

The gifts of historical fiction

or, When can we add the tsunami?

I write historical fiction for two reasons. The first is the joy of the endlessly interweaving of complexity as you learn about the past and see its connections with today – and for tomorrow, too. Ignoring what makes us who we are like waking up with amnesia: is that strange woman offering us toast our mother or an axe murderer? We need the past – both its small things and large – to understand the now.

The second reason is that it's just plain fun. I like the past. I did as a child too. History has the best adventures.

The past has pyramids and mummies and tsunamis and invading armies and the bubonic plague, all safely far away where they can't touch you, when you are a lucky child in the Australian suburbs.

Non-fiction can teach you the facts. Historical fiction brings it alive. Humans like stories. Stories are how we tell not just our past but what we did at school. The great books of our religions are based on stories. Successful advertisements usually have storylines too.

Historical fiction gives readers the gifts of both history, and fiction. History's gifts include a deeper, richer understanding not just how and why the world works today, but a basis for predicting tomorrow, too. History shows kids that the world changes, and those with commitment and passion have made the world better, and that they, too, can shape the world.

In the 1890's kids in Sydney slums worked in factories and rarely saw the sun, sleeping on the dirt floor, paid only their food, rarely reaching the age twenty. Even in 20th century Australia, a female teacher who married had to resign; it wasn't until the 1970's that women received equal pay if they did the same job as men.

History gives kids power. It gives them hope, too.

Our ancestors survived the last ice age and the bubonic plague. We are descended from extremely good survivors. History lets kids meet their ancestors, and realise that they can inherit the same strength and determination.

Historical fiction gives even more. It teaches readers empathy. A student may read of Cook's first voyage to Australia history book. Historical fiction will help them share

the terrors and triumphs of the voyage. Humans are probably born with some degree of empathy, but it needs to be taught and practiced, too. Historical fiction gives opportunities to empathize with people from profoundly different places and times, and that empathy will translate into the way they deal with strangers in their own lives.

Fiction also exercises imagination and creativity. We are born with that, too, but again, the more it is used, the stranger it becomes.

Imagination may help you create a novel, or a vision of what Australia should be like in 20 years time, or a new theory of the universe. In many different disciplines, imagination is still the basis for new insights or inventions.

Historical fiction can also be used to give insight into the moral problems of today. I write about how anger can be used as a political weapon in *Pennies for Hitler*. Demagoguery and genocide are major problems in the world today, but they are also intricately woven with various political and religious viewpoints. Placing the debt in the past keeps it at a distance: it isn't as confronting to either the young readers, or possibly the parents who oversee their reading.

There is also the magic of a long book. A short book can be fun as can a TV show. But they don't demand sustained focus and concentration. Concentration, too, is something that needs to be learnt and practised. The more you do it, the better you'll be. The dramas and exoticism of the past can be used to tempt kids to read a work that is far deeper, longer, and more nuanced than they'd otherwise have read.

But that very vividness of historical fiction brings danger.

When you think of a pirate, do you think of Johnny Depp in long sexy boots? Or gallant Captain Cook in his red uniform? Actually probably neither wore shoes at sea. Those small ships in the days before refrigeration and packaged food were crowded with live animals kept for food for the voyage and so the decks were slippery with manure. Most seamen, even officers, wore clothes made of old sailcloth, saving their uniforms for greeting other ships, going ashore – or getting their portrait painted.

So much of what we think is history is wrought from fiction: much of the story of Simpson, the man at Gallipoli with the donkey, was created after his death. The starving convicts of our First Fleet, transported for stealing a loaf of bread, are another myth. Nearly all those men and women transported on the First Fleet were experienced criminals and there was only one eight-week period of real shortage in those early years. (See [Let the Land Speak](#)). Criminals back then were hanged if convicted of stealing goods worth more than a guinea. Compassionate magistrates

would, therefore, convict and sentence them for much lesser offences – that silk handkerchief instead of the gold pocket watch – so that young boys could be sent to serve in the Royal Navy for a second chance, and others transported to the new colony of New South Wales.

Poor starving wretches, guilty of no more than pinching a handkerchief, make better fiction than career criminals who refused to eat the available corn because they preferred bread made of wheat.

So how do you find fiction that doesn't lie? By knowing the subject, so you can pick up howlers, but also by sticking to those authors who have specialized in history, and not been asked by a publisher to take a famous event or person, like Ned Kelly, and turn it into a book. The children's book industry is ripe with publishers asking for good short books about history for kids – and while the fiction may be good, much of the history too often is not.

To write a good work of historical fiction, you need to know enough about the subject so you need undertake little or no extra research. More importantly, you need to know enough so that you know what you DON'T know. What were the main Indigenous languages of what is now called Sydney Harbour in 1788? What were the differences between the clans? What are the likely reasons that the marines didn't leap to the defence of Governor Philip when he was speared at Manly, lying bleeding on the beach, the spear deep in his shoulder and pinning him to the ground? Did convict clothes have pockets?

The past isn't today, but/just with bonnets and spears or muskets. Social values, ambitions and assumptions were also different.

But this is also what makes the past so fascinating. The changes even in my own lifetime have been so profound that my childhood is a different world to that of the kids of today. Not just no mobile phones, but many areas with no phones at all, and you rang an operator to ask for a number, not dial person to person.

In the holidays before I went to university I earned \$19.50 a week working one and a half jobs, ten hours a day six days a week. A man doing the same work received \$144 a week. A married woman wasn't allowed to be a public servant. In my early years at school, a married woman wasn't even allowed to be a teacher unless she had special permission.

Women were known by their husband's name – a newspaper would speak of a Mrs John Smith, not Mrs Jane Smith. Knowing how recently Australian society deeply discriminated against women helps kids understand not just that change is possible, but that other cultures can and maybe will change, just as ours has done so recently.

Good historical fiction also needs to be drawn from primary sources, not history books. A history book may be accurate, but it will also only reveal the bones of the past, not the flesh.

A writer who draws their material mostly from history books may make assumptions about how people thought, ate or dressed without realising how much can change in even a few years.

So what else does good historical fiction need?

Good historical fiction needs to slip through the cracks in history. There should be nothing that contradicts anything we know about the past, or that is likely to emerge.

Historical fiction books need to be enthralling to keep kids reading. Just as good fiction writing doesn't necessarily result in good historical fiction, good history doesn't necessarily lead to an exciting book. It's all too tempting to cram as much about the past as possible into a novel – to be primarily an educator instead of a story teller. Knowing when to stop adding fascinating historical glimpses is as important as adding them.

There is also the problem that much of the past is boring. Cook's journeys across the southern oceans were heroic, death defying, with waves with icy froth rising above the ship. But day after day of: It was cold. The seas were high. We survived ... becomes boringly repetitious, as does much of the journey of the First Fleet, unless you add events that didn't happen. So much of the trench warfare in World War One was both horrific and unimaginably confronting. But most days were pretty much the same.

The very complexity of the past can also mean it takes a chapter to really feel comfortable in the world the author portrays. Books. Every week I get masses of letters that contain a few that say something like:

“Dear Jackie French, Our teacher made us read Tom Appleby Convict Boy and I hated it and then I started to love and now it is my favourite book. What else should I read next?”

This is the TV generation, the zap from Twitter to Fango and YouTube. They need introducing to the complexities and sheer DIFFERENCE of the past. But that is what makes it fascinating. The past is NOT like today, but more different than any fantasy novel.

Consider narrative non-fiction, too. Some kids simply prefer non-fiction. Books like *The Donkey who Carried the Wounded* (about ‘Simpson’ and his donkey), *The Camel who Crossed Australia* (Burke and Wills, told from the point of view of Bell Singh, the only camel who survived) or *The Goat who Sailed the World* (the true story of the stropo goat who sailed with James Cook and helped save the ship when it was wrecked on the Great Barrier Reef) stick as closely as possible to real events (although seen from the point of view of the animals) using only what I can substantiate from primary sources.

But there are also others way to let kids wander in the safer roads of the past. Try books written at the time you are studying. Dickens for 19th century England; Mary Grant Bruce for before and during World War 1 and the Depression in Australia. And, yes, there will be racism and jingoism: but if these books are read with teacher and parental guidance they’ll show how deep these are in our culture, too.

Newspapers of the period can be enthralling once kids begin to read them to find out what they can deduce from the past. Thanks to on-line depositories, it’s now possible to get newspapers and pamphlets from several hundred years. Kids can learn a lot from studying not just the article – the return of Cook from his voyages, but the advertisements. What were the people eating, wearing, enjoying? How many were hanged or flogged in public that day?

In the past twenty years I’ve tried to present Australian history both in non-fiction form (the eight volumes of the Dinkum History series, Scholastic Books) – 60,000 years looking at more than white men in the major cities, but a history of our whole land from 60,000 years ago to the present and into the future.

I’m also trying to cover the entire reach of our history in many different forms of fiction too, for all ages. (The first link below links the various books to themes in the curriculum. The second list gives a chronology of Australia with the books set in that time).

Kids need not just historical facts, but a context in which to place them.

Good historical fiction can do that even more vividly than history books. But kids gain other strengths from historical fiction, too. They learn that the world changes – and not necessarily to afraid of it. So many of our youth are scared of what tomorrow may bring. Others don’t even want to face it.

There probably has never been a generation that didn’t face its own deep and desperate challenges.

History shows us that humans are very, very good at meeting challenges. When times are bad humans are capable of the greatest kindnesses, inventiveness and compassion. This too is what historical fiction can show kids, so vividly that they feel they have been there and experienced it all too. Historical fiction gives role models

who meet loss or disaster and go on to rich and fulfilled lives.

Humans are not, however, good at being bored. We may not be able to promise today's children a world of peace and plenty, but we can promise them challenge, and historical evidence to give them reason to feel that they can succeed in meeting them.

Tomorrow will probably be pretty much like today. But one day it won't be.

Fiction and Non-Fiction Sources for the History syllabus by Jackie French

Note: The eight-volume [Dinkum History of Australia](#) series is published by Scholastic Books. All other books below were published by Angus and Robertson.

See also the Harper Collins web site and [teachers' hub](#) for teacher's notes and activities.

The nature of the sources for ancient Australia and what they reveal about Australia's past in the ancient period, such as the use of resources:

Fact-based non-fiction:

Dingo: the Dog who Conquered a Continent

Narrative non-fiction:

Nanberry: Black Brother White

Non-Fiction:

Shipwrecks, Sailors and Sixty Thousand Years (Dinkum History Book 1)

Changes in the way of life of a group(s) of people who moved to Australia in this period, such as free settlers on the frontier in Australia

Fiction:

A Waltz for Matilda

Tom Appleby, Convict Boy

How the Finnigans saved the Ship

Refuge

Non-Fiction:

Grim Crims and Convicts (Dinkum History Book 2)

Rotters and Squatters (Dinkum History Book 3)

Gold, Graves and Glory (Dinkum History Book 4)

A Nation of Swaggies and Diggers (Dinkum History Book 5)

The contribution of individuals and groups, including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and migrants, to the development of Australian society. For example, many different people have contributed in areas such as the economy, education, science, the arts and sport:

Fact-based non-fiction:

Dingo: the Dog who Conquered a Continent

Narrative non-fiction:

Nanberry: Black Brother White

Non-Fiction:

Shipwrecks, Sailors and Sixty Thousand Years (Dinkum History Book 1)

World War I

Students investigate key aspects of World War I and the Australian experience of the war, including the nature and significance of the war in world and Australian history.

Fiction:

A Rose for the Anzac Boys

The Girl from Snowy River (post war)

Non-Fiction:

A Day to Remember (the History of Anzac Day)

A Nation of Swaggies and Diggers (Dinkum History book 5)

Experiences of Australian democracy and citizenship, including the status and rights of Aboriginal people and/or Torres Strait Islanders, migrants, women and children:

Fiction:

- *A Waltz for Matilda* (Federation, the rise of the Union movement, swaggies, female suffrage, differing indigenous and white perspectives, impact of European agriculture on the landscape and society)
- *The Night They Stormed Eureka*
- *Nanberry: Black Brother White*

Non-Fiction:

- *Rotters and Squatters* (Dinkum History Book 3)
- *Gold, Graves and Glory* (Dinkum History Book 4)
- *A Nation of Swaggies and Diggers* (Dinkum History Book 5)
- *Weevils, Wars and Wallabies* (Dinkum History Book 6)
- *Rockin' Rollin' Hair and Hippies* (Dinkum History Book 7)
- *Booms, Busts and Bushfires* (Dinkum History Book 8)

Australia and Asia

Students investigate the history of Australia OR an Asian society in the period 1750 - 1918 in depth.

Fiction:

- *Refuge*
- *Nanberry: Black Brother White*
- *Tom Appleby, Convict Boy* (1788-1860)
- *The Horse Who Bit a Bushranger* (1830-1870)
- *The Camel Who Crossed Australia*
- *The Night They Stormed Eureka*
- *A Waltz for Matilda* (1892-1915)
- *The Girl from Snowy River* (extensive flashbacks cover the Snowy River March and the effect of the First World War in Australia)
- *Refuge* (migrations to Australia 60,000 BPE to the present)

Non-Fiction:

- *Shipwrecks, Sailors and Sixty Thousand Years*
- *Grim Crims and Convicts*
- *Rotters and Squatters*
- *Gold, Graves and Glory*
- *A Nation of Swaggies and Diggers*

World War II

Students investigate wartime experiences through a study of World War II in depth.

Fiction:

Pennies for Hitler (contrasts German, English and Australian war experiences and ideologies)

- *Hitler's Daughter*
- *Soldier on the Hill*
- *Refuge* (migrations to Australia 60,000 BPE to the present)

Non-Fiction:

- *Weevils, War and Wallabies* (Dinkum History Book 6)
- *Rockin' Rollin' Hair and Hippies* (Dinkum History Book 7)
- *Booms, Busts and Bushfires* (Dinkum History Book 8)

Timeline

4,000–10,000 BCE *Dingo: The Dog who Conquered a Continent*

3,000 BCE *Pharaoh: The Boy who Conquered the Nile*

1,000 CE

- *They Came on Viking Ships* Angus and Robertson
- *Macbeth and Son* 1200 AD, ancient Scotland–the present
- *The Dog Who Loved a Queen* (1556-1569)
- *The Goat Who sailed the World* (Cook's voyage 1768-1774)
- *Nanberry: Black Brother White* 1788- 1020
- *Tom Appleby, Convict Boy* (1788-1860)
- *Daughter of the Regiment* 1820's)

- *The Horse who Bit a Bushranger* (1830-1870)
- *The Camel who Crossed Australia* 1855- 1866
- *The Night They Stormed Eureka* (1854)
- *A Rose for the Anzac Boys* (1914-1920, World War One)
- *A Day to Remember* (with Mark Wilson) 1915 to the present
- *A Waltz for Matilda* (1892-1915) (Federation to World War One)
- *How the Finnegans Saved the Ship* (1913)
- *The Girl from Snowy River* 1915- 1924 (extensive flashbacks cover the Snowy River March and the effect of World War One in Australia)
- *Somewhere Around the Corner* (1932, the Depression)
- *The Road to Gundagai* (The Depression)
- *Pennies for Hitler* 1939-1949 (World War Two)
- *Hitler's Daughter* 1940-the present (World War Two)
- *Soldier on the Hill* 1942 (World War Two)
- *To the Moon and Back* (with Bryan Sullivan) 1960's-1978

1968–1969 *The Ghost By the Billabong*

1972–1975 *If Blood Should Stain the Wattle*

1972–present *Booms, Busts and Bushfires* (Dinkum histories)

1974 *Cyclone* (with Bruce Whatley) (Cyclone Tracy)

1978 *A Land of Love and Flame* (working title, coming December 2017)

1979–1979 *While the Billy Boils*

1978–1982 *Drought* (with Bruce Whatley)

2003 *Fire* (with Bruce Whatley) **2003** *The Day I was History* (National Museum of Australia) (Canberra and regional fires)

2011 *Flood* (with Bruce Whatley) (Brisbane Floods)

2014 *The Hairy-Nosed Wombats Find a New Home* (with Sue deGennaro)

Today and Tomorrow *The Tomorrow Book* (with Sue deGennaro)

Long-Range Books

- *Refuge* (migrations to Australia 60,000 BPE to the present)
- *Walking the Boundaries* 40,000 years ago to the present
- *Valley of Gold* 4,000 years ago to the present
- *The Fascinating History of Your Lunch* 4,000 years ago to the present (non-fiction)

- *Let the Land Speak: how the land created our nation* (non-fiction for adults)