

U.S. Political History and Young Readers: Our Reviewers Share Their Insights

Jill P. May

When we began planning this issue over a year ago, we thought we would find lots of 2015 children's and young adult books telling stories about people running for office in the past fifteen years. After all, a national presidential election would happen in 2016. We expected that publishers would want to talk about the women who have recently run and become national legislators or state governors; we imagined we would find books about hopeful—but failed—presidential candidates for the past two elections, and new faces for the 2016 race; we believed that publishers would want to address the issues that were most shaping the country's political debates, such as education, the environment, the Middle East, and technology and surveillance. We quickly found we were wrong. So, we asked ourselves: What had been published about the U.S. political past that we might want to share with readers as the elections come up? How should those books be approached?

Surprise! All of the available biographies we culled were about white men. Two issues that might have some bearing on this season of elections—the relevance of climate change in the political arena and privacy and government surveillance—did have some discussion, but they were not being directly addressed as contemporary political issues. Our final list of books about the men engaged in national politics was a motley one, including some poetry, a ghost tale, a Revolutionary War baker, and a biography of Thomas Paine. The “issues” books we found were nonfictional accounts of Vietnam resistance and Hurricane Katrina.

First Opinions, Second Reactions has always focused its attention on materials that have been designed to “meet the needs of K–12 teachers of Language Arts, parents and children, and public and school librarians.” While we try to find books that have been recently released, we have also occasionally looked at past trends. Still, the online journal's call has largely been for “careful analysis of the books as contemporary literature published for a youthful audience.”¹ How could we put this year's publications into some perspective?

In 2012, British scholars Catherine Butler and Hallie O'Donovan released a study of history books written for children, arguing that the books “typically accommodate both a confidence in the essential continuity of human experience over time and an historicist insistence on the radical difference, and even inscrutability of the past” (1). They asserted that authors of history books written for children usually create texts that allow their readers to learn about the past and see a difference between past events (or people) and present ones. According to Butler and O'Donovan, these authors assume that knowing about the past is important, but that “change is real and profound and that this should be acknowledged” (2).

Is this true in the United States? What might contemporary literature about the past reveal concerning U.S. political history?

We decided to keep our reviewers uninformed about the paucity of choices and ask them to address the books they received as some of the ones recently published that addressed U.S. political history. When the reviews came in, I read them with an interest in their insights. Here are some of the things I saw: acknowledgement that the past and present can be linked through historical retellings; anticipation of the teacher/librarian/parent's role in the story's explorations and interpretation; and thoughtfulness about the historical relevance of what is seen on the page. Let me take one set of reviews as an example.

Writing about the biography of a German baker who serves in the Revolutionary War, Lotta Larson explained that *Gingerbread for Liberty!* contained an unknown story from the Revolutionary War worth sharing because of its historical accuracy and its relevance to today's youth: "The story is intriguing, while offering a unique perspective of what it means to be a hero." Laura Strack's focus in the "Second Opinion" piece extends Larson's observations into the world of the child. As a speech-language pathologist (MS, CF-SLP) and clinical fellow in a rural community, who shared the book with two struggling readers, she set her goal as helping them "find a connection to [the] text in order to maintain attention and comprehend the material." Just as Butler and O'Donovan said, Strack hoped to link the past and present so that her students would understand how "change is real and profound" (Butler and O'Donovan 2). Strack furthered her conversations through a careful analysis of the book by having her students not only share the story, but also peruse information she readily found on the internet. "We discussed as a group how clothing and transportation have changed over the course of history by comparing and contrasting the soldiers and the boats in the pictures to Google images of soldiers and ships today."

And the other reviewers of the books we found? I think they did a remarkable job of answering the editors of *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, Andrea S. Libresco and Jeanette Balantic, when they encouraged using literature "from multiple perspectives" in order to "allow students to extend their understanding of the personalities and events that have shaped our world" (1). And if you agree, then perhaps we did discover something about U.S. politics—past and present—after all.

Works Cited

- Butler, Catherine, and Hallie O'Donovan. *Reading History in Children's Books*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Print.
- Libresco, Andrea S., and Jeanette Balantic. "Our conversation with you about 'Effectively Integrating Literature and the Social Studies . . .'" *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 26.1 (Sept./Oct. 2013): 1, 4. Print.

Note

1. For a more thorough discussion of the online journal's purposes, look at the statements on the home page <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/fosr/> and the policies page <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/fosr/policies.html>.