Historic Fiction and Citizenship Building
Whose Values Are We Teaching Now?
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Abstract: Children's literature has always been seen as a primary conveyor of moral lessons and as a means of introducing children to the mores of society - a civilising influence. Historic fiction carries a double burden - it communicates values from the present time, framing the stories of the past in contemporary lenses, while it usually provides a citizenship perspective - a view of how present day institutions developed from the past, selectively choosing some experiences while ignoring others. While carrying all this baggage, historic fiction must also be entertaining, a good read, be 'authentic' to the period involved and provide a role model of good writing. This paper uses some recent children's historic fiction to illustrate the texts' implicit moral values as well as the citizenship values within.

Keywords: Historic Fiction, Values in Education, Children's Literature

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The Civics Expert Group perceived the term ‘citizenship’ in broad terms:

It encompasses a whole range of educational processes, formal or informal, that encourage and inform participation by citizens in community activities and public affairs. (p.7)

All of the values described in the Australian government’s list of important values for schoolchildren Values for Australian Schooling (DEST, 2005) are also seen as important for general citizenship knowledge. These values are Fair go – all people are treated fairly; Responsibility – be accountable for one’s own actions; resolve differences in constructive; non-violent and peaceful ways; contribute to society and to civic life; Understanding, Tolerance and Inclusion – be aware of others and their cultures, accept diversity within a democracy society, being included and including others; Care and compassion – care for self and others; Responsibility – take care of the environment; Freedom – enjoy all the rights and privileges of Australian citizenship free from unnecessary interference or control, and stand up for the rights of others and Respect – treat others with consideration and regard; respect another person’s point of view. These values can be seen to have universal appeal and underlie any civics program. To compare them with other international views on values the author examined the OXFAM website. Oxfam (1997), on their webpage Cool Planet for Teachers, define a Global Citizen as someone who; is aware of the wider world and has a sense of their own role as a world citizen; respects and values diversity; has an understanding of how the world works economically, politically, socially,
culturally, technologically and environmentally; is outraged by social injustice; participates in and contributes to the community at a range of levels from local to global; is willing to act to make the world a more sustainable place; and takes responsibility for their actions.

The first list represents some key dispositions, the second takes similar dispositions and argues for action to go with them. While historical texts can explore these aspects of citizenship it then becomes the teacher’s job to help learners to develop the actions that go with them. (Lovat & Schofield, 1998) explored the worth of a direct values education program in establishing prescribed values. The program focused on the use of a range of moral issues and dilemmas in a classroom setting using a variety of teaching strategies. Students who participated reported high enjoyment and belief in the worthiness of the program. They found that the intervention did produce changes in attitudes with best results associated with activities that linked values with the school-related environment and the real-life experience of the child. (Lovat, 2005) furthermore argued that values education refocuses the attention of teachers on the fundamentals of effective teaching - the teacher, the quality of the teacher’s knowledge, content and pedagogy and the teacher’s capacity to form the committed and caring relationships with students. Students discover global values by living as well as learning these values and teachers promote values by living them in the classroom as well as teaching them explicitly (Campbell, Kyriakides, Muijs, & Robinson, 2004). Thus the teacher can assist with taking the dispositions explored in historical texts further, leading them to action of relevance to citizens of contemporary society. Explicit teaching of the language of values linking everyday experiences and fictional texts, working on the quality of the teaching including content, knowledge, and pedagogy and the teachers’ relationship with the students, and living the values and ideas of the texts in the classroom.

Accessibility to different points of view and ways of doing things can be linked to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) where children’s right to participation outlined in Article 12 is closely linked to freedom of expression (Franklin, 2002). This Article implies children’s right to information that ensures that their participation is relevant and meaningful. Children’s literature, including historic fiction, can be seen as a conduit to understanding of the wider world and to children’s participation in it. Increasingly children’s fiction is providing examples of minority views on issues and taking a more global stance on values’ perspectives. For example in the USA fiction for middle graders currently under-represents Black Americans but many socially conscious books are currently being written both for whites and for African American and although the numbers are still low they have increased and the authority and authenticity has improved (Agosto, Hughes-Hassell, & Gilmore-Clough, 2003). Other social themes have increasingly emerged in children’s literature and the role of historic fiction in exploring social issues in children’s literature is substantial. For example in the area of combating prejudice these same authors analysed book reviews of fiction between 1992 and 2001 and found that historical fiction contained the largest percentage of multicultural protagonists of all the genres explored with 28% of all books containing multicultural protagonists being historic fiction. Thus, although it would be wonderful for fiction to explore current multicultural issues, it is telling that many authors feel that historic fiction provides a valuable and possibly safer avenue for exploring cross cultural issues. Phillip Pullman, author of *Northern Lights, The Subtle Knife and The Amber Spyglass,* wrote:

I didn’t set out to write a trilogy with a female protagonist and give her exciting and interesting things to do: the story chose me. But I was glad to find the medium in which I could show how feminism, for example, didn’t spring fully armed from the head of Germaine Greer but was being discussed, and was influencing people, a hundred or more years ago……in the same book I wanted to talk about socialism. (Pullman, 2001, p. 107)

Fiction, and in particular historic fiction, is thus an important vessel for conveying the knowledge of others, and attitudes towards otherness that is crucial for some basic understanding of citizenship. It is however the historic fiction’s ability to display solutions and accommodations to conflicting situations in the past - allowing for safe distancing for children to explore similar situations in their own lives - that is its great contribution to global understanding. Stradling, Noctor and Baines (1984) argued that teachers often need to distance issues when dealing with sensitive matters that may generate strong feelings or polarise students. Teachers can consider analogies and parallels to current controversial situations either by removing themselves in time or, alternatively, in place. Historic fiction does both – both time and place are different to contemporary times. Stradling, Noctor and Baines suggested, for example, that exploring Indigenous conflicts in another culture can provide analogies to Indigenous issues in our own culture and can begin to allow discussion without the ‘emotional baggage’ that issues close to students and community hearts can evoke. Examining Indigenous issues in the past informs current debate and provides new perspectives.
on current issues. Distancing allows for the principles to be explored. It is historic fiction’s ability to provide distancing that probably explains its power to inform in terms of current issues associated with citizenship.

Traditionally young children’s tales were moral ones. These days the overt moral dimension has been downplayed but children’s books continue to be significant learning experiences in the moral as well as other domains of human experience. Consider, for example, the children’s picture books, *The Conquerors* by David McKee and *Heart of the Tiger* by Glenda Millard and Gaye Chapman. The first is a story of soldiers who conquer other people and other lands but find that they are very much like the people they conquer and when they return home they bring their knowledge of others with them. They have incorporated into their cultures parts of the conquered culture and learned of the unity of humankind. The second picture story has a message of environmental imperatives and the need to treasure our green environment. Both fictional tales have strong citizenship values. Pearce (1997) argued that much children’s literature is dependent on the idea that children can be moulded into adults and develop the desired ideological orientation - being imbued with the values of their time (but not necessarily the values of the time under study). She explored the Australian fictional text *Seven Little Australians*, published in 1894, arguing that Ethel Turner was filled with nationalist fervour and wrote about it in this classic text, but that the gender stereotyping of the period in which she wrote was also very obvious - ‘girls are at best still confined to the verandahs’ (Pearce, 1997). Thus Ethel Turner was writing about a period of growing national awareness in Australian history – and the text provides interesting insight into attitudes to Federation and a national government in 1901. At the same time Ethel Turner provided a perspective on women’s rights in that period – a perspective that she was not consciously portraying but a perspective that assists students to understand something of the background to the need to fight for women’s right to vote that occurred after Federation.

Stephens pointed out that even if the writer is not aware of it ‘children’s fiction belongs firmly within the domain of cultural practices which exist for the purpose of socialising their target audience ...a narrative without an ideology is unthinkable: ideology is formulated in and by language, meanings within language are socially determined, and narratives are constructed out of language’ (Stephens, 1992, p. 8). Bage, (1999) argued that stories underpinned educational practice because, among other reasons, they are enjoyable, inspire curiosity, help students think, communicate information, can simplify, explain and moralise, and help explore people. In many cases though, even now, the ideology is overt. Gooderham (1995) claimed that although the morality doesn’t now usually depict good versus bad there are still moral structures in children’s books - non-judgemental, altruistic concern in some, pathos and hope in others (Margaret Wild and Julie Vivas, *Let the Celebration Begin* (1991)). He maintained that children’s books often needed to appeal to children and adults also and so must have messages for both and there is an expectation that there is a moral. With an even stronger sense of citizenship responsibility for writers of fiction Sandmann (2004) declared that educators have a responsibility to build a more just society and raise awareness and advocate for social justice. She claimed that literature ‘can be the bridge, a kind of vicarious living, that demonstrate the consequences of both just and unjust action’ (Sandmann, 2004, 255).

Literature can also explore ways of learning about others. *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* and *The Frozen Waterfall* are examples of useful historic fiction which explore the importance of language learning as ‘an adaption of mind and linguistic sensibility’ (Lathey, 2001, p. 300). In these texts language is seen as an important method of understanding other cultural groups. Lathey argued that to assist cultural intercourse, writers of fiction need to respect the acquisition of new languages as windows of learning into other cultures and must depict language learning as yet another learning adventure – not to emphasise the difficulty or ‘strangeness’ of others’ language. The emphasis should be on attaining accessibility to others not on pointing out how difficult it can be to access other peoples’ views. Thus in children’s literature the moral agenda can be explicit or implicit but it is nevertheless incorporated. It would therefore stand to reason that historic fiction, in as much as it is a bridge between two disciplines - both of which have a moral imperative (see Barton and Levstik, 2004 for discussion of the moral imperative of history teaching)- would provide a strong force for values inculcation, clarification and analysis. There is thus a good case for the value of historic fiction in encouraging citizenship.

The titles below explore a variety of citizenship focused themes. These were chosen because many of them are recent releases and perhaps as yet unknown, and a couple were included because they may be unknown to the variety of audiences that may read this article ie they may previously have had an audience restricted to a particular cultural group.
Surviving Sydney Cove by Goldie Alexander lacks finesse but it demonstrates the lessons that historic fiction can tell and the ideas that can be used to promote discussion of contemporary issues. Although demonstrating little empathetic understanding of what the first white settlers of Australia would actually have believed, the heroine of the story, Elizabeth, argues that the Indigenous Aboriginal tribes of Sydney Cove were possibly not savages who did not know right from wrong and wants to talk to them about some of their customs:

‘perhaps that was their way of welcoming us. They seem gentle enough even if they wear no clothes…’ (Alexander, p. 13)

Similarly, with insight far beyond what would be expected of the times, Elizabeth points out the folly of have classes in society and the ridiculous separation of the duties of convicts and soldiers in a colony where all were starving:

‘Some of our soldiers find this life most tedious. They drink too much rum and gamble. While some grow rich, others lose everything they own. But there is so much to do in Rose Hill,’ I cried. ‘Why don’t they help us plough the fields for the next planning? Why not help us make bricks and build proper houses?’

Winston looked so shocked I could hardly suppress a giggle. ‘We are soldiers, not servants, he said indignantly. ‘Our only task is to mind you convicts, not toil in the fields.’ (Alexander, p. 39)

Although almost totally imbued with present day values rather than considering the values of the period, the text can be useful in the history classroom for discussing just that issue. It is important to understand the origins of some of our perspectives today in order to counter them and to act to dissipate them.

It does provide opportunities to discuss issues of tolerance, respect for others, how to deal with those who have different points of view than our own and what a classless society might look like - and so has value in the civics classroom. As the indicators of good values education suggest these concepts must be explicitly taught in the classroom, particularly the language of these ideas and must also be experienced in the everyday relationships in the classroom. Is the classroom a classless society? Do we tolerate those who do not ‘fit in’ or who have a different view than ourselves?

Riding with Thunderbolt by Allan Baillie is more subtle with important messages more realistically portrayed. Correct attitudes are not presented - the answers are much more problematic:

‘They knocked us down, cut pigtails like scalps, and rode us down through the bush. I lost many friends in Lambing Flat. I hated the whites after that. All of them….then I left the goldfields and came here. This is a good place, very peaceful, and I didn’t want to go to China and kill the merchant any more. He was no worse than the whites. Then my anger with the whites began to shrink….Now, if I see a digger that I recognize from the riots – well, I won’t cook him a banquet, but I won’t try to kill him either…getting revenge on people….is stupid.’ (Baillie, pp. 110-111.)

Events may not be fair and may not be inclusive but a citizen has to show responsibility. There is a need to resolve differences in a constructive manner.

The Silver Donkey by Sonya Hartnett explores the notion of courage and portrays a soldier’s dilemma when he has to choose between his duty and his commitment to people he loves. It is a story of pacifism and taking responsibility for upholding personal perspectives and values as opposed to national ones. The conflict between two opposing values is a real one that plagues us every day in modern citizenship.
dilemmas. Once again good teaching leads to discussion of such dilemmas with reference to how it is relevant to present day. The Silver Donkey provides some morally upholding stories where someone has stood up for their convictions while following the tale of a soldier deserter in World War 1. The excerpt below illustrates the turning point for the soldier when he has to choose between his responsibility towards his fellow soldier and his responsibility to the army:

‘The Lieutenant heard chiming: his hearing returned. No-one’s land boiled in unholy chaos. He heard beserk shouting, shrieks of outrage and dismay. He heard the untamed whinnying of terrified warhorses. He heard piteous cries of agony, and artillery shrilling through the air. Mostly he heard the rifles, and the sodden thud of shadows collapsing into the mud….

‘Lieutenant. Lieutenant.’ Ernie was trembling, fluttering his hands. The Lieutenant looked away from him, across the battlefield. The stump of a tree was torn up and tossed into the sky…..the Lieutenant glanced impatiently at Ernie. Be quiet! He wanted to say. He wanted to tell the dying boy to have the decency to die in silence. Couldn’t he see that the Lieutenant had other things to think about? But when he heard these hideous thoughts in his head the Lieutenant was ashamed. He pictured Ernie’s father crouched beside a spinning bicycle wheel. Soon a telegram would arrive at the door of the repairs shop and Ernie’s father would always wonder about the last moments of his son’s life. The Lieutenant could not let this boy fade into the mud, his final words unheard’.. (Hartnett, pp. 105-107.

Onion Tears by Diana Kidd and Little Brother by Allan Baillie provide insights into problems for refugees. Although dealing with wars in different parts of the world and at different periods of time, the messages are similar. They are about the value of freedom, about respect for those who arrive at Australia as refugees and they are about the need for care and compassion for others. In Australia where debate on the treatment of refugees is very controversial at the moment the study of these two texts focusing on children who have suffered because of warlike conditions in their homeland provides enough distance to enable some multiple perspectives on the issues of providing refugee asylum. They can also allow some discussion on futures by examining the lives of those who have come this way before – what contribution or lack of contribution did these previous refugees provide to Australian society?

There are endless other examples where clever use of historic fiction can assist current understanding of citizenship issues. The importance of the teacher in using the opportunities provided by the fiction must be emphasised. There is a fine line that must be trod between imposing a moral story onto another time - a time that had a different moral view - and using a past experience to help develop understandings and actions that can inform citizens of today. A teacher using historic fiction must have an expert knowledge of the history as well as an ability to make the past relevant to the present and future. Students must discuss the vocabulary of citizenship but must also appreciate that there will be differences in attitudes between the past and now and that too simplistic approaches to historical understanding can lead to poor understanding of the present. Good teaching makes the difference.

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