

## Historical Fiction: A Living Presence in the Modern Classroom

Workshop topic code:

PC

Length:

60 minutes

While novels set in past eras of human history are classified as fiction, many readers—both adults and children—tend to see what is presented in them as fact, placing a responsibility for correct presentation of facts on the author. If children are to be engaged by a novel, the writer must balance story with history, and entertainment with accuracy, without sinking into didacticism. This leaves the author with the delicate task of representing history accurately while telling the story she wants to tell.

The Common Core Standards require that middle- and high-school students research widely using a variety of source material. Two award-winning authors of historical novels for young readers set in the Classical world (Egypt, Etruria, Greece, and Rome) will model their research process: how they research, how much invention they allow themselves, and how they create characters and events that make an engaging story without sacrificing historical accuracy. The three speakers—the authors and a Latin teacher—will address authors' notes (are they necessary in order to clarify historical events that might have been altered, or do they destroy the “willing suspension of disbelief?”), the presentation of often uncomfortable customs of past times, and the inclusion of unsubstantiated theories of historical behavior and facts. The speakers will then present a framework for conducting historical research that can be used in middle and high school classrooms to foster student inquiry, engagement, and effective research.

The panelists will also explore how teachers of the Classical Languages and Civilization,

English, and History can help their students meet the Common Core Standards by modeling how to read critically, conducting paired readings of fiction and nonfiction, and considering historical fiction as a culmination for student research. For example, students might ask whether the characters' attitudes are consistent with the setting or more like modern attitudes. Similarly, by reading authors' notes critically, students can evaluate an author's choice to make particular changes. Students can also research the historical periods and Classical texts—using other books, internet resources, films, music, etc.—on which these books are based or which were produced in the time period represented, thereby gaining an insight into authorial choices that could potentially inform their own writing. Studying the authors' use of language that reflects the historical sources would reinforce vocabulary and structures studied in class by showing that vocabulary and those structures in a modern context.

Teachers of various subjects (Classical Languages and Civilization, English, History, Social Studies, etc.) can work in an interdisciplinary framework to use these tools to help their students read both primary and secondary sources more critically, looking for the often-unconscious intrusion of the author's point of view, prejudices, and assumptions into what is intended to be an objective recounting of historical fact. Various means for teachers to accomplish these goals will be explored in this workshop.

Through these and other techniques, students will become more knowledgeable and critical readers of historical fiction and of historical texts in general, and will gain deeper understanding of how strongly the Classics resonate today.

Here are some of the questions which attendees in the workshop will discuss with the panelists: What is the relevance today of these situations found in these historical novels? Why should today's readers care about what happened to teenagers thousands of years ago? Points of

discussion:

- Octavian used sexually demeaning slurs to fan the flames of hatred against Cleopatra.
- Telemachos had to learn how to be a man in the absence of a male authority figure while his father was at war.
- Cleopatra Selene wondered how free will worked when her entire life was controlled by sometimes dangerous adults.
- Ariadne had to reconcile her need to be true to herself with her family's religion and traditions.