-chan, all same my daughter Helen. So you and she and all Christian peoples do what Jesus teach, to live good lives. After dying, if you deserve, you go to God. To Christians to be with God is perfect happiness, is heaven." . . .

"Mr. Ito. What will happen to you, after you die?"

"Many road leading heaven, Sara-chan. Your God making peoples different, not all same. Why you think He make so, if He want only one kind of peoples in heaven. Ito thinking, different peoples put in world to show different roads to heaven." . . .

"What about the war, Mr. Ito. Why is war in the plan?"

"Perhaps to teach men how good peace is and to try harder for it. In perfect world with perfect men there be no war. But men not perfect. Men still on road." (Garrigue, 1985, pp. 114-118)

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<sup>5</sup> Refers to a previous, unpublished classroom novel study unit by the author with her own grade 6/7 students.

Garrigue's portrayal of the old Japanese gardener is so poignant and touching that it is sure to have a lasting impact on many young readers.

Unfortunately, not all of the characters featured in Garrigue's novel are so well developed. In fact, some secondary characters seem to have been hastily created and appear more like cardboard cut-outs than real people. This is particularly true of the character of Uncle Duncan whose character is included to represent the popular sentiments of many white British Columbians during the war:

Uncle Duncan got very red in the face. "You'd think he'd have turned Christian after thirty years in Canada. You know, Jean, I can't understand why the Japs don't assimilate better. They seem determined to hang on to all their old customs even though they're Canadians now. They should behave like Canadians instead of carrying on all these antiquated ways. . . ." (pp. 30-31)

Uncle Duncan's anger towards the Japanese after the bombing of Pearl Harbour leads to his rash decision to fire Mr. Ito and later to work on the B.C. Security Commission, the organizing committee which mobilized the evacuation of Japanese Canadians. His speech justifying the creation of internment camps typifies commonly heard rhetoric during the war:

"Well, as you know, all Japanese men between the ages of eighteen and forty have already been shipped out. Today we received authorization from Ottawa to ship the rest of them. Everyone of Japanese background is to go, every man jack of 'em."

"Good heavens!" said Aunt Jean. "There are thousands in Vancouver alone. You don't mean all of them? Not the Canadians?"

He nodded. "The whole bunch, Canadian-born or not, citizens or not. It's the only way. We've got to act quickly. It's for their own good as much as anything else. Ugly feeling is building more and more every day, with the bad news from Singapore and Burma." . . .

Aunt Jean looked anxiously after her. "Where will they be sent, Duncan?"

"We're getting camps ready up in the mountains. There are places up through there that have been virtually ghost towns since the mining petered out. It will keep them properly isolated. And it might even help



the towns revive a bit to have a bunch of new people arrive. The inmates will need food, clothing, that sort of thing - it'll help the local shopkeepers." (p.73)

Uncle Duncan's actions towards the Ito's and his indifference to the plight of west coast Japanese Canadians make it somewhat difficult to believe his abrupt change of heart at the end of the novel. When he discovers his niece Sara at the internment camp and sees the squalor in which the Ito family is living, he is suddenly sorry for what has happened to the Japanese. In this speech to Helen Ito, Garrigue seems, once again, to be using the character of Uncle Duncan as a type, to represent the feelings of the general populace. This time his speech reflects the remorse felt by many British Columbians, particularly at the end of the war:

"I'm so sorry, Helen. So sorry...It's the war. Pearl Harbour took us by surprise. We feared invasion...There was no time to think things out or separate the innocent from the guilty..It was a question of defence against sabotage..." (p.158)

It may be said that history is an illustration of the human experience. In order for a novel to succeed as historical fiction it must allow the reader to experience the past vicariously and personally (Cianciolo, 1981), through characters who are believable and interesting. Furthermore, characters in historical fiction, rather than simplifying the issues and promoting generalizations about historical events, should compel young readers to examine historical issues for themselves and think critically about our past.

### **Style**

The final literary quality to be considered when evaluating children's historical fiction is style. In historical fiction, style is perhaps even more fundamental to the success of a story than it is in contemporary fiction because, like setting, style is a key element in recreating an authentic, accurate and

believable past.

In his article featuring, "*Suggestions for Evaluating Historical Fiction*", Donelson (1989) discusses style by identifying what flaws poor historical fiction may feature. One of the flaws he examines is "awkward narration and exposition". Awkwardness in writing style is evident, for example, if an author attempts to teach history through contrived conversations between characters. The emphasis here is on the *plausibility* of any given conversation; one must ask whether it is natural and believable that the characters involved would discuss historical facts in a particular situation and setting. In *A Child in Prison Camp*, for example, many of the conversations between adults focus on the political climate of the times and the reactions of Japanese Canadians internees to decisions made by the government. It seems understandable that Takashima would include these types of conversations. The book is written in diary form, from the perspective of a young child who overhears the conversations of adults around her and struggles to understand their meaning. In the setting of the internment camp, updates of the war were based on the odd newspaper story and rumours spread by word of mouth. The adults living in the camps were concerned about national and international issues and the effects they would have on their present living conditions, as well as their future in Canada. These adult internees, most of whom were jobless and frustrated, felt a need to talk about current events and the issues involved. Their conversations in the novel seem natural and believable and they add a degree of tension and drama.

Blos (1985) uses the term "overstuffed sentences" to describe what she considers awkwardness in narration. Overstuffed sentences refers to clauses of historical information which are introduced in the novel in an intrusive and

unnatural way: "awkward facts call attention to themselves and may be so conspicuous as to overwhelm the story." (p.38). If one examines the conversations in Garrigue's novel, *The Eternal Spring of Mr. Ito*, one might begin to question whether they have been included because they are vital to the plot, or simply to educate young readers on the facts of history. In the following conversation, Helen shares with Sara what has happened to the Ito family. It is difficult to believe that a proud Japanese Canadian woman would be so frank about intimate family matters with an outsider, especially one as young as Sara:

She handed Sara her tea, and while Sara drank it, Helen talked about what had happened to them since Pearl Harbour. Her brother George had been arrested, taken away without a chance to even pack a suitcase, and his fishing boat had been confiscated by the government. Henry, too, was gone, sent to a road gang with the first batch of Japanese men, forcing his wife to sell their farm at a loss, because so many farms were on the market at the same time. "And we've had to sell my father's truck because we Japanese are not allowed to have cars anymore. And I was fired from my job." Angry tears choked Helen's voice. "We are treated like criminals! Worse than criminals, for they at least receive a trial and get a chance to prove their innocence!"

Mrs. Ito held up her hand. "Is enough, Helen. Sara-chan little girl. We not bother her with our troubles." (Garrigue, 1985, p. 82)

Another, perhaps more obvious, flaw in historical fiction relates back to the appropriateness of historical details in the story. If an author has not done thorough research and is not completely familiar with the particular time period in which the story takes place, anachronisms may be evident, even to a younger reader. Anachronisms can include illogical combinations of people, speaking styles or social values from different time periods (Donelson, 1989, p. 170).

Historical fiction writers are faced with an even greater challenge than authors of contemporary fiction when establishing the tone of their story. While early works of children's historical fiction were characterized by sophisticated

prose and long passages of historical fact, contemporary historical fiction must keep up with the times in order to appeal to today's children. Writers whose stories take place in a historical setting must find a way to integrate appropriate language and writing style and maintain the integrity of their stories, without losing the interest of modern young readers. Blos refers to this as finding "the most correct negotiation between our time and the story's" (1985, p. 39). The stories and novels written about the internment seem to have succeeded in reaching this delicate balance between historical style and and modern literary appeal, without compromising historical accuracy. The task was perhaps made easier for the authors featured in this study since, unlike stories written about a very distant past, the internment occurred a mere fifty years ago. Still, it is apparent that these authors were aware of subtle differences between the speaking styles of the 1940s and our own, and adjusted the dialogue in their stories accordingly. The colourful expressions used by Aunt Jean in *The Eternal Spring of Mr. Ito* will probably remind young readers of their own grandmother's style of language:

"James Duncan Cameron! You go and take off those argyle socks this minute. If you're not standing in this hall in decent grey ones in two shakes of a lamb's tail, there'll be no Sunday dinner on your plate today!" (Garrigue, 1985, p. 38).

In historical fiction the writer's style must be both a reflection and an extension of setting. Style is an important element in recreating an accurate, detailed and authentic description of the past. If a writer is thoroughly familiar with the historical period during which the story takes place, the language used in the narrative and the way the characters speak will reflect that past world. The reader will then come away with the feeling that he or she has been transported back in time to experience, not only important historical events, but

the everyday life of those who lived in the past.

### **THE MORALITY OF NARRATIVE STRUCTURE**

Burton (1969) has said that the prime object of writing an historical novel is an exercise of the heart rather than the head. Burton believes that children's historical fiction authors write stories as an extension of their own human sympathies. This brings us back to what Levstik calls the "emotionally charged context" of narrative and raises the thorny issue of morality in historical fiction. In the following pages, the author will address two questions: Is it possible for historical fiction to portray historical events in a completely balanced and unbiased manner? How does our present perspective bear upon our ability to interpret historical truth and develop opinions of right and wrong?

The first question requires us to reexamine some of the elements of good historical fiction discussed earlier. Obviously, in order to be responsible historical fiction, a story about the past must accurately depict people and events and demonstrate a faithfulness to historical facts. Stories must also avoid simplifications and stereotypes which could influence the way in which children view a particular historical episodes. However, it is doubtful that fiction, or for that matter any historical writing, can remain moralistically neutral in its portrayal of the past. The very act of writing is, according to novelist Katherine Paterson, a type of self-judgment. "If a particular novel or poem or story pronounces judgment on the society in which the writer lives, it must do so because the writer is a part of that society and she has in this writing searched her soul" (Paterson, 1993, p. 61). Another children's author, Jean Fritz, comments on the impossibility of complete objectivity in historical writing: "the retelling of history is of necessity a selective process . . . 'the very truth' is at best only a partial truth" (1981, p. 81).

Until World War I, only the heroic history of the western world was taught to children; lessons highlighted the brave deeds of our ancestors and if the motives and actions of our forefathers were in any way questionable, those episodes of history were typically omitted from the lessons (Haugaard, 1979). The primary purpose of history was to teach nationalistic pride, not to cast doubt on the integrity of historic figures who waged battles, explored new worlds and defended the honour of the country. Hence, children were presented with what Haugaard refers to as "selected truth" whenever history was taught to them. "English children could be proud of the Empire, for they were told little that would cause them not to be, just as American children were taught to view the conquest of the West as one glorious adventure" (p.698). This attitude towards our past may also explain why in British Columbia, prior to the 1980s, the internment of Japanese Canadians was absent from social studies text books.

Today, however, there is a call to teach history in a different manner. Many historic figures who were once considered heroic are now seen as villains in an educational environment which is becoming increasingly more politically correct. Christopher Columbus, for example, at one time admired as the brave explorer who discovered America, is now seen by many as a ruthless imperialist and oppressor of Native Americans. Does this mean that children are now being presented with a more honest version of history? Haugaard uses the metaphor of a film projector in answering this question: students may get a truer picture of history when the projector beam shines its light on the less heroic aspects of our past, but young people are still being presented with only a selected truth. "Someone has directed a spotlight upon the past, and the child is under the illusion that he is seeing a complete picture" (p. 698).

This same trend towards a more honest, yet selective presentation of

historical information is also evident in children's historical fiction, where for at least the past three decades, novels and picture books have become more introspective and have tended to explore the less flattering aspects of our collective past.

In many ways, the writing of historical fiction has paralleled not only developments in fiction, but in historical scholarship too. In both disciplines one finds that new and revisionist points of view abound, that heroes are not sacrosanct, that old beliefs are labelled misbeliefs, and that emphasis is given to new kinds of details. (Blos, 1985, p. 38)

In children's historical fiction, as in the teaching of history itself, young students are being presented with a more modern, yet still subjective, version of historical facts. True historians know that all historical material is suspect to a certain degree (Haugaard, 1979), and that personal prejudices will affect the writing of history, even in textbooks. Likewise, children's historical fiction authors write about the past from their own personal perspective, a position which is naturally influenced by religious, cultural or political beliefs.

Selectively written history is meant to appeal to the most basic emotions and children in particular respond emotionally to any injustice they read about in history, whether it is in a text or a story.

However, there is an important distinction to be made between the emotional response of children when they read history in textbook form and when they read about historical events through historical fiction. In the introduction to this chapter it was noted that Levstik had observed, from many case studies, that children tend not to be spontaneously critical of historical fiction. Young students may easily question the validity of textbook history because they have no personal connection to the historical events or people presented. However, when children read history through narrative, as in a

compelling picture book or novel, their identification with certain characters and their emotional attachment to the story, causes them to lose sight of the subjective nature of historical fiction (Levstik 1986, 1988, 1990). So, while historical fiction does provide children with historical information, that information is "strongly colored by the author's point of view and the reader's identification with particular characters" (Levstik, 1986, p. 16). Moreover, Levstik's studies indicate that children's moral indignation is more greatly aroused by historical narrative than by textbook history.

Researchers seem to agree on two important points. First, narrative history is more subjective than expository texts (White, 1980; Levstik, 1989). Some academics even suggest that historical fiction is intentionally moralistic, "every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralize the events of which it treats" (White, 1980, p. 18). Others claim that in writing about history through stories, authors arbitrarily impose a certain truth upon readers (Kermode, 1980, p. 90). The subjective, and perhaps moralizing nature of historical fiction is cause for concern. Because children respond so emotionally to stories, they are unable to recognize and be spontaneously critical of the subjectivity and moral voice in historical fiction. This is precisely why Levstik sees the emotional impact of history as literature as problematic (Levstik, 1986, p. 16), and why she has directed her recent research towards exploring the need for teacher mediation whenever children's fiction is used to teach history (Levstik, 1989, 1990). In the next chapter, the author will examine suggested ways in which teachers can mediate between the subjective nature of literature and their students, in order to promote, within the classroom, a more mature historical understanding.

The second point, often discussed in recent research, concerns the issue



of historical revisionism (Seixas, 1994, p. 261), particularly in narrative and popular representations of the past. As noted earlier in this section, the study of history, and subsequently the writing of historical fiction, have both undergone philosophical changes over the past few years. In their search for historical truth, it may be said that historians and fiction writers alike are becoming more critical of the past, of traditional viewpoints and of important figures in history. Historical writing is becoming more politically correct, with a greater emphasis, on the injustices perpetrated by traditional social orders, and on the violation of minority groups' rights throughout history. However, in their passion for exposing the wrongs of our ancestors, historians and writers of historical fiction may in fact be imposing their own present day values upon the past. "And just as the past casts its shadow into the future, so does the present bear upon the historian's study of the past" (Haugaard, 1979, p. 700). It is easy, in reading history, to be critical of the actions and motives of an earlier generation when we judge them from our modern perspective. Times have changed and what was once considered right or necessary by our parents may now be looked upon by us as an abominable crime against humankind. Furthermore, by focussing on the injustices committed against certain people in the past, the context in which historical events took place may be forgotten or overlooked.

The Japanese Canadian and American internment illustrates well how presentism in historical fiction can effect our interpretation of historical events. All of the books included in this study are unequivocally sympathetic to the plight of the Japanese. The focus in all of them is on the human side of what happened in 1942, the separation of family members, the loss of material goods and the hardships endured in the internment camps. Without denying the tragic nature of these events, or the violation of constitutional rights, it must be noted

that the authors of the Japanese internment books spend very little time explaining the context in which the events took place. The world was at war and Japan was committing atrocious crimes in South East Asia. After the bombing of Pearl Harbour, the people on the west coast took the threat of attack by the Japanese Army very seriously. We can look back on the events of 1942 with contempt and criticism because we know now what was not known then: there was no evidence of spies living among the Japanese Canadians and Americans, or of any individuals willing to assist the Japanese Army in attacking the coast. The tragedy of the internment camps is that they were completely unnecessary and violated the rights of innocent people. However, the politicians and military decision makers of 1942 did not have the advantage of hindsight and many may have acted in what they believed were the best interests of all concerned. When children read stories about the internment, their emotional attachment to key characters causes them to be naturally sympathetic towards the victims of this episode in history. Just as young students do not spontaneously question the subjective nature of the writing because of their emotional attachment to the story, likewise they have difficulty recognizing when authors, or they themselves, have applied present-day values to judge historical events. Once again, teacher intervention is crucial in helping students broaden the projector light beam which has been so narrowly focussed, and to understand the larger context in which an historical event took place.

## **CONCLUSION**

Historical fiction as a genre is generally expected to adhere to a common set of characteristics. Novels and stories considered historical fiction should include an authentic and detailed description of historical setting, an exciting

plot that revolves around genuine historical events, well developed characters who come alive as believable people, and a style of writing which accurately reflects the historical setting. In order to produce quality historical fiction for children, authors must do extensive research in order to become so familiar with the past that they can skilfully interweave historical fact into a plausible story which will appeal to young readers. Classroom teachers can promote the reading of quality historical fiction by evaluating books according to the above characteristics and selecting only those stories which meet the requirements of quality historical fiction. Of course, the true test of any children's book is the response of young readers themselves to a story. Even those stories which educators and critics might consider brilliant will not be effective teaching tools in the history or language arts program if they are not well liked by our students. The value of children's historical fiction is its "ability to transport children into a past that is believable, useful and interesting to them" (Jean Fritz quoted in Van Vliet, 1992, p. 156).

The subjective nature of narrative history, morality in historical fiction and the problem of presentism are issues of much concern. The final chapter in this study examines the need for teacher mediation whenever historical fiction is used to teach history, and outlines classroom strategies which may promote a more mature historical understanding in children.

## Chapter Five

### TOWARDS MATURE HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING: CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

#### INTRODUCTION

Much educational research in the past two decades has explored the value of integrating story into general teaching practice (Barton & Booth, 1990; Coles, 1989; Egan, 1986, 1992; Rosen, 1988). Along with this interest in the general educational potential of narrative, a substantial amount of research has concentrated on the use of historical fiction, as a complement to textbooks and other traditional teaching methods, within the social social curriculum (Blos, 1985, 1993; Brozo & Tomlinson, 1986; Cianciolo, 1981; Danielson, 1989; Downey & Levstik, 1988; Johnson & Ebert, 1992; Levstik, 1986, 1989, 1990, 1992; Nelson, 1994; Richgels, Tomlinson & Tunnel, 1993; Savage & Savage, 1993, Tunnel, 1993). Three important conclusions may be drawn from the body of scholarship concerning the use of children's literature to teach history.

First, as was noted in Chapter Three of this study, there is a strong pedagogical argument for including historical fiction trade books within social studies. Stories about the internment like *Journey to Topaz* bring history to life for children in a way that textbooks alone do not. Fiction provides readers with the humanizing details of history; it emphasizes human motives, human problems and the consequences of human actions (Tomlinson, Tunnell & Richgels, 1993; Levstik, 1989.) The best historical stories stimulate the imagination and make history relevant and meaningful (Cianciolo, 1981). Unlike history textbooks which tend to present facts in a dry, impersonal manner, historical fiction embellishes the past with characters, like Garrigue's Mr. Ito, who come to life as real people. Stories place history in a vivid setting

and retell important events through an exciting, action-packed plot (Tomlinson, Tunnell & Richgels, 1993). Some scholars have argued that narrative may be superior to traditional history textbooks in developing time and causation concepts in young children (Downey & Levstik, 1988). Finally, many researchers believe that historical fiction is a potent spur to historical interest and that it is more effective than are textbooks in shaping the historical understanding of young children (Levstik, 1990, 1993; Vanderhaeghe, 1987).

Second, historical fiction appeals to children on a more emotional level than history textbooks. The affective nature of narrative history is viewed by some researchers as a positive feature; when children become emotionally connected to the stories they read, historical events become more significant and reading about them has a humanizing effect. "Students can feel empathy, fear, hope, prejudice, love, and joy in dealing with literary characters placed in real-life human conflicts" (Heinly & Hilton, 1982, p. 22). In the case of the Japanese internment, stories like *A Child in Prison Camp* or *Naomi's Road* help students understand the pain and humiliation experienced by Japanese families who were uprooted from their homes and sent to live in overcrowded camps.

Other researchers consider the emotional impact of historical fiction to be potentially problematic unless it is controlled by direct teacher intervention. Egan states that stories have the power to engage our emotions and our commitment, and that it is precisely this power which makes some people afraid of stories, particularly where young minds are involved. "The story's power to contribute to tolerance and a sense of justice needs to be balanced, of course, with its power to do the opposite as well" (1992, p. 55). Levstik also views the emotional impact of stories with a great deal of caution. Levstik found in her

studies that historical fiction enlists the emotional involvement of children to the point where students are no longer able to analyze the story or the historical events with any sense of objectivity. Teacher mediation is required, according to Levstik, in order for children to recognize the subjective nature of fiction and the ethical or moral context created by the author and supported by the story's characters and events. Furthermore, teachers need to assist students in removing themselves emotionally from the story in order to think carefully, and with a fair-minded attitude, about the historical issues presented in narrative (Levstik, 1990). When discussing the internment, for example, students need to step back from the emotional context of the stories at some point, and examine the events from a more global perspective. Teachers can assist in this task by explaining the context of World War II and the history behind the Japanese invasions in South-East Asia, both of which were significant factors in creating an atmosphere of fear and insecurity on the west coast.

A third conclusion which may be drawn from the research into historical fiction concerns the way in which children judge stories for historical accuracy. Once again, Levstik's research provides evidence that using historical fiction in the classroom must be carefully controlled with teacher intervention. During her 1986 classroom study, Levstik observed that, while students consistently challenged the accuracy of textbooks, they were unable or unwilling to doubt the truthfulness of the stories that had touched them emotionally. In fact, children tended to use the stories, rather than the textbooks, as the definitive source for historical truth. Levstik concluded in her research that the sense of indubitable truth transmitted so effectively by a good story may overpower the reader's concern for historical accuracy. In the classroom study of *The Eternal Spring of Mr. Ito*, students were so convinced of the novel's truth that they lost

sight of the fictional nature of the story. Once again, mediation between students and historical narrative is necessary in order to teach children to approach narrative portrayals of history as cautiously as they would a textbook.

The observations made by Levstik help educators understand both the appeal of narrative history, and the way children respond to historical literature. With only minimal teacher intervention (directing students to certain novels for example), students' initial responses to historical fiction tend to be emotional rather than critical or analytical. Furthermore, after reading an especially moving story about the past, students seem reluctant to doubt the historical accuracy of the information presented.

If students are to move beyond their initial emotional responses to historical literature, they must learn to critically analyze what they read. Students need to become aware of the subjectivity of historical information, especially in fictional format, and of the personal bias which authors inevitably bring to their writing. A specific classroom context which promotes the use of a wide range of reading materials, fosters sharing and discussion, and develops the skills of critical reading and thinking will enable students to judge historical issues from an informed and fair-minded position. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to providing educators with classroom strategies to facilitate mature and analytical responses to historical fiction.

### **PROVIDING MULTIPLE RESOURCES**

The classroom environment should provide for a variety of fiction material including novels, picture books, poetry and films where available. In addition, students should have access to non-fiction resources of historical information such as textbooks, encyclopedias, magazines, newspapers, videos, C-D Roms and other multimedia resources. When students are exposed to a variety of

both fictional and non-fictional resources, they are able to read about the same topic from different perspectives. Students should also be encouraged to discover other sources of historical information from within the community, including librarians, history experts, or individuals who have directly experienced historical events. When studying the Japanese Canadian internment, a teacher might invite war veterans and/or Japanese citizens who were interned to speak to the class. A wide variety of resource materials is necessary in establishing a critical reading program (Ross, 1981, p. 311) since it provides students with the material necessary for comparing facts, confirming information and solving disputes over historical accuracy (Levstik, 1990, p. 851). A wealth of information books within the classroom fosters further research and is a necessary component of a learning environment which promotes critical analysis of historical information.

Teachers also need to allow ample time for independent and teacher-directed reading within the daily schedule. Students benefit from exposure to historical novels or picture books read along with the teacher, but they also need time for making personal choices regarding historical fiction. In some cases, students' choices may be limited by specific historical topics (i.e., during social studies periods), but the selection of books for independent reading (during language arts blocks) should be left up to the students themselves. Students who are interested in a particular period of history should, however, be encouraged to read more than one fictional account of that event in order to make comparisons and expand their understanding of the issues involved. If the use of historical fiction is to move beyond the enrichment stage of making the past come alive, children must have access to a number of trade books on the same historical topic. Only then will they begin to appreciate that events



are interpreted in various ways and that comparative reading can yield to them a better informed point of view (Lehman & Hayes, 1985, p. 166).

### **PROVIDING SHARING AND REFLECTION OPPORTUNITIES**

The classroom context should cultivate a “community of learners” (Levstik, 1986, p.14) by providing opportunities during the day for discussion and sharing of historical information. The concept of literary experience should be extended to incorporate not only reading, but also reflection, personal response, and exchanging ideas inspired by the reading.

Aidan Chambers, in his book *Tell Me*, says that the “act of reading lies in talking about what you have read” (Chambers, 1993, p. 15). This is particularly true in the case of historical fiction, where multiple perspectives are often presented on difficult and sensitive historical issues. Students need time to ponder those issues, develop their own opinions and then test, modify or retain those ideas through interaction with other resources and other readers.

Teachers need to encourage sharing in informal situations such as small group discussions. Providing thought-provoking questions and reflection topics guide discussions and ensure the quality of sharing opportunities. These types of questions also de-emphasize shallow responses to literature such as “I liked this story” or “I thought the book was exciting” by promoting in their place more in-depth and thoughtful responses. While discussing books about the Japanese internment, for example, teachers might want to propose questions for reflection such as: Do you think the B.C. government was justified in evacuating Japanese Canadians from the west coast? Was the internment a result of racism in B.C. during the 1940s or a necessary measure of national security? Do you think this historical event would have been told differently by another narrator? How do textbook versions of the internment differ from the

way it is presented in literature? Throughout these discussions, teachers should praise students who demonstrate a willingness to think carefully about issues, share ideas, listen to others' opinions and explore topics through further research.

Following group sharing opportunities, formal response ideas might include journal writing, conferences with the teacher, book reviews, creative writing assignments and art projects. After reading books on the internment, students might be asked to write journal entries from different characters' perspectives in order to understand how different individuals reacted to the same events. Other ideas include having students write interviews with characters from novels, develop different newspaper reports about the internment from opposing perspectives (i.e., one article for "Japan town News" and another for the "Vancouver Sun") or explore the internment visually by creating, as Hamanaka did, a time-line in mural form. These formal responses to literature allow children to explore, define and express their own thoughts about historical topics.

Whenever history is taught, the classroom environment should promote the ideas that striving to know more about a historical topic is important, that truth is not absolute, and above all, that there are many possible perspectives to a given issue. The fundamental and essential ingredient in developing critical readers is a classroom atmosphere where different values and many points of view are acceptable" (Lehman & Hayes, 1985, p. 169).

### **PROMOTING CRITICAL READING AND THINKING CAPACITIES**

It is the critical thinker, and by extension, the critical reader, who is least likely to be waylaid by misinformation and bias. Certainly, students who can develop the capacity to read critically will have acquired a means to recognize divergent points of view and to support one or another with reason and clarity by evaluating

available material. These students are not only critical readers but active participants in their own learning. (Lehman & Hayes, 1985, p. 165)

There is no dichotomy between teaching the facts of history and developing the skills of thinking critically about them (Reed, 1989). Scholarship in the area of reading process provides educators with an insight into the concept of critical reading and the notion of critical analysis as it is applied to narrative history. Research from as far back as thirty years ago had already formulated a definition for critical reading, as well as a rationale for incorporating this important skill into the curriculum (Ennis, 1964; Karlin, 1967; Dale, 1967).

Reading comprehension may be understood to include three sequential stages: *literal reading* or understanding the denotation of words, ideas or sentences in context, *interpretive reading* or obtaining deeper meaning not directly stated in the text, and *critical reading* or evaluating the quality, value, accuracy and truthfulness of what is read (Wolf, King & Huck, 1968). Critical reading may be defined as "an analytical, evaluative type of reading in which the reader analyzes and judges both the content of the selection and the effectiveness with which it is stated" (p. 442). In becoming critical readers, children need to be taught specific skills and must adopt a certain attitude towards the material they read. Critical reading involves judging the truthfulness and worth of a text, as well as "searching for the purposes underlying the author's message and making rational judgements about what is read based upon valid criteria" (p. 442). In simple terms, critical reading may be thought of as critical thinking applied to all types of written material, including argumentative, informational or literary.

Critical reading is a complex skill which is considered essential if

students are to react thoughtfully to printed material (Ross, 1981). However, researchers generally agree that children do not reach this higher level of the reading process unless they are "led there by teachers who direct them, through inquiry and reflection, to demand accountability of available material" (Lehman & Hayes, 1985, p. 165). In order to develop their own set of standards for evaluation of books, and become critical readers, children need to be taught specific skills and given opportunities within the classroom to practise and perfect those skills: "the ability to analyze and evaluate ideas does not develop naturally as a concomitant of chronological age. Rather, critical reading behaviour is learned and proper systematic instruction in the skills that contribute to it are necessary" (Wolf, King & Huck, p. 440).

Lehman and Hayes (1985) believe that critical reading skills must be taught as soon as students have the capacity to internalize historical concepts and opinions and make judgements on them. It is recommended by many researchers that instruction and practise in critical reading be initiated in the upper intermediate grades and that it be an on-going part of the process of securing meaning whenever children are reading. "Evaluation occurs at every stage of reading as the reader selects suitable information and rejects the unsuitable, interprets a descriptive phrase, recognizes the techniques of persuasion, or analyzes plot development" (Wolf, King & Huck, p. 440).

Several models for effective teaching of critical reading skills have been developed over the years. Lehman and Hayes (1985) synthesized previously devised reading models in order to create their own strategy for teaching critical reading of historical material. Their strategy for reading critically involves three stages which they refer to as the Plan, Probe and Ponder Phases. Each of these stages involves specific skills and attitudes which are fostered by an

underlying teaching principle and reinforced with appropriate classroom activities ( p. 167). The Plan Phase is the prereading stage where questions and ideas are generated in order to help students anticipate what they will learn and develop an objective frame of mind in reading a... listening to others' opinions. The Probe Phase involves information research strategies which allow students to examine what they are reading and to explore other relevant material. The Ponder Phase may be thought of as post-reading contemplation where students connect previous knowledge with what they are reading, and evaluate and compare material.

While other researchers have proposed critical reading models with three sequential stages of readiness, reading and response (Holmes & Ammon, 1985), the three phases of Lehman and Hayes' model are not necessarily consecutive, but are an ongoing part of the reading process. In this way, Lehman and Hayes' model is similar to the cyclical model proposed by Levstik (1990) who emphasizes subjective response followed by critical analysis and reinforcement through art work and creative writing projects.

Children need to develop certain skills and attitudes in order to become critical readers. Researchers have identified a number capacities considered necessary for the critical reading of historical fiction. These capacities, which overlap Lehman and Hayes' Plan, Probe and Ponder stages, incorporate both mechanical skills and mental attitude. They include activating prior knowledge, suspending judgement, generating questions for reflection and research, checking and comparing sources, developing research skills, developing criteria for evaluation of historical fiction, acknowledging the subjectivity of historical fiction, rejecting monocausality in historical theories, exploring the concept of presentism in historical writing and developing historical empathy.

The ultimate goal of fostering these skills and attitudes is to assist children in developing a mature understanding of historical issues and a fair-minded attitude towards the past. The following sections explore these capacities and propose appropriate teaching strategies and classroom activities.

### **Activating Prior Knowledge**

Before students begin reading historical fiction, it is important for teachers to prepare them intellectually and emotionally. Intellectual preparation involves activating prior knowledge and creating a context for further learning. Teachers can use strategies such as brainstorming, discussions, or word associations to focus attention on the topic, and motivate students to learning more about a particular period in history (Holmes & Ammon, 1985, p. 368). During these preliminary activities, students come to recognize what they already know, through prior learning and previous experience. They also begin to share their knowledge with fellow classmates. The teacher acts as a facilitator, encouraging input of ideas, eliciting questions from students (a key component in critical inquiry) and directing the discussion towards key issues which may be dealt with in the historical fiction books. Before reading a story about the Japanese internment, for example, a teacher might activate prior knowledge by asking students to list words or events which they associate with World War II, or by having students brainstorm ideas about the Japanese culture. The objectives of these types of prereading classroom activities include having students recognize themselves as sources of information (a precursor to the establishment of peer experts within the class), debunking any historical myths or misinformation about a particular historical period or figure, and stimulating an interest in reading and learning more about a topic.

### **Suspending Judgement**

Emotional preparation involves making students aware of general attitudes and values, and encouraging them to keep an open mind while reading about an historical topic and listening to others. Students need to recognize that their own ideas are often based on personal (or family) opinions, and perhaps previous experience. They should recognize and respect the fact that authors and other students may have different values and view historical issues in a different, or even opposing, way. Suspending judgement at the beginning stage of critical reading is crucial if students are to make fair evaluations of reading materials (Lehman & Hayes, 1985, p. 167). Students need to learn to keep an open mind and listen respectfully to other points of view. Activities aimed at accomplishing the task of emotional preparation might include opinion surveys, debates and class discussions about experiences which have had a significant impact on students. These experiences might include films, books, or encounters with special people who were influential enough to make students develop opinions (or form new ones) about certain issues. These types of activities encourage students to remain open to new ideas, to accept that everyone views history from different points of view and to understand that personal perspectives are formed by unique life experiences.

### **Generating Questions for Reflection and Research**

The process of questioning teaches the individual to doubt established "truths", to reexamine acquired knowledge, and to question information. The ability to ask questions for oneself enhances an individual's status as a free human being. (Rosenzweig, 1982, p. 62)

In order for students to prepare themselves for further research and to develop the habit of reading historical material with a critical, inquiring attitude, they must first learn the skill of posing relevant, probing questions. These types

of questions give focus to the reading of historical texts and provide a framework for searching for more information about a topic (Lehman & Hayes, 1985, p. 167). Teachers can model this skill by proposing key study questions, helping the class design questions as a group, and assisting individual students in developing investigative questions to guide reading and research. These questions should be open-ended and involve analysis, synthesis and evaluation of reading material in order to stimulate critical thinking (p. 167).

When a class is reading novels about the Japanese internment, higher-order questions aimed at guiding students' reading and research might include: From whose perspective is the story being told? What prior experiences or cultural background of the author might have influenced the way the story is told, or the way certain characters are portrayed? Is the author providing us with the big picture or only a narrow view of the historical events involved in this issue? What other world events were occurring at the same time as the internment? These types of questions compel students to reflect carefully as they are reading and encourage them to investigate historical topics further.

### **Checking and Comparing Sources**

As students read historical fiction, it is important that they learn to check sources for such elements as the author's qualifications and background, the date of publication, and any relevant information about the publisher. With proper guidance, and specifically planned activities, students can develop the skills needed to evaluate an author's background knowledge of a topic, as well as his or her historical competence and possible personal bias. Students will also learn where to find significant information about an author's competence, and how to evaluate it (Ross, 1981, p. 311). Activities aimed at checking a writer's experience and education might include reading excerpts from books



about authors (such as Kovacs and Preller's *Meet the Authors and Illustrators*), checking book jackets, chatting with librarians and other literary authorities, or writing to authors and asking specific questions. In the classroom study of *The Eternal Spring of Mr. Ito*, for example, students wrote to Garrigue to ask her how she (an American) could write so vividly, and with such detail, about B.C. in the 1940s. Garrigue responded personally to each student in the class, explaining that she had spent part of her childhood in Vancouver, and that, in fact, she had based the character of Sara on herself as a child.

Comparing sources is another skill which is highly recommended by many of the researchers who promote critical analysis of historical fiction. Classrooms which are well stocked with many children's trade books (both fiction and non-fiction sources), as well as traditional textbooks, encyclopedias and primary sources of historical information (newspapers, diaries, autobiographies, old newspapers) provide the best environment for stimulating in children a reflex for systematically checking and comparing sources. In cases of historical inaccuracies, or when two different historical fiction sources seem to contradict one another in terms of historical information, students can check the dates of publication, as well as the reputation of the publishers, just as they would when checking and comparing non-fiction sources such as textbooks and encyclopedias.

Teachers also play a key role in fostering this skill by promoting the use of multiple sources of information, rather than a single textbook or a single historical novel (Levstik, 1986, 1990), and by empowering students with a choice of resources and the opportunity to evaluate historical resources for themselves. "By comparing and evaluating sources, students learn to judge the reliability of various types of materials. Critical readers examine a variety of

materials, realizing that a statement supported by several authors is probably more reliable than an unsupported statement.” (Ross, 1981, p. 311). As children read and compare sources, they will inevitably discover historical discrepancies and inaccuracies. Their discoveries will serve to eliminate the notion of a single, final authority in historical study, and to promote the idea that history is interpretive and subjective. Critical, comparative reading of historical information, will stimulate the systematic verification of printed materials, motivate students to further reading, and spark discussions and debates about historical issues. Children who are encouraged to compare and contrast differing viewpoints in their reading and research, are more likely to develop critical reading skills and define their own ideas (Holmes & Ammon, 1985, p. 366).

### **Developing Research Skills**

Research involves searching for relevant materials and gathering evidence. As stated above, providing students with a variety of classroom resources, rather than just a single textbook or historical fiction novel, will encourage the critical use of multiple sources of research materials and downplay the idea that some types of historical writing are more valid or authentic than others. More important than the act of searching for information though, is the ability to gather evidence for supporting specific ideas or theories. According to Lehman and Hayes (1985), this is a skill which is too often neglected at the elementary level. Students need to learn how to substantiate their claims and ideas with information they have found during their research, and to support their thinking through logic. This skill is also relevant when students are discussing novel elements and writing style with their teachers or peers. Activities aimed at encouraging students to systematically find evidence

(examples or quotes) from their reading to validate their opinions will enhance the quality of students' own writing in response to literature, and foster logical thinking.

### **Developing Criteria for Evaluation of Historical Fiction**

Having students develop and refine their own criteria for evaluation of sources is an important step in the critical reading cycle (Lehman & Hayes, 1985, p. 166). In order for students to engage in the critical analysis of the books they read, they need to develop a set of criteria with which to evaluate and judge narrative history. The criteria for evaluating historical fiction should focus not only on historical accuracy/faithfulness (which will be revealed by careful, comparative reading), but also on important literary elements which may effect the way history is presented in story form. These elements include the literary components already examined in Chapter Four of this study (setting, plot, characterization and style), with a particular emphasis on the language and writing style of historical fiction.

In the previous chapter, it was noted that in historical fiction style is a fundamental element in recreating an authentic, accurate and believable past. However, a writer's style can also be used to intentionally distort the truth or influence a reader's interpretation of historical events through careful manipulation of language (Lehman & Hayes, 1985; Ross, 1981). Researchers have even suggested that some historical writers employ persuasive techniques such as propaganda, misrepresentation, omission and diversion in their writing in order to promote a certain version of history, or advance a personal cause (Ross, 1981, p. 313). Craig (1989) claims that while narrative history has the most attractive appeal to readers, and is an efficient method of presenting history to children, this form of historical discourse is often biased by

a writer's style: "even the most effective practitioners of the narrative form, or perhaps especially the most effective, are prone to omitting or minimizing the importance of facts and circumstances that interfere with its dramatic sweep" ( p. 130).

Careful analysis of language and writing style is an important component in critical reading, particularly where historical fiction is involved. Students need to learn to recognize the persuasive powers of language and to understand that words can sometimes be used to disguise or distort the truth (Lehman & Hayes, 1985). Teachers can promote the systematic analysis of language and writing style by developing classroom activities which familiarize students with persuasive techniques of writing. As students read historical fiction, they should learn to identify such subtle writing tactics as repetition, word associations, omission, diversion, and to understand that writing and language can be used for many purposes. Students need to ask themselves whether a particular author is writing to inform, entertain, persuade, denounce or convince (Ross, 1981, p. 313), and whether the language used has been manipulated in order to promote the author's own bias.

With proper guidance, practice and encouragement, students can learn to evaluate historical fiction for the literary elements of setting, characterization, plot and style. While all of these components are important in the critical analysis of historical narrative, language and writing style are particularly worthy of careful inquiry since they are possibly the most effective and subtle tools used by an author to influence a young child's interpretation of historical events. By posing critical questions as they read, checking and comparing resources, and evaluating language and writing style, students will begin to develop a personal set of criteria with which to judge narrative history.

### **Acknowledging The Subjectivity of Historical Fiction**

Levstik (1989) has suggested that historical narrative is clearly more subjective than history written in expository form. Furthermore, the inherent subjectivity of historical fiction need not be viewed as a negative aspect of this form of history. While the textbook presents history in a distant and impersonal manner, historical narrative "invites a particular kind of speculation that is important in the development of a mature understanding of history" (Levstik, 1989, p. 116). Fiction moralizes history by creating conflicts which often enlist the reader's identification with and sympathy for the protagonist in the story (Levstik, 1990), but stories also imply that historical events can be viewed from at least two possible (and often opposing) perspectives. Within the classroom teachers can encourage children to consider history from different perspectives through written exercises which explore opposing viewpoints. When reading stories about the internment, for example, students might be asked to write journal entries, letters or newspaper articles which illustrate the interpretation of events from the point of view of both Japanese and non-Japanese characters. When teacher mediation and critical analysis are an integral part of reading historical fiction, children begin to expect history to be subject to interpretation and to involve moral, personal and cultural issues. This attitude towards past events is valuable if children are to gain any real understanding of history.

### **Rejecting Monocausality in Historical Theories**

Just as students need to recognize that history may be interpreted in different ways and from different perspectives, they also need to realize that historical events have more than one cause. Historical fiction can help students grasp the complexity of historical causation by promoting the idea that past events are triggered by many factors. However, even the best historical novels

should be complemented by teacher mediation and classroom activities aimed at promoting the idea that historical events have several causes (Craig, 1989). Classroom activities might include having students identify causes and effects of historical events through illustrated timelines which examine the underlying connections between world events, and developing "word wheels" which ask students to brainstorm reasons for particular historical events, based on the class's prior reading and research (Reed, 1989, p. 312). When studying the internment for example, teachers might ask students to brainstorm, on a word wheel, possible causes for the evacuation. The contributions to the word wheel would be based primarily on students' prior knowledge, research and information learned from historical literature. Suggestions might include "the bombing of Pearl Harbour", "the aggressive policies of the Japanese army in South-East Asia", "the threat of invasion by the Japanese Army", "the need to tighten national security on the west coast", "fear of spies", and "racism against the Japanese Canadians". With classroom activities aimed at rejecting monocausality in historical theories, students can learn to reject facile and insufficient explanations of history, to accept that past events have multiple causes, and to avoid making excessively abstract generalizations about past events (p. 311).

### **Exploring the Concept of Presentism in Historical Writing**

In the last chapter, the issue of presentism in historical fiction was examined as it relates to historical fiction in general and to the Japanese internment in particular. Craig (1989) refers to this problem in historical interpretation as "the distance which exists between the historian and the events that he describes" (p. 132). Narrative history in particular often interprets the past from a contemporary perspective, applying values and social mores

from our own times in its interpretation of historical events. In popular forms of history, such as historical fiction for children, stories often portray the past as a mere backward extension of our own times, with characters who are essentially like us in their fundamental attitudes, motivations and priorities (p.133).

Children who read this type of historical writing, without critical analysis and meaningful teacher mediation, may come away with an erroneous, confused and distorted view of the past.

In a recent study with high school students, Seixas (1993) examined the way in which popular presentations of history, such as film, apply contemporary interpretive frames to history. Most importantly, Seixas wanted to find out how young people respond and judge history (for accuracy, authenticity and ethics) when it is presented in an emotionally engaging, modern film such as *Dances with Wolves*. Seixas suggests that film (and other popular forms of history) is successful in bringing the past to life, in having students imaginatively and empathetically enter the past (p. 353) and relive "the motivation and meaning of past actors and actions" (p. 353). However, the results of his research indicate that popular forms of history may also create a problem in history teaching because of the way in which they impose "present-day, culturally contingent values, conventions and judgements" upon the people of the past, people whose cultural frameworks were quite different. Seixas noted that film versions of history which present the past with present-day conventions, values and beliefs, are more convincing and "realistic" to students than older films. Furthermore, he observed that, without teacher intervention, students are not critical of historical films which present people and events from history as familiar and contemporary. Rather, students seem to accept uncritically the media's presentation of history, particularly when the past is presented in

popular, technically dazzling and modern screen versions.

The conclusions reached by Seixas, and other researchers who have studied historical narrative in popular forms, indicate once again that there is a need for teacher mediation within the classroom in order to promote the critical analysis of contemporary portrayals of history. Seixas suggests that students be given the opportunity to move to a hermeneutic level of analysis of popular portrayals of history (such as film or fiction) since these popular versions may impose an anachronistic distortion upon the past (p. 366). Specific strategies are needed within the classroom in order for students to approach history with caution and to acknowledge that narrative history is, to a large extent, a reflection of the social values and morals of the time at which it is written. These strategies might include having students read and compare both older and more recent fictional portrayals of the same period in history (as Seixas did with film in his study), and systematically analyzing all historical writing for signs of presentism in its portrayal of people and events.

In a study of the Japanese internment, teachers can effectively illustrate the concept of presentism in historical interpretation by having their students view and compare two different films about this topic. The first film, *Of Japanese Descent* was produced during the time of the internment and distributed by the Canadian government to promote the value and importance of having Japanese Canadians “resettled” in a “safe” and “healthy” environment. This author has observed in classroom studies, that students tend to regard this film as an out-dated promotion of racist propaganda, especially after reading historical fiction about the internment. However, what students should understand is that, while we may look upon this film with skepticism from our modern perspective, fifty years ago, it was probably considered a realistic and



accurate portrayal of life in the internment camps. The second film, *Enemy Alien*, is a more contemporary version of the same event and takes a different approach to the events. In this version, the internment of Japanese Canadians is portrayed as unjust treatment and a violation of constitutional rights. The emphasis throughout this film is on the absence of any evidence of Japanese spies threatening the security of the west coast during the war, and on the unnecessary human suffering resulting from the internment. In Hanson's unpublished study, students preferred the more modern film version of the internment (as had the students in Seixas' study), and needed encouragement and guidance in order to recognize the effects of presentism at work in the film.

Once students acknowledge that presentism is a powerful force in our interpretation of events, they may be able to approach historical fiction about past events with a certain degree of caution. Students will begin to understand, for example, that the books about the Japanese internment written thirty to fifty years after the fact, will undoubtedly portray history from a modern, and somewhat revisionist position. Students need to approach the past with a "plenitude of the quality that we call empathy, which permits us to feel our way, if we are lucky and work hard enough at it, into the culture of the age that we set out to study and describe" (Craig, 1989, p. 133). An awareness of presentism may, in fact, be a precursor to the development of researchers call historical empathy.

### **Developing Historical Empathy**

One of the ways in which students can avoid present-mindedness in their approach to the past, is to develop the ability to perceive historical events and issues as they were experienced by people at the time (Reed, 1989). Teachers can assist children in developing this kind of historical empathy by encouraging

them to “feel their way into the culture of the age” (p. 305) through creative writing activities aimed at imagining personal responses to historical events. Writing diary entries or letters from the point of view of both good and bad characters in a historical fiction novel will help children realize that right and wrong are often based on personal perspectives rather than any absolute truth. Another suggestion made by Reed is to have students explore the difficult decisions made by history makers throughout time by imagining (through creative writing activities) how leaders and other important historical figures arrived at those decisions.

Children need help in perceiving historical events in their proper context, rather than relying solely on the information provided by a particular historical fiction novel or story. Reed (1989) suggests that teachers help students understand the complexity of historical events by looking at current issues in newspapers and weekly news magazines. A class discussion can stimulate children to think and talk about current events as being only the “tips of icebergs” (p. 305), and to discover the importance of obtaining background knowledge about current issues in order to fully understand and evaluate them. In the same way, students can extend their knowledge and gain a deeper understanding of a particular historical event presented in literature by doing additional research and reading on the topic, using other historical fiction stories as well as non-fictional historical resources. Once again, comparative reading, critical analysis and reflection play a major role in helping children to understand and examine the context of historical events, and to judge the past from an informed, thoughtful and empathetic manner.

### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF MATURE HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING**

A mature understanding of history means acknowledging that historical

writing can be subjective, moralistic and even erroneous. With critical analysis of historical reading materials and appropriate teacher mediation, students will begin to appreciate the difficulty of judging the past from our contemporary position in a fair and unbiased manner. Children should also understand that history itself is tentative and uncertain business. As new discoveries about the world are made, history is continually being rewritten and reinterpreted. What is presented as historical truth today, may seem foolish and outdated to future historians.

It would seem important in the development of any mature historical understanding that learners see history as a human enterprise made up of interpretations and subject to revision. The structure of narrative seems to encourage readers to recognize the human aspects of history and, with some mediation, to develop a better sense of its interpretive and tentative aspects. Perhaps most important, it may help students maintain a balance between the abstractions of history as an on-going participatory drama. (Levstik, 1990, p. 852)

However, while students should, to some extent, be prepared to live with the equivocal and tentative nature of history, it is also important that, as they read history in narrative form, they learn to make educated judgements about the past. The results of a study of adolescent moral development in the context of a literature based history curriculum (Bardige, 1988) indicates a need to attend to the moral and ethical dimensions of history. Bardige has stated that there is a tension between helping children to see multiple perspectives, and leaving them unable to take any kind of stand on historical issues because all perspectives are perceived as equally good. Levstik (1990) agrees that history instruction which tries to maintain a completely neutral stance can increase children's feelings of impotence and lead to their inability to take action against evil. Students should be exposed to unbiased reading material and classroom instruction, but they also need to learn to judge history based on informed

opinions.

The question of whether or not history teachers should observe a strictly value-free approach to history remains a question of debate among researchers and educators. Craig (1989) has stated that one of the principle functions of history should be to promote humane values and that teachers have a moral obligation to set certain limits on objectivity when analyzing history:

The search for historical truth should be suffused with a commitment to deeply held humane values and a warm and instinctive sympathy for such qualities as fortitude, steadfastness, endurance, civic virtue, dedication to the greater good, and service to humanity when they are embodied in historical movements and personalities. (p. 136)

Many teachers would probably disagree with Craig's position. It might be argued, for example, that a universal, moral code from which to judge history simply does not exist because of different cultural, religious and political beliefs in the world. However, it seems reasonable to assume that as we help children understand the complexities and uncertainties of history, we also instil in them the importance of developing their own moral sensitivities and personal set of values based on cultural or religious beliefs, and on a fundamental respect for the humane rights and freedoms assured by a democratic society.

The ultimate goal of any history lesson should not be limited to the memorization of historical facts, but should encompass a more critical analysis of the events and issues based on specific criteria and sound judgement. Mature historical understanding incorporates a deeper awareness of the forces of present-day values at work in historical writing, and of the subjective, paradoxical and uncertain nature of history itself. Critical reading and analysis of historical fiction provides students with the opportunity to develop a more mature historical understanding by compelling them to confront some of the

ambiguous aspects of history and formulate their own set of values and beliefs regarding past events.

## **CONCLUSION**

The power of narrative in shaping in children a deeper understanding of and appreciation of history is well documented in current research on historical fiction. Levstik (1990) has said that the emotional and intellectual engagement with history which is afforded by literature is crucial to meaningful historical study. "If history is just chronology, there is little reason to 'understand' it. If, on the other hand, it involves the interpretation of vital moral and ethical issues, it not only requires understanding, but it is also relevant to the way we come to understand ourselves and the world around us" (p. 850). Historical narrative has the potential to spur interest in history, to promote skills in critical inquiry and analysis of historical topics, and to assist young people in developing and defining their own set of values and beliefs.

However, the research into historical fiction has also raised real concerns regarding the emotional context of the narrative mode. It has been observed by Levstik and others that students are not spontaneously critical of literary sources of historical information because of the emotional appeal of stories. It is imperative, therefore, that teachers cultivate a classroom environment which stimulates and promotes informed, fair-minded, and critical analysis of all historical reading material. Teachers need to consciously mediate between students and historical fiction in order to achieve this type of classroom protocol. Levstik (1992) has said that the power of narrative, without teacher intervention is not an unmitigated good since there is no guarantee that historical literature does not, in some cases, lead young children to an inaccurate or biased view of history.

the impact of narrative operates regardless of the accuracy of the historical content it carries. . . . children will believe bad history if the narrative is compelling or . . . they will ignore good history if the narrative is insipid. This should serve as a caution to those currently trying to "narratize" the curriculum. (p. 15)

Historical fiction may possibly shape a child's understanding of history.

However, the depth and scope of that understanding are ultimately controlled by teaching methods and classroom environment.

There is, without a doubt, a place in the history curriculum for narrative, storytelling and children's historical novels. However, just as history taught exclusively with traditional textbooks can be dry and uninteresting, teaching history to young people exclusively with historical fiction would deprive students of the opportunity to be historical inquirers (Levstik, 1992) and of approaching the past actively, through a wide range of both primary and secondary sources of information. A dynamic and sensible history curriculum, one which promotes critical thinking and perspective taking, must encompass a variety of teaching strategies and materials. Reed (1989) suggests that a history pedagogy, which embraces various teaching methods and classroom activities, is crucial in promoting debate, critical thinking skills and historical judgement in children. Reed also believes that this type of eclectic approach to history is more considerate of the multitude of strengths and interests among teachers, as well as the various learning styles of students (p. 318).

Levstik (1992) states that there is an important difference between "acknowledging the power of narrative to shape historical understanding" and "assuming an intellectual primacy for narrative" (p. 2). While this study recognizes and applauds the potential of historical fiction to make the past more vibrant, appealing and provocative to young children, the author agrees with the

cautions put forth by Levstik and others: the emotional appeal and impact of children's fiction must be tempered by a classroom environment which systematically promotes critical inquiry and the careful analysis of historical evidence through a wide variety of information sources.

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