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Stories from Our Past: Making History Come Alive for Children

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As social studies teachers seek ways to make studying history relevant for their students, oral history is one strategy that is proving successful (Hickey 1991). When students interview family or community members to gain information about the past, those personal connections help to make history relevant. Using children's literature is another good strategy. Levstik (1986) found that when children read fictional narratives, they identify with the characters, are able to see actions from the characters' perspective, and thus learn social studies content in ways that have personal meaning.

Educators have advocated using literature in social studies programs for many years. The National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools recommends that teachers utilize a rich mixture of written learning materials, including children's literature (1989). Many educators laud the use of historical fiction (Cianciolo 1981; Gallo and Barksdale 1983; Freeman and Levstik 1988; Zarillo 1989; Drake and Drake 1990). Others advocate using literature to aid geographic literacy (Allen and Hoge 1990) and for early anthropological studies (Barnes 1991). The National Council for the Social Studies publishes annually in *Social Education* a list of "Notable Children's Trade Books in the Field of Social Studies," and Laughlin and Kardaleff's *Literature-Based Social Studies* (1991) reviews and recommends several hundred trade books for a social studies curriculum.

Picture books that tell family history stories can serve social studies teachers particularly well. Stories written as family histories pique children's interest in their own family's history that can lead to a deeper appreciation of history in general. Writing stories about one's family members provides a personal link between children and historical events. Reading picture storybooks sets the stage and provides the model for writing, which in turn can help children become more reflective and thoughtful readers of historical writing.

Many historical stories in picture book format are true tales of members of the family of the author, but are classified as fictional storybooks because they read as fiction. Others may be fictional accounts, but use historical facts and situations as background for an entertaining story about a fictional character. This article discusses some recently published family history picture books and suggests

some curricular extensions for them. Although these are all picture books, the stories they tell are entertaining enough to be used in kindergarten through sixth grade, especially in conjunction with a thematic exploration of historical times and events.

This article offers three strategies for selecting and using literature in social studies classes: book links, webbing (connecting related books to form a curriculum), and encouraging children's response to literature. Each of the next sections discusses books under the heading of themes that may be used for social studies purposes. The themes are: memories; family stories from the past; family keepsakes; passing traditions down through generations; occupations; and the westward movement.

The Literature Focus

Selecting children's books to support a social studies curriculum can be a challenge for teachers not up-to-date in children's literature. The "Notable Children's Trade Books" list is a good place to start to find well-written and interesting books that have accurate content and illustrations. The family history picture book genre is exciting because so many of the books are of such high quality. Two have won Caldecott Medals for illustration: *Ox-Cart Man* (Hall 1979) and *Song and Dance Man* (Ackerman 1988). Many others are of award-winning quality with beautifully written authentic stories and carefully investigated illustration.

Creating Book Links

Too often when teachers share literature with children, they use isolated books that just happen to be related to the topic of study. In those cases, "making literature part of a unit" may mean only that a book is read aloud to the class. A truly literature-based curriculum, however, goes far beyond that. It must lead children to discover links among the books and links between the books and their own life experiences, or the experiences of family members. Linking literature with life and other literature can help make children avid readers and help them respond at higher levels to the books they read.

Children need to learn what to do when they finish a book. How do they find another one that is likely to be equally interesting or satisfying? Teaching children how to link books is one strategy for promoting the habit of returning to books. This concept of linking literature has spawned a journal called *Book Links* published by the American Library Association. Of inestimable value to social studies teachers, the journal has features such as "Around the World with Children's Literature," with a focus in each issue on children's literature from a particular region. Author, illustrator, topic, theme, and locale provide links.

Similarly, this article (summarized in Table I) demonstrates how to create book links through themes. Another way is to explore other works by children's favorite authors and illustrators. The most prolific authors of family history books are

Karen Ackerman, Barbara Cooney, Patricia Polacco, and Cynthia Rylant. Stephen Gammell is a popular illustrator, as are Barbara Cooney and Patricia Polacco.

Webbing Literature

What children do with books is as important as the quality of the books that are part of the curriculum. Books can serve as supplemental frills, added merely for entertainment purposes, or they can be an integral part of all aspects of the social studies curriculum. Teachers can explore many ways to use a book in the curriculum or to fit into a theme.

In the popular strategy of "webbing," children or teachers brainstorm all of the learning opportunities afforded by a specific book. Webbing usually involves a two-part process. First, for a general web, readers brainstorm all of the themes, issues, content, or literary elements that exist in the story that might relate the book to a particular part of the curriculum. Second, readers recall other books with similar themes, issues, content, or literary elements, with which the book might be compared.

In the example in Figure 1, the book *The Potato Man* (McDonald 1991) involves a grandfather telling his grandchildren a story from his youth. To create a web more specific to the social studies curriculum, teachers should first encourage students to think about different aspects of social studies. What is geographical about this story? The setting is the streets of Pennsylvania, where itinerant vendors traveled by horse and wagon. What is historical about the story? The children are dressed in knickers; the house is furnished with furniture and a phone from the Depression; the vendor lost his eye in the Great War; a vintage car with a running board is stored in a shed. What is economic about the story? The traveling salesman is the era's supermarket. Vendors, such as a knife sharpener, an organ grinder, and a tin man, are pictured. A sociological and psychological theme of honesty is also in the plot. Exploring the book in ways like these allows a book to stimulate discussion on a variety of topics and possibly projects related to the theme. The second level of webbing involves identifying other books and authors who have written on those themes whose books might relate to the first one. *The Christmas Coat* (Bulla 1989), for example, is another Depression story, with children dressed in knickers and with money in short supply. It includes a tailor, another occupation of the time, and also features a theme of honesty. *Cecil's Story* (Lyon 1991) involves another man injured in a war, although the war in this book is the Civil War. The pattern goes on.

Another strategy is to select a social studies theme and have the students brainstorm all of the children's books they can think of that might relate to each. In this case, the theme (family history) would be in the center of the web, and the subthemes (memories, family stories from the past, keepsakes, passing traditions from one generation to another, occupations, and westward movement) surround it. By listing the subthemes in the books mentioned in this article, we have used the thematic webbing strategy.

Responding to Literature

Children get more out of the books they read or that people read to them when they are given opportunities to respond to the literature (Short and Pierce 1990). Traditionally teachers have tested children on what they read. Memorizing facts is a fairly low level of response to literature. Instead, teachers can promote higher levels of response-analysis, synthesis, and evaluation-by encouraging students to share thoughtful personal opinions after reading. Some teachers provide children with reading response journals for logging personal responses to literature. One child, after reading *The Potato Man*, wrote a narrative about how she and her grandmother and cousins used to wait for the ice cream man on a bench her grandfather had built. The ice cream man had only one leg, and she wondered if he had lost his leg in a war. Using the historical book as a basis for reflecting on her own experiences led this fourth grader to explore her personal history and become curious about historical events. From children's written responses, individual and group projects can emerge that further develop children's knowledge about history and their sensitivity to stories from the past.

Memories

Although historical stories written in picture books typically involve authors' memories, some of them focus specifically upon the concept of remembering things from the past. These make good books to begin a unit of study on family stories from the past. Once children begin remembering and writing down memories of their own and of other family members, the path to understanding and relating to historical stories is opened.

Three touching stories highlight the beauty of recalling memorable past experiences. Mem Fox tells the story of a lady in a nursing home who is losing her memory. In *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge* (Fox 1985), young Wilfred helps Miss Nancy recall significant experiences from her life. In *The Auction* (Andrews 1990), a youngster and his grandfather talk about old times on the farm the night before everything is to be auctioned off because the old man can no longer run his family farm. In *Knots on a Counting Rope* (Martin and Archambault 1987), a grandfather recalls the birth of his grandson and his courageous youth as a blind child when he guided his horse in a long distance race. Each time the grandfather tells the story, he ties a knot in the counting rope, and when the rope is full of knots, the child will be able to tell the story himself.

Memories provide slapstick humor in a series of books by James Stevenson: *That's Exactly the Way It Wasn't* (1991), *Could Be Worse!* (1977), *That Dreadful Day* (1985), and *That Terrible Halloween Night* (1980). In each story, the past is exaggerated into a tall tale. Also Grandpa and his brother, Uncle Wainey, remember events they experienced together as children in very different ways.

Books such as these encourage children to write about their memories and to interview other family members about theirs. Peak past experiences make wonderful topics for personal writing. One class wrote a collection of memories

about their experiences with their grandparents after listening to these stories. In another class, a number of the children wrote letters to their grandparents. Responses to these letters elicited even more family history stories.

Family Stories from the Past

Every family has stories from the past that can help children discover their roots. Reading other people's family stories heightens children's sensitivity and understanding of others whose family histories may be different from their own. Writing stories about their own families helps children build pride and appreciation for their own roots and may enhance self-esteem. Reading and writing family history stories encourage children to learn to appreciate stories from the past, a process that can provide a smooth transition into learning history.

Gloria Houston's *The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree* (1987) is essentially a true story about Gloria's great, great grandmother, as told to her by her grandmother. The story involves a child named Ruthie who waits patiently for her father to return from the war to cut down a Christmas tree for the village church. When the father does not return in time, she and her mother climb the mountain, cut down the marked spruce, and deliver it to the church on Christmas Eve. Ruthie's mother also cuts up her bridal gown to make a costume for Ruthie to use as an angel in the Christmas play and to clothe a doll angel for the top of the tree.

An appropriate book link to this book is *When I Was Young in the Mountains* (Rylant 1982), as both are set in Appalachia. As a followup, a class of elementary school children might explore the locale where they and their parents grew up. "When I was young in the city, suburbs, on a farm, in the Midwest, etc." would make great titles for descriptive pieces about places important enough to remember from childhood. These essays could be mounted on a bulletin board along with maps depicting the locale of each story.

Another link to Houston's book is *Cecil's Story*, by George Ella Lyon (1991). Although told in a conditional voice ("If your papa went off to war"), the illustrations show exactly what happens to Cecil while his father is away and how the family adjusts to his return with a disability. *The Christmas Coat* (Bulla 1989) also begins with a father who was lost during a war.

Lyon also wrote *Come a Tide* (1990), the story of a community's response to a spring flood in the mountains of Kentucky. The illustrations by Stephen Gammell remind the reader of *When the Relatives Came* (Rylant 1985), which recounts the joyous experience of a mountain family whose relatives come to visit during the summer.

My Grandmother's Story (Cech 1991) explores the difficult times a Russian grandmother experienced in her young life, when all of her family's personal belongings were taken after the Russian Revolution. She endured hardship and

hunger while seeing soldiers in two different wars, until finally emigrating to Chicago after World War II. The book is the story of her life as told to her granddaughter, and it is again based upon the true experiences of the author's mother-in-law. The Russian style of illustrations by Sharon McGinley-Nally make the story even more authentic.

In *Some Birthday!* (Polacco 1991), a child remembers when everyone in the family pretended to forget her birthday until the evening when they all went to explore the Clay Pit Bottoms Monster, who turned out to be her father. This story is based upon Patricia Polacco's real childhood summer experiences in Williamston, Michigan.

Every family has stories about its past that can be told and then written down. Children can write stories about their own past life experiences. Collections of these stories make great gifts to parents for holidays. Through telling stories about peak experiences in their lives, children learn to better appreciate stories told in family history books. They get a view of history as a collection of stories about the past. One teacher wanted to make Veterans Day more meaningful for her first graders, so she assigned them to interview their parents about any members of their family who might be veterans. One child came in with the unhappy story that four of his uncles had died in wars. That experience certainly brought the study of those wars close to home for the child and the class.

Keepsakes Tell of Historical Events

Family mementos such as quilts, dolls, medals, and pictures make wonderful tangible links to the past. Some families have an attic or hope chest full of these mementos. In other families, artifacts from the past hang on the walls or are in use.

Dolls play an important role as family mementos in several books. *The Wooden Doll* (Bonners 1991) is written in the first person to tell the story of a child named Stephanie who, for the first time, visits her grandparents all by herself. Her grandfather, like the father in *Cecil's Story* (Lyon 1991), is handicapped (missing a finger). Stephanie yearns to play with the beautiful painted wooden doll that Grandfather brought with him from Poland, but is told not to touch it. She sneaks a peek at the doll and discovers that it contains many smaller ones and has her name etched on the bottom of it. After confessing to her grandfather, she is told about her great-grandparents and her father's determination to immigrate to America.

A similar story is told by Patricia Polacco in *Babushka's Doll* (1990). Natasha is eager to play with her Russian grandmother's doll, but when she gets the opportunity, the doll comes alive and frightens her by not being obedient. When her grandmother comes home, Natasha is crying. Her grandmother assures her that she has just had a bad dream.

In *The Chalk Doll* (Pomerantz 1989), a Jamaican mother tells stories about her youth to her sick daughter. She explains how she made a rag doll but had always wanted a chalk doll, which was a store-bought doll. At the end of the story, she helps her daughter make a rag doll because all the girl has ever had are store-bought dolls.

In *From Me to You* (Rogers 1987), some lace cloth is passed down the generations from the christening dress grandmother wore as a baby, to a decoration on her wedding gown, to a lace skirt for her baby's cradle, to a lace handkerchief for her granddaughter. *The Quilt Story* (Johnson 1985) and *The Keeping Quilt* (Polacco 1988) are two stories about quilts as family heirlooms.

Aunt Flossie's Hats (and Crab Cakes Later) (Howard 1991) explains the story behind each of Aunt Flossie's hats as her nieces play with them on Sunday afternoons before the family enjoys going to a restaurant for a crab cake supper. Aunt Flossie remembers the big parade in Baltimore, the big parade marching up Charles Street celebrating the end of the Great War, and how a dog retrieved her favorite hat from a pond. The author's Aunt Flossie was a schoolteacher in Baltimore for many years.

In social studies class, teachers might have their students examine their possessions to determine which ones are the most personal and valuable—the ones they might keep for their children to pass on to their children. Children might ask their parents about family keepsakes. A museum corner in the classroom could provide a place to display items and children's writings about their significance.

Passing Traditions from One Generation to Another

In many families, traditions are passed from one generation to another. Often these traditions are associated with holiday times or special celebrations. Sometimes cultural or religious significance to the traditions are passed along as well. Often these traditions kindle our fondest family memories of the past.

A young girl unearths her great-grandmother's recipe for a high rise glorious skittle skat glorious sky pie angel food cake in the book by the same name by Nancy Willard (1990). She bakes the cake for her mother's birthday; the recipe is in the book. Another cake story with a recipe is found in *Thunder Cake* (Polacco 1990). Based upon her own summer visits to her grandmother who lived in Michigan, Patricia tells how her grandmother assuaged her fears by baking a cake during a thunder storm. The winter weather triggered exaggerated stories of children's experiences in a snowstorm in *Brrr!* (Stevenson 1991).

Authenticity is as important in illustration as in the text. Barbara Cooney traveled to the desert twice to interview Alice McLerran, the author of *Roxaboxen* (1991), and her eighty-year-old Aunt Frances in order to make the illustrations in her book authentic. The town of Roxaboxen is created by children out of rocks, wooden boxes, scraps of desert glass, bits of amber, amethyst, and sea-green.

Using sticks for horses and swords of ocotillo, the children played on that hill for years. This playspace passed from generation to generation.

Author Tony Johnson explains her family's tradition of planting a tree to commemorate the birth and death of family members which caused her to write *Yonder* (1988). A bride and her farmer husband plant a plum tree from which their children and grandchildren swing and where they play nearby. The tree grows through the seasons and when the farmer, now an old man, dies, the family plants another tree beside it. A tree tradition is also the focus of *The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree* (Houston 1987), in which each year one family provides the village tree for the Christmas pageant.

Island Boy (Cooney 1988) is the story of a boy who grows to be a grandfather on an island in the ocean. He hands down to his grandson his love for the island itself and for ocean living. Like the man in *Yonder* (Johnston 1988), this old man is buried under a tree on the island. *Miss Rumphius*, also by Barbara Cooney (1984) involves the planting of wild flowers called lupines. In this book, a child tells the life story of her aunt, Alice Rumphius. As a child, Alice listens to her grandfather's stories and vows to be like him, to travel, to settle by the sea, and to make the world a more beautiful place. She does the latter by scattering the seeds of lupines all over the countryside.

The original *Tar Beach* (Ringgold 1991) is a story about a quilt in the collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City. The book tells the fictional story of a child who dreams of flying everywhere from the roof of her apartment building in Harlem. Her family and neighbors would gather on the roof on hot summer nights, where the adults would play cards and the children play on blankets-a tar beach.

Dancing with the Indians (Medearis 1991) tells the story of the return of the author's relatives to Indian powwows each year. This practice is based upon the family tradition of her grandfather taking his family back one week a year to celebrate his father's life as an escaped slave who was accepted as a member of the Seminole tribe.

In activities building on these books, students might explore the origins of their family traditions and write about them. At holiday times, children can share how their families celebrate the holiday and why differences exist among families. Can the children find their family traditions in children's picture books? Students in the classroom might want to investigate school traditions. One school, for example, has a school-wide sing-along every Friday afternoon. Children could research when and how that tradition began.

Occupations Give Insight into Past Times

Occupations play an important role in families. Because parents spend long hours at work, children are curious about the jobs their parents perform. Children enjoy

exploring the many occupations in their families-including parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents, and ancestors. For class projects on occupations, teachers might consider the following family history picture books.

Aaron's great-uncle in *Just Like Max* (Ackerman 1990) is an immigrant tailor who works on the fourth floor of a big brownstone house shared by his entire family. Aaron's Gram and Gramp live on the first floor. His aunt lives on the second floor. Aaron, his sister, and his parents live on the third floor. Aaron loves climbing the steep stairs to the fourth floor to watch his uncle work. When his uncle has a stroke and must move in with Aaron's family, Aaron decides to bring the sewing machine downstairs and have his great-uncle help him sew a dress for his mom. Aaron ends the story forty years later when his own nephew climbs the stairs to watch him work: he has become a writer. This story is authentic in the fact that many immigrant extended families lived in the same house for generations.

In another example of an occupation book, a grandfather in *Song and Dance Man* (Ackerman 1988) invites his grandchildren into the attic, where his vaudeville props are stored in an old trunk. He performs for the kids while their grandmother makes supper.

In *Ox-Cart Man* (Hall 1979), a Colonial-era farmer and his family make their living by growing vegetables and fruits, raising geese, and making things. The story tells of the father taking his annual trip by ox-cart to the market in Portsmouth to sell the family produce and wares and to purchase items the family needs for the coming year. A Depression-era vegetable vendor is the central character in *The Potato Man* (McDonald 1991). In it, a grandfather tells his grandchildren the story of a traveling fruit and vegetable peddler, Mr. Angelo, who traveled down East Street in a city in Pennsylvania.

For social studies class, children might interview their parents, grandparents, other relatives, and even neighbors and friends about their occupations. These interviews could lead to library research about these occupations, vocabulary study in language arts about terminology specific to occupations, and historical study of how occupations change over time.

The Westward Movement in Children's Picture Books

Children seem to be fascinated about how early pioneers crossed this country to settle the West. A number of children's books have been written on this topic, but most are long and of questionable accuracy. Two more recent books that deal with the realities of the trip in a fictional story format with interesting subplots that appeal to young children are *Araminta's Paint Box* (Ackerman 1990) and *Aurora Means Dawn* (Sanders 1989).

Araminta's new paint box falls out of the family's covered wagon shortly after their trip to California has begun. The paint box has its own adventures as it passes

through the hands of a number of different people, who use it for a number of different purposes, but in the end, Araminta & Mac222;nds it in California. A map depicts the routes west taken by both Araminta and her paint box.

Scott Sanders in *Aurora Means Dawn* tells a similar tale. The Sheldon family traveled from Connecticut to Ohio in 1800 with their seven children, two oxen, and a bulging wagon. They arrived during a bone-rattling thunderstorm to a nonexistent town on a land company map. Sanders says that the seeds of the story about the Sheldon family are true, but he imagined the descriptions of the wagon, sycamore tree, thunderstorm, and events surrounding the settlement of the town of Aurora.

Using maps of their state or region, children might plot how their families came to settle where they presently live. Many families have moved from one place to another, even during the lives of children. Children might explore where their grandparents were born and then trace the route of the family over time. If children move into or out of the class during the school year, excellent opportunities arise for pen pals to trade cultural information about different home towns.

Conclusion

Since oral history is a fruitful way to help elementary school children view the past (Hickey 1991), and since many excellent family history picture books are now available that demonstrate learning about history from family stories, there could be no better time than the present for teachers to share this genre with their students. Since these books involve stories of people from many different ethnic groups and family situations, they match to some degree the diversity of life experiences present in today's society. Children relate the stories not only to their own personal lives but also develop an appreciation for the life experiences of those who may be culturally or socially different from themselves. Excellent books like these offer a rich resource to today's elementary school teacher.

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