

Writing history for kids



How do you convey to kids just what the past was like?

History books? Too many facts for easy digestion and, all too often, history for kids is scaled-down 'adult history.' A sample recipe for a school history book might be: take two medium weight adult history books, dice some facts into bite sizes, discard remaining facts, add snappier pictures, and serve.

You end up with something which is neither good history, nor terribly fascinating for kids.

And humans like stories more than facts. Which do you remember most vividly- the history lesson about Troy, or Brad Pitt's muscles?

Ideally, then, you need books of facts and books of stories, each complementing the other. But there are dangers in giving kids the wrong sort of historical fiction too.

Historical fiction can, and often does, change history to make a better story. That doesn't just apply to books for kids, either. Anyone seen 'The Dish?' Excellent drama, but historical claptrap.

Even if the dates and names are right, historical novels can serve up clichés. Kids end up not only believing Elizabeth I looked like Cate Blanchett, but that the past was pretty much like today, with a few added bonnets and lepers.

So does it matter if we get it wrong?

Yes. History matters. If history didn't matter then John Howard would have had no problem saying 'sorry', and the Japanese Prime minister wouldn't need to deny that prisoners of war were forced to work in Japanese brothels. History explains why our world is like it is.

Truth matters too. We live in a world of increasing spin doctoring, where the truth can be skewed to win an election or convince you to buy more whoozles. When you write for kids, or teach kids, you have a duty to show kids that truth is something you can strive for.

Historical fiction can mislay the truth for many reasons. Sometimes it's deliberate. Most often it's laziness, when an author or filmmaker can't be bothered to do more than scrape the surface of their subject. How many historical books or movies make the world of the past seem pretty much like today, except for a few bonnets or swordfights?

The past WASN'T like today. People thought in different ways, acted for different reasons. It's important that kids realise this, too. I don't believe the cliché that if we don't know our past we're doomed to repeat it. Hitler knew all about British Concentration camps. They just inspired him to make bigger ones. The most important thing history can teach kids are that THINGS CHANGE.

200 years ago kids pulled trucks in Welsh mines because children were cheaper than ponies. 50 years ago aboriginal people in Australia couldn't vote in Federal elections. Once kids realise that things HAVE changed they can start imagining how things CAN change. It's a heady feeling that can lead to, well, anything from a vision of what Australia might be like in 20 years time when they become Prime Minister to a new theory of the universe.

I'd like to say I've dutifully tried to cover all the significant areas of history in my books for kids, but I haven't. The range of my books reflects my own obsessions- Vikings and the urge to explore (They Came in Viking Ships); a sense of belonging (Daughter of the Regiment) how the lure of gold transformed a valley (Valley of Gold), how humans shape their environment but how the land also shapes its people too. (Walking the Boundaries) or how a dream can create a better world- even in the depression. (Somewhere Around the Corner) and power and prejudice in Hitler's Daughter and Soldier on the Hill.

The Animal Stars series, on the other hand, takes a real animal from the past and weaves a story around it ... The Goat Who Sailed the World is the story of the goat who really did sail with Cook on his voyage that led to Australia's colonisation. The Dog Who Loved a Queen is the story of Mary Queen of Scots dog, who was with her when she died (and no, it wasn't a Skye terrier!) The Camel who Crossed Australia is the tale of a camel on the Burke and Wills expedition.

Sometimes, too, it is almost as though I hear a whisper calling 'remember me.' This was the case with *They Came on Viking Ships*, based on the stories of Freydis Eriksdaughter in the Icelandic sagas. Why do we remember her brother, Leif Eriksson, when Freydis is forgotten? With *Macbeth and Son* it was the story of the historical - not literary- Macbeth. Why do contemporary sources describe him as one of the great good kings, but later English historians - and Shakespeare - turn him into a weak minded villain?

The whispers were even louder with *A Rose for the Anzac Boys*. Most of what we know about World War 1 comes from official records. But as I read the many diaries and letter collections now being published, often privately, by the decedents of the people that were there, other stories emerge, including those of the women volunteers- not the official nurses and VADs, but the unofficial ones. At first I thought there were dozens, then hundreds. Now I think there were probably thousands, or even more- a forgotten army of women...but that would take far more space than I have here to explain.

Perhaps that's what my books really are -- a whisper that becomes an obsession; years of research that suddenly crystallise into a story, and then the labour of turning the past into fiction, woven with facts.

But my writing also comes from a real feeling of urgency. Our history is our heritage – and it's one that our kids are often denied.