

Examining How Historical Agency Works in Children's Literature

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This paper begins by framing the concept of historical agency as a complex relationship between structural forces and individual actions. We then describe general features of historical fiction and consider ways of using this type of text in classrooms. Using the concept of historical agency, we examine three historical fiction texts for upper elementary or middle level readers (Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, The Fighting Ground, and Dragon's Gate). The analysis reveals the similarities and differences in the ways the authors construct historical agency. The paper concludes with a set of four key questions that teachers and students can apply to historical fiction to help students refigure the ways in which they construct knowledge about the past.

Key words: agency, children's literature, historical agency, historical fiction, history

Introduction

Middle grades students tend to see history as a pageant of heroes and villains, faced with an array of stark moral choices rather than to acknowledge the difficult, confusing and morally ambiguous conditions that the real world so often presents (Lindquist, 2009). Yet, by situating sympathetic protagonists in complex historical situations, quality historical fiction can help students recognize that history seldom offers straightforward choices or easy answers. Put another way, good historical fiction can give middle grades students a port of entry into the important, but otherwise abstract concept of historical agency. In this article, we offer a framework for teachers and students to explore the concept of historical agency.

Historians create patterns and relationships to give meaning to the ambiguities and complexities of the past, thus reducing the infinitely complex to a finite, manageable, frame of reference (Gaddis, 2002, p. 32). Historians do this with several second-order concepts (Lee & Ashby, 2000), such as historical significance, evidentiary warrant, continuity and change, progress and decline, empathy and moral judgment, and historical agency (Seixas, 1996). While these constructs are interrelated, we focus here on historical agency, a concept central to understanding the past. What makes histories coherent and intelligible is the presence within them of human agents reasoning, making choices, and exercising their will (Roberts, 1997, p. 257). We begin by framing historical agency as a complex relationship between structural forces *and* individual actions (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; Seixas, 2003).

We then describe general features of historical fiction and consider ways of using this type of text in classrooms. This leads us to propose four key questions teachers can use to help students examine issues of historical agency in texts. Next, we use these questions to guide our examination of three historical fiction texts for upper elementary or middle level readers: *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976), *The Fighting Ground* (Avi, 1984), and *Dragon's Gate* (Yep, 1994). We conclude by considering how employing these questions to read historical fiction can help teachers and students reflect upon the ways they construct knowledge about the past.

Historical Agency

When issues of historical agency are addressed in school classrooms, the tendency is to offer simplistic narratives of heroic individuals engaged in power struggles, rather than to acknowledge the difficult and confusing conditions that the real world more often presents (den Heyer, 2003). A more sophisticated understanding of historical agency involves considering the complex relationships among causes and effects, structural forces, such as economic, political, and social upheavals, along with the shaping influences of individual actors. In other words, we define historical agency as *the relationship between structural forces that shape historical events and the ways people influence, shape, and are affected by these events*. That is, human beings are autonomous agents with abilities to affect change, yet there are social structures that constrain and limit what individuals can do (Seixas, 2003).

Consider a few examples of how broader social forces and conditions bring about, limit, and shape historical events. Jared Diamond, in *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997), discusses the role geographic location plays in shaping the economic and political development of societies. Marxist historians identify significant eco-

nomical forces that have led to historical change (e.g., market forces causing the shift from feudal society to capitalism and concomitant changes in social relations). Social historians look at broad social trends and factors that have shaped these trends, such as the rise of corporate consumer capitalism, and how they contribute to certain effects, such as the decline of civic participation and sense of community.

At the same time, individuals and groups of people have shaped and responded to these forces. They have taken action within networks of relationships and social and institutional structures. Leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, and the thousands of activists involved in sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and civil rights marches addressed social, economic, legal, and institutional forms of discrimination to bring about the many reforms of the Civil Rights Movement.

Historical Fiction with Young Readers

Textbooks typically obscure issues of agency by presenting the past as the result of abstract and impersonal forces that appear beyond human control (Levstik & Barton, 2001). When textbooks, for example, describe how there was a shift from feudalism to capitalism, it can make it difficult for students to view historical events as being shaped by individuals and groups of people. Children's literature, in contrast, especially narrative, biography, autobiography, and historical fiction, often personalizes history, making historical events come to life. Children's literature evokes emotional and personal connections to historical characters and events and encourages readers to experience history through the experiences --- the choices, trials, travails, and triumphs --- of the characters. Historical fiction can help students understand what happened in the past (what people did at the time of the event, specific actions taken, etc.), why the event took place (what the actions, beliefs,

motivations, and intentions of certain actors were), and the consequences of the event (how people were affected, how they responded, etc.). Historical fiction also can help students understand broader contexts, such as the social forces that were created and shaped by people or the ways certain economic conditions affected people's lives. Historical fiction, moreover, can make visible the contributions of individuals and groups of people often marginalized by traditional heroes and great (military) leaders' accounts of history. Much like revisionist historical accounts, such as Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (2003), historical fiction also can give voice to those who might have been silenced or adversely affected by a particular event, thus inviting students to question why some groups had less power, influence, or privilege than others.

There are several additional reasons for using historical fiction in middle school social studies classrooms. A work of historical fiction provides a continuous narrative that is easier to follow than a set of loosely connected primary documents. Historical fiction can pique students' curiosity about the past, provide important details about how people lived, and aid students in appreciating the multi-faceted nature of historical figures, events, and issues (Lindquist, 2009). Linda Levstik and Keith Barton (2001) suggest that an important reason for using historical fiction is to ensure that students have experiences with a range of texts and genres in social studies literature, because reading across a range of texts, including primary sources, textbooks, biographies, and fictional works, helps teachers and students build a web of meaning in classrooms. According to Levstik and Barton (2001), historical fiction helps students develop mature historical understanding because it encourages readers to recognize the human aspects of history and gives students a sense of history as an ongoing, participatory drama (p. 120). They argue that historical fiction can particularize and personalize

history to help students make connections between past and present moral dilemmas. All of these factors support the use of historical fiction to help middle school students understand historical agency and learn about the past.

Agency in Historical Fiction

Because historical agency is such a core construct for historians and for the ways we develop knowledge of the past, it bears taking a close look at how this construct gets enacted in historical fiction for children and youth. Central to this type of examination is an emphasis on issues of authorship, considering the choices authors make as they construct their texts and represent the past. While social studies scholars have considered issues of authorship and stylistic conventions related to textbooks (Fitzgerald, 1979; Loewen, 1995; Werner, 2000; Wineburg, 1999), less work has focused on these issues with children's literature (Damico, Baildon, & Lowenstein, 2008), and historical fiction in particular.

Toward this end, we use the following four questions to guide an examination of how three well-respected children's and young adult authors describe the ways through which individuals and groups of people take action to bring about change within certain historical contexts, as well as how they respond to events and forces that oftentimes seem beyond their control. We believe these four questions can assist teachers in guiding students to investigate closely issues of historical agency.

"In other words, we define historical agency as the relationship between structural forces that shape historical events and the ways people influence, shape, and are affected by these events."

1. What key people/characters, events and issues, and settings/contexts are discussed in the book?
2. What role do the main characters play in bringing about or shaping significant events or issues?
3. In what ways are the main characters affected or shaped by certain contexts or conditions?
4. How are key concepts in history --- significance, change and continuity, progress and decline, perspective and judgment --- portrayed in terms of agency?

The three works of historical fiction selected for the analysis – *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976), *The Fighting Ground* (Avi, 1984), and *Dragon's Gate* (1994) --- are commonly used in upper elementary and middle school classrooms in the United States (grades 4-6, ages 9-13). We believe that grappling with these kinds of critical questions about historical fiction can help readers cultivate their own agency with texts.

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry

1. *What key people/characters, events and issues, and settings/contexts (time and place) are portrayed in the book?*

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (1976), set in 1933 in the Depression era American south, is a core text in a series of books Mildred Taylor has written about the experiences and struggles of an African American family, the Logans, to preserve their land amidst forces and constraints of White oppression. Cassie Logan, a young female member of this family, narrates the text, chronicling the escalating racial tensions her family experiences during a nine to ten month span as they grapple with the impending threat of violence and potential loss of their land. The Logan family includes: Cassie's grandmother, parents, an older brother,

er, two younger brothers, and an uncle. A key African American character in the story is TJ Avery, a friend of Cassie's older brother, whose decision to align himself with two White young men leads to tragic consequences. Central White characters in the story, whose actions serve as the catalyst for the book's critical moments, include a prosperous landowner who exploits the labor of a number of African American families who work as sharecroppers on his land; a White family with their two teenage sons, who take advantage of TJ Avery, and daughter, Lillian Jean, who has a few significant run-ins with Cassie.

2. *What role do the main characters play in bringing about or shaping events or issues in the book?*

One way to understand the actions of the Logan family is that they respond to the deep structural and personal effects of racism with resolve, resourcefulness, and commitments to solidarity and equity. They are not resigned to a fate based on an uncritical acceptance of the status quo. The resilience and resistance of the Logan family permeate the entire book. As landowners themselves and educated (Cassie's mother is the schoolteacher and academic learning is highly valued in the Logan home), the Logan family possesses resources, justice-oriented commitments, and a deep sense of pride that result in being viewed by the White people in the area, as the ones who are always stirring up trouble. This sense of pride is entwined with a sense of personal responsibility, exemplified by Cassie's mom with these consoling words after Cassie is humiliated by a White girl, Lillian Jean: "Baby, we have no choice of what color we're born or who our parents are or whether we're rich or poor. What we do have is some choice over what we make of our lives once we're here" (p. 129).

The themes of personal and familial responsibility and agency in working for transformative change run throughout *Roll of*

Thunder, Hear My Cry. Consider the following examples of Logan family members taking stands against injustices: Cassie's youngest brother refuses to accept beat-up books handed down (i.e., discarded) from the nearby White school; Cassie's mother elects to teach her students about slavery, subject matter that is not part of the approved curriculum, which leads to losing her job; Cassie's eldest brother, along with the rest of his siblings, cleverly derail the school bus for White children that had soaked them with mud and dirt as they walked to school; Cassie exacts revenge upon Lillian Jean in a fight when they are alone in the woods in retribution for when Lillian Jean's public humiliation of Cassie, ordering her off a sidewalk in town (which led to Lillian's father pushing Cassie to the ground); and the Logan family leads a boycott of a store run by a White family levying exorbitant interest rates on many of the African American sharecropping families who have to shop at their store. The Logans volunteer to travel to a more distant city to shop for other African American families who cannot afford the costs of this travel. It bears mentioning that the Logan family does not stand to gain materially much if at all from this action and that they are willing to put up their land as collateral, a huge risk the family takes.

"Children's literature evokes emotional and personal connections to historical characters and events and encourages readers to experience history through the experiences – the choices, trials, travails, and triumphs --- of the characters."

3. *In what ways are the main characters affected or shaped by certain contexts or conditions described in the book?*

As the narrator, Cassie chronicles the problems throughout the story, so what readers learn is rooted in her personal experiences --- what happens to her and what she sees and hears happening to others. Thus, she is in charge of cataloging the ways characters are affected or changed. In many ways, what she records is the raising of awareness or consciousness of herself and family, especially her eldest brother, Stacey. When the book begins, Cassie and her siblings mostly have been shielded from specific acts of racial violence (though they were keenly aware of inequalities stemming from segregation such as no busing for the African American schools). They have been raised to deeply value their familial history, the richness and depth of the struggle for freedom and their acquisition and preservation of land. Thus, when Cassie gets admonished verbally and physically by Lillian Jean Simms and Lillian's father, when Mama gets fired for her oppositional teaching of slavery, and when Cassie and her siblings become aware of the terrorizing work of 'Night Riders' in their own community, the Logan children (especially Cassie) experience more viscerally the sting of racism and are compelled to come to terms with what this means for each of them and for their family.

4. *How are key concepts in history --- significance, change and continuity, progress and decline, perspective and judgment – portrayed in terms of agency?*

The stances and actions of the Logan family communicate clearly that it is not a matter of *if* racist policies and practices will be upturned, but *when*. This embodies a progressive view of history as a continuous struggle toward outcomes and a future that is more democratic and humane where there is a more equitable distri-

tribution of economic opportunities for people. The themes of race, class, and gender intersect throughout *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. Strong, assertive female characters, such as Cassie's grandmother and mother, play pivotal roles in the development of the plot. The boycott of the store is both a marker of racial unanimity, where African American families in the community unite against the racist and physically abusive White family, and class solidarity as seen in the collective effort aimed at reconstructing economic relations between wealthy owners and presumed powerless workers.

The Fighting Ground

1. *What key people/characters, events and issues, and settings/contexts are discussed in the book?*

The Fighting Ground, by Avi, is set in a 24-hour period in 1778, during the Revolutionary War. The protagonist is Jonathan, a 13-year-old New Jersey farm boy, who has fantasized, from afar, of the glory of war. Jonathan's martial wishes come true when, on the second page, the village bell rings, calling all able-bodied American men to stand and fight. Against the wishes of his parents, Jonathan sneaks away to join the adult males who have gathered at the tavern. The villagers are led by an outsider, who is referred to simply as the Corporal. He informs the men that Hessians, mercenary soldiers fighting on behalf of England's King, are approaching the village. The Corporal rallies the local men to try to stop the advancing enemy soldiers. Jonathan marches with the men to cut off the Hessians. There is a brief, confused skirmish between the two sides. Terrified, Jonathan runs away into the woods, where he is captured by three Hessian soldiers, who march with him through the countryside. Though there is a complete language barrier between Jonathan and the Hessians, Jonathan begins to see the Hessians

as individuals, not the inhuman monsters he at first imagined them to be.

With a storm unfolding, the Hessians and Jonathan search for shelter for the night. They stumble upon an apparently abandoned house in the woods, where Jonathan discovers a little boy hiding in the shed. The boy's parents have been murdered, and, together, Jonathan and one of the Hessians dig a grave for them. Later, when the Hessians fall asleep, Jonathan escapes, carrying the boy in his arms. He finds the remnants of his militia unit gathered around a fire. To his surprise, Jonathan learns that the Americans had actually defeated the Hessians, and his Hessian captors were in flight when they found him. He also learns that the Corporal had murdered the little boy's parents, because of their Loyalist leanings. The Corporal compels Jonathan to march with him and the other men back to the farm where the Hessians are sleeping. He sends Jonathan up to the house, alone, to determine whether the Hessians are still sleeping. But Jonathan, sickened by the Corporal's murder of the little boy's parents, tries to save the Hessians. He wakes them up and warns them that they are surrounded. The Hessians try to use Jonathan as a human shield in their attempt to escape, but Jonathan breaks free from them and runs away as the Corporal and the other Americans gun down the Hessians. The story ends with Jonathan's safe return to his parents.

"... we believe that reading historical fiction, and historical texts in general, ... can help students refigure the ways they construct knowledge about the past."

2. *What role do the main characters play in bringing about or shaping significant events or issues in the book?*

Most of the characters in the story are portrayed as extremely passive, and subject to forces beyond their control and sometimes even their understanding. Caught up in a fog of war (a metaphor which Avi consciously employs by setting the story during an unfolding storm), the majority of the men in the militia unit which Jonathan joins seem not to know why they are fighting. For much of the novel, Jonathan is characterized as indecisive or simply paralyzed. Jonathan's instinct at this point is to put himself in the hands of the Corporal, who he sees as a decisive figure of action. But as the novel progresses, Jonathan begins to see that ceding decision-making authority to the unscrupulous Corporal is dangerous. He ultimately realizes that it is the Corporal who provoked the Hessian attack by murdering the little boy's parents. Thus, in the final third of the novel Jonathan seizes control of his own actions. As a result, he is responsible for saving the little boy's life and attempting to save the Hessians.

3. *In what ways are the main characters affected or shaped by certain contexts or conditions described in the book?*

Jonathan has inherited the political beliefs of his parents and the community around him, and at first, he subscribes unquestioningly to the prevailing local narrative of the Revolution, which is that the British are cruel tyrants, preying upon innocent Americans. At the outset of the novel Jonathan seems to believe in the unnuanced tropes of evil Tories, Englishmen, and Hessians without skepticism. Other characters, too, are shaped by the political context described in the book. Most notable is what happens to the little boy's family. His parents are murdered by the Corporal because of their ethnic background (they are French)

and Catholic religion. In defense of his actions, the Corporal announces that the little boy's parents were Tories.

4. *How are key concepts in history --- significance change and continuity, progress and decline, perspective and judgment --- portrayed in terms of agency?*

The Fighting Ground focuses primarily on the question of perspective and judgment. By employing the metaphor of a fog of war, Avi raises the question of how there can be agency and moral choice in wartime. The evolution of Jonathan's character within the 24-hour period in which the book is set provides a compelling argument for its young readers that the need for critical thinking and deliberation is, if anything, even greater in wartime than in peacetime. The plight of the little boy's family shows just how dangerous it is to cede judgment and perspective to those who would argue, like the Corporal, that the ends justify the means. This novel is no heroic fantasy; indeed, while Jonathan acts courageously, producing one notable result, the saving of the little boy, he ultimately is not able to successfully challenge the Corporal. His efforts to save the lives of the Hessians fail. *The Fighting Ground* is a realistic portrayal of human agency. While Jonathan makes real moral choices, his actions are constrained by the social structures of revolutionary America.

"The authors of the three texts we examined situate their narratives within the broader social, political, and economic structures of the time period (institutional racism, war, and the exploitation of immigration labor)"

Dragon's Gate

1. *What key people/characters, events and issues, and settings/contexts are portrayed in the book?*

Laurence Yep's *Dragon's Gate* begins July 1865 in Guangdong Province, China and follows Otter, a 14-year-old Chinese boy, to California in January 1867 to work on the Transcontinental Railroad in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Yep contextualizes the story in the preface by noting that toward the end of the Civil War, the United States began construction of the Transcontinental Railroad to unite the country. Since only 31 miles had been built from 1863 to 1865, however, the Central Pacific Railroad turned to Chinese crews to help them build the railroad through the Sierra Nevada Mountains. At this same time, many Chinese were immigrating to the United States due to the rule of the Manchus and their role in increasing poverty and misery.

While in China, Otter accidentally kills a drunken Manchu soldier in self-defense, which prompts Otter's mother to send him to join Father and Uncle Foxfire in the Sierra Nevada. Otter meets westerners for the first time, befriends Sean, the Irish-American son of the work crew supervisor, and finds the bitter cold, back-breaking work, numerous accidents, and cruel authority of the crew bosses difficult to endure. After getting whipped by Sean's father for disobeying orders, Otter begins to question what should be done to address the injustices experienced by Chinese workers in the United States. After learning that Chinese workers make a third as much as western crews and that official company policy of an eight hour work day only applies to western workers, Otter leads a successful strike for better pay and an eight hour work day.

2. *What role do the main characters play in bringing about or shaping events or issues in the book?*

Yep's characters personify some of the key issues and conflicts represented in the book. Father and Uncle Foxfire are seen as heroic rebels against the Manchus and colonial powers carrying out the "Great Work" necessary to resist foreign rule. Otter embodies the struggles many Chinese faced in China, their desire for restoration of Ming rule, the reasons many Chinese migrated to the United States, and their trials and tribulations working on the transcontinental railroad.

Through Otter, Yep depicts a strong sense of historical agency and an awareness of how history is constructed. At the end of the book, for example, he has Otter reflect on the importance of the "Great Work" and remember Uncle's advice: "I could learn to change things or go on being changed by events" (p. 267). Although Otter initially is told by Foxfire and Squeaky to not challenge the westerners' authority since this will make things worse, after Foxfire's death he realizes that Uncle Foxfire had come to America because "he needed to hope" and because "the future is here" (p. 226). Otter's father reinforces this by noting that Foxfire thought of Otter as the future. Otter is seen as one who can carry out the Great Work that his father and uncle had started.

Along with the individual agency of Otter, there is a sense of agency through collective action. The workers organize and carry out the strike. Since there were 3,000 workers and only a few dozen company officials in the camp, the workers remained united in the face of physical intimidation to gain better pay and the right to not be beaten by the crew supervisors. During the celebration at Promontory Point, Sean notes that Otter and the Chinese workers have every right to be part of the ceremony. Otter responds by saying, "they [company officials] can have their little ceremony. We know the truth" (p. 270). Later they both acknowledge they had worked together to build the railroad and promise not to forget their role in making history.

3. *In what ways are the main characters affected or shaped by certain contexts described in the book?*

The main characters are shaped by the historical conditions in China in the 19th century. The Chinese are affected by Manchu rule, the opium trade of the British, and the general strife and poverty of 19th century China. Otter's family prides itself on being rebels resisting foreign rule.

There is a strong sense of people being caught up in history and conditions not of their own making. Manchu rule has prevailed for 200 years, the characters are concerned about European efforts to colonize parts of China, and economic conditions are such that many Chinese are forced to migrate. Chinese workers on the transcontinental railroad faced the prospects of dying while building the railroad and were denied the freedom and equality supposedly that was part of the American social fabric. After getting whipped for disobeying orders and frustrated by an inability to confront injustice and exploitation, Otter realizes in resignation "We either finish this railroad or die" (p. 178).

Still, Otter is ennobled by the idea of serving the great destiny of this country (p. 209) and inspired by the ideals of freedom and equality in a country where you fight wars to be free (p. 174). These ideals serve as ideological contexts that inspire the characters in their own struggles to free China from foreign rule.

"... and they have the protagonists act within and against these constraints in different ways."

4. *How are key concepts in history --- significance, change and continuity, progress and decline, perspective and judgment --- portrayed in terms of agency?*

Dragon's Gate points to the importance of individual and collective struggle as necessary for change and progress. Laurence Yep provides a fictional social history of Chinese workers hired by the Central Pacific Railroad to complete the transcontinental railroad. He seems to be suggesting that greater significance in the history of the transcontinental railroad should be granted to the workers who built it (rather than on the entrepreneurs, engineers, and political leaders, for example). As Yep notes in an interview, he really "felt a responsibility to these workers on the railroad because they get such short shrift in all the history books.... And the fact is, they performed heroic labors.... They had to do such things as hang down the cliff face in a basket with a hammer and chisel, make a hole, pack the hole with gunpowder, and then hope that they could be hauled up in time before the explosion went off. I forget how many tons of bones were shipped back to China, of the men who died working on the railroad" (Laurence Yep interview). In doing so, Yep provides readers with the perspective of immigrant workers that helped build America, a perspective typically minimized in history textbooks.

Discussion

Historical agency is complicated; it involves discerning the strength and impact of structural forces *in relationship to* individuals and groups of people acting within and against these forces. The authors of the three texts we examined situate their narratives within the broader social, political, and economic structures of the time period (institutional racism, war, and the exploitation of immigration labor) and they have the protagonists act within and against these constraints in different ways.

Table 1 summarizes the similarities and differences in the ways that authors construct historical agency and situate it in broader contexts.

In *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, Cassie and her family take personal responsibility for bringing about social change. Historical change and progress is seen as the result of individuals willing to act in the face of injustice. In *The Fighting Ground*, the main character takes orders and is indecisive in the march to war. Compliance to authority in this case might be seen as the inability to exert one’s agency in certain ways or as a form of agency that resulted in people blindly following orders or being swept up in powerful social forces such as war. In *Dragon’s Gate*, the main character demonstrates an awareness of his own agency and his options by declaring that he could learn to change things or go on being changed by events (Yep, p. 267).

Another issue to consider across these texts is how aware the protagonists are of broader social forces affecting them. Cassie (*Roll of Thunder*) demonstrates a developing consciousness about the larger forces shaping her life as she moves from a childhood in which she was shielded from some of the more severe forms of racial violence, to an appreciation of the life and death consequences of being involved in the struggle for racial and economic justice. Like Cassie, the burgeoning awareness of Otter (*Dragon’s Gate*) is shaped by family influences, the experiences of his father and uncle alongside his own, which culminate in Otter helping lead a successful labor strike.

“... historical fiction can help students recognize that history seldom offers straightforward choices or easy answers.”

Table 1 – Comparison of Three Texts

	<i>Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry</i>	<i>The Fighting Ground</i>	<i>Dragon’s Gate</i>
Time period, context	1930’s American South	1778 New Jersey, Revolutionary War	1860’s China and California
Social forces	Deep, institutional racism, segregation	Complexities of war	Exploitation of immigrant labor
Agency enacted by protagonist	Primarily on personal level (e.g., exacts revenge on White girl)	Primarily passive, following orders; main individual act fails	Active in naming and transforming unjust working conditions
Collective agency – protagonist working with others to transform situation	Plays observant role as family leads boycott of store	Formation of local militia mobilized by the Corporal (used to demonstrate the need for individual agency and moral choice in the face of war)	Works with others to lead successful strike to improve labor conditions

Jonathan (*The Fighting Ground*) comes to better understand the moral complexities embedded in the war, and this has key pedagogical implications. Muddying the moral waters can serve as an antidote to the ways histories of wars are often doled out to students, in simplified binaries divided into heroes, villains and victims, with obvious moral choices. Of course, seldom is the truth so simple. More often, the lives of real people are subject to forces that they may only dimly perceive, and the choices people make are often shrouded in

confusion, and shaded by loyalty to the people they know best. Using the concept of historical agency to analyze Jonathan's growth may give readers a more complex understanding of the difficult choices history presents to ordinary people, especially in times of war.

Concluding Thoughts

The set of four key questions provides a critical guide for teachers and students to investigate issues of agency in historical fiction. Grappling with these questions can help students better understand the choices and options along with the values, motives, and perspectives of people in the past, and how they responded to historical events. Attending to these questions also can lead to discussions about how they as children or young adults, might become more aware of the choices and options available to them. This, in turn, can help them cultivate a deeper appreciation and understanding of the complexities embedded in deciding courses of action amidst significant sociopolitical events, as the three historical fiction texts demonstrate, such as, when they feel unable to or choose not to act in ways consistent with their values and beliefs, which seems to be the case with Jonathan in *The Fighting Ground*.

Perhaps most importantly, we believe that reading historical fiction, and historical texts in general, with a complicated conception of agency as *the relationship between structural forces that shape historical events and the ways people influence, shape, and are affected by these events*, can help students refigure the ways they construct knowledge about the past. With guidance from teachers, students can come to appreciate a vibrant, dynamic conception of history and writing about historical events, a conception that is

never seen as final, complete, or in the past. Rather it is constantly remade, in particular situations, for the purpose of

finding and securing power and agency among participants. History is not simply a background force in social life; it is a cultural resource, moving continually within and among participants as they define the future. (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007, p. xiv)

With attention to the ways authors make choices to represent the causes and consequences of historical events, young readers can strategically build and rebuild their relationship to what it means to read, write, and know about the past.



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Citation for this Article

Damico, J. S., Baidon, M., & Greenstone, D. (2010). Examining how historical agency works in children's literature. *Social Studies Research & Practice*, 5 (1), 1-12. Retrieved from <http://www.socstrp.org/issues/PDF/5.1.2.pdf>
