Getting **personal**: making effective use of
historical fiction in the history classroom

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Writing stories in history lessons? But we don't do things like that in history do we? Strange bedfellows though history and fiction might seem, Dave Martin and Beth Brooke make a strong case for collaboration between the English and history departments in order to introduce students to the challenging task of writing their own realistic historical fiction. This is not about superficial 'imagine you are' type empathy writing. Instead, their approach stresses the importance of rigorous historical research and careful attention to style and genre. This helps students to write stories that both deepen and communicate knowledge and understanding of the past. This is empathy with edge.

History and fiction

The *Each* (English and history) project began in October 1993 as a collaboration between the English and history advisory teams in Dorset. Its intention was for teachers of English and history to explore together, and in depth, ways in which the skills of each discipline might overlap through the shared use of historical fiction. Some history teachers mistrust historical fiction, regarding it as an 'inaccurate' view of history. Anna Davin believes that 'Stories are dangerous: they are fiction not fact; … they are contaminated by imagination'.[1] Others argue that '…historical fiction should be part of every child's classroom history diet because it contributes to the creation in children's minds of a more faithful picture of it [history] than that which they infer from standard school books or even from artefacts and documents alone.'[2] For us, the point was best expressed by Jill Paton Walsh:

> 'Whereas a history text book deals, usually, in what happened to groups of people in the past – what happened to the English peasantry after the Black Death, …. The novelist gets personal. He or she is more likely to tell you what happened to one particular peasant as he suddenly found himself free to sell his labour to the lord of the manor, … The writer may invent characters, conservations, circumstances, but if the book is a good one, the invention will all be with the grain of the known historical evidence, and will illuminate.'[3]

In the first year of the project the students of three Year 7 classes in Wareham Middle School read *A Little Lower Than The Angels,* an historical novel set in the medieval period by Geraldine McCaughrean.[4] They then researched and wrote their own historical fiction stories set in the same period. Three points emerged from the assessment of the students' stories and the teachers' reflections. First, the students were extremely enthusiastic about the curriculum link between history and English.[5] Second,

they developed a sophisticated notion of historical fiction both as a literary genre and as historical source material. Third, the students, as we had suspected, found historical fiction inherently difficult to both read and write. To use it effectively in the classroom demands a very active approach to texts in particular and to learning in general
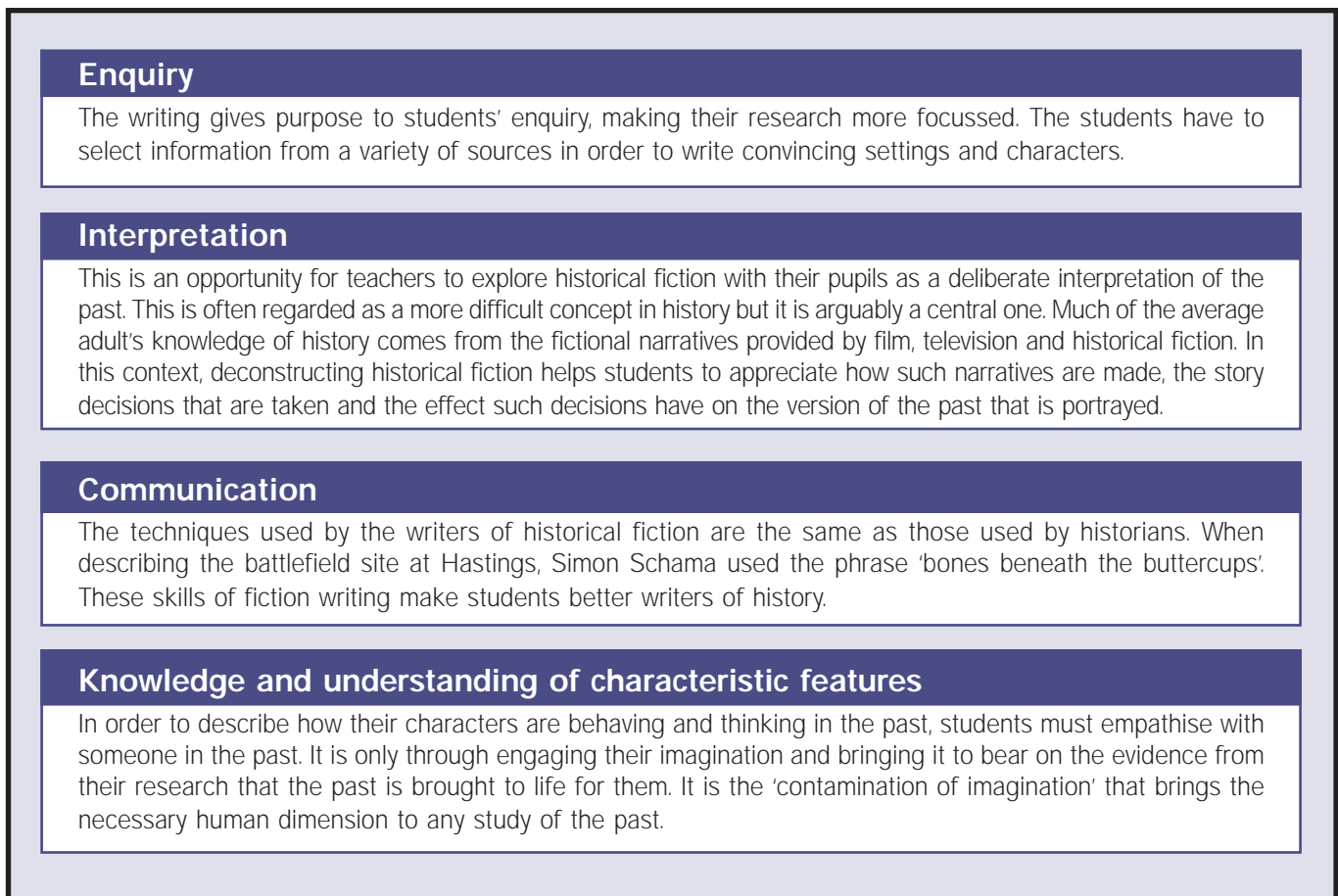
In the years since 1993 the project has broadened to include other schools and other historical periods.[6] In every case students have responded enthusiastically to the challenge of story writing. Their story writing has given a purpose to their historical research. They are finding out about the past in order to make their settings, characters and plots authentic. This can lead to higher quality enquiries which focus on a much wider range of features of the past. Writing and studying historical fiction can help to achieve that elusive balance between different historical perspectives, encouraging greater emphasis on the social, cultural and aesthetic aspects of a period in a rigorous and engaging way. At the same time, it has become clear that a highly structured approach to students' writing pays dividends in terms of the quality of their historical communication. Specifically, it supports students' ability to create historical settings and characters which are as historically accurate as they can realistically be. The work they produce is a far cry from the run of the mill empathy writing exercises we are all familiar with and which have contributed to the criticism levelled at empathy in the past.

Clearly, the contributions that historical fiction make towards pupil progress in history must always be a high priority. In terms of pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding at Key Stage 3, using historical fiction can promote pupil progress in a variety of ways (see Figure 1[7]).

Write your own Roman story

The latest collaboration between teachers in the project has resulted in the publication of *Write Your Own*

Figure 1: Ways in which historical fiction can enhance and develop students' understanding of history.

Enquiry

The writing gives purpose to students' enquiry, making their research more focussed. The students have to select information from a variety of sources in order to write convincing settings and characters.

Interpretation

This is an opportunity for teachers to explore historical fiction with their pupils as a deliberate interpretation of the past. This is often regarded as a more difficult concept in history but it is arguably a central one. Much of the average adult's knowledge of history comes from the fictional narratives provided by film, television and historical fiction. In this context, deconstructing historical fiction helps students to appreciate how such narratives are made, the story decisions that are taken and the effect such decisions have on the version of the past that is portrayed.

Communication

The techniques used by the writers of historical fiction are the same as those used by historians. When describing the battlefield site at Hastings, Simon Schama used the phrase 'bones beneath the buttercups'. These skills of fiction writing make students better writers of history.

Knowledge and understanding of characteristic features

In order to describe how their characters are behaving and thinking in the past, students must empathise with someone in the past. It is only through engaging their imagination and bringing it to bear on the evidence from their research that the past is brought to life for them. It is the 'contamination of imagination' that brings the necessary human dimension to any study of the past.

Roman Story.[8] The purpose of this textbook is to support history teachers in developing a structured approach to the teaching of history using historical fiction. In the book, students are presented with a range of historical fiction and are asked to create their own historical stories.

The notion of fictionalised recount writing in history is well established in schools but, rather than producing fiction that has integrity and displays an imaginative and empathetic engagement with its subject matter, the stories that students write are often of the disappointing, 'I am a five year old chimney sweep. I get up at 5am every day and my master makes me sleep on a sack in a hovel', variety. No real intellectual or imaginative link is made between the period, the individual and the situation. By asking students to create a plot – a real story – we are encouraging them to do something more than simply represent everything they know about Victorian chimney sweeps in those dreary 'pretend you are' narratives. The demands of story writing where the plot is what drives the story actually encourages deeper thinking about the historical setting and context. It leads to a fuller understanding of the period and produces a response that is not hackneyed or pedestrian.

What exactly does a plot provide? Well, all good adventure stories begin with a problem. Perhaps something goes wrong for one of the main characters or perhaps something happens that forces them to take action. Part of the excitement of the story comes from the way characters resolve that problem and from the way their experiences affect and change them. The whole purpose of any story is to provide something for its characters to react against and to interact with. If there is no problem then there is nothing for the writer, the writer's characters or the writer's audience to respond to. This is why traditional historical recounts have been so unsuccessful; they have nothing other than their historical content to engage with.

One lesson learned very early on in the project was that without structure, students will develop plots that are either over ambitious, with too many characters, or which lack direction. There is then a tendency for them to become demoralised when they cannot achieve their plans and often their writing deteriorates into bland description. One way to support students is through a story recipe that provides a creative constraint. As the story recipe in Figure 2 shows, the students are limited in terms of the time and scope of their story and by the number of characters and locations they can include.

After plot, setting is a key ingredient in any story. It is particularly important in historical fiction, as it is one of the ways a writer establishes the historical credentials of the text. The historical details for a Roman setting

Describing Hastings, Simon Schama spoke of 'bones beneath the buttercups'.

Your story recipe

Your task is to write a story (or an extract from a story) set in Renaissance Florence.

Setting

The date is 3 June 1480. It is summertime. Your story must take place within a maximum of 2 days (48 hours). The city is Florence. Your story should include no more than 3 precise locations. These might be drawn from the Medici palace, the Ponte Vecchio, the Cathedral, ...

Characters

You may have up to 3 human characters, at least one of whom must be a woman. They may be fictional or real people such as Leonardo da Vinci and Lorenzo de Medici. You must include an animal.

Plot

Think about an event or problem that can start your story off. E.g. You have just arrived in the city but your letter of introduction to the Medici has disappeared. Plan the most important things that happen to your characters because of the initial problem. Consider how the problem is finally resolved.

In order to write your story you will need to do some historical research. Precisely what will depend upon your story, so if your characters eat a meal, you will need to research food. If your story takes place inside an artist's studio then you will need to research buildings and art. If you include Leonardo, you will need to research him or any other character, real or imaginary.

Remember, your story needs to be both interesting and historically accurate!

through a number of language techniques which children can be taught to use in their own writing. The sense of the busyness of the forum is created by list sentences that pack in lots of detail and by the use of strong verbs such as plundered, mingled, bumbled and splintered, all of which are highly descriptive and which add a sense of character or individuality to the scene. In addition, the writer uses alliteration that adds a sense of pace and speed through the use of sibilant sounds: 'A spice seller skidded'.

In order to describe an effective setting students need to have acquired a very strong visual image in their head. One resource that should not be underestimated is artists' reconstructions in textbooks. Figure 4 is an example of one such reconstruction that offers a fruitful source of ideas for student writers. It is well worth playing the 'what can you see?' 'what can you hear?' and 'what can you smell?' game with students. To see how these visualisation techniques and use of stronger, more descriptive verbs can impact on students' writing, compare extracts 1 and 2 (Figure 5) written by Year 7 students.

Both pieces demonstrate historical knowledge and understanding, but the depth of that understanding is very different; it is the second student who has let the history 'get under the skin.' The two pieces also highlight another critical aspect of successful fiction writing – character. First person writing is frequently difficult for children and needs careful teaching. Students need to engage all their senses and to demonstrate this in the way their characters respond to the events and the settings. The opening of one particular story provides a successful example of this (see extract 3, Figure 5).

Clearly, the character in extract 3 has a more ambivalent attitude towards the gladiatorial games than the other spectators. After one long sentence of simple description, the reason for this is given in a short, direct statement: 'My best friend was in the battle.' This technique can be taught quite explicitly and its purpose is to improve the quality of the history through developing the skills of narrative writing. The first person narrator above lets us view events through his eyes, rather than simply describing what he sees. His character only interrupts our viewing to point out something important to the development of the plot. The work shows a knowledge and understanding of Roman attitudes to violence as entertainment. The same student demonstrates further knowledge of Roman society later in his story in a similarly sophisticated way: 'I looked in awe and jealousy at the windows of real glass with pine window frames.' The use of story also provides opportunities to incorporate the entertaining – but often irrelevant – snippets of information so beloved of students, as in extract 4 (Figure 5).

The information in extract 4 comes from sources beyond the textbook and shows how this student can

can be gathered from a variety of sources and examples of historical fiction can of course be used to exemplify the genre. The Roman market described in Figure 3 offers teachers and students a model of how a writer turns such historical detail into a description that engages the imagination as well as one that transmits knowledge of the period. Because the writer's key purpose is to provide a setting for a plot rather than a setting solely to demonstrate knowledge, the writing is much more vivid and clearly indicates a much deeper engagement with the original sources. The historical detail is plainly evident but it has been brought to life

Figure 3: An example of good historical fiction to share with students.[9]

One of the characters, Quintilian is crossing the forum in a town in southern Italy.

Being the third day of the Festival of Mars, the forum was packed to capacity. Butchers' cleavers splintered their blocks; mongrels plundered the scrap bins. Shouts of 'stop thief' or 'make way for the chariot' mingled with smells of pies and poultry, pickles and pancakes. A spice seller skidded on a fish head, and a thousand exotic scents exploded into the air. Cinnamon and nutmeg and cumin clung to Quintilian as he bumbled his way through the shoppers and the charlatans. You could buy anything here today from pastry cutters to ivory plaques, cucumbers to scribes.

And the sun beat mercilessly on it all, pounding his head like a pestle.

We are encouraging them to do something more than those dreary 'pretend you are' narratives.

select and organise information from a variety of sources to produce structured work. This neatly combines the 'Knowledge, skills and understanding' of the National Curriculum for History (the former 'Key Elements'),[11] specifically historical enquiry and organisation and communication. It also displays a strong sense of character and is funny, further demonstrating how the student has engaged with the material.

This approach to writing can be adapted for any year group and any historical period. Figure 6 is taken from the work of a Year 10 student whose class had tackled some story writing as part of their Schools History Projec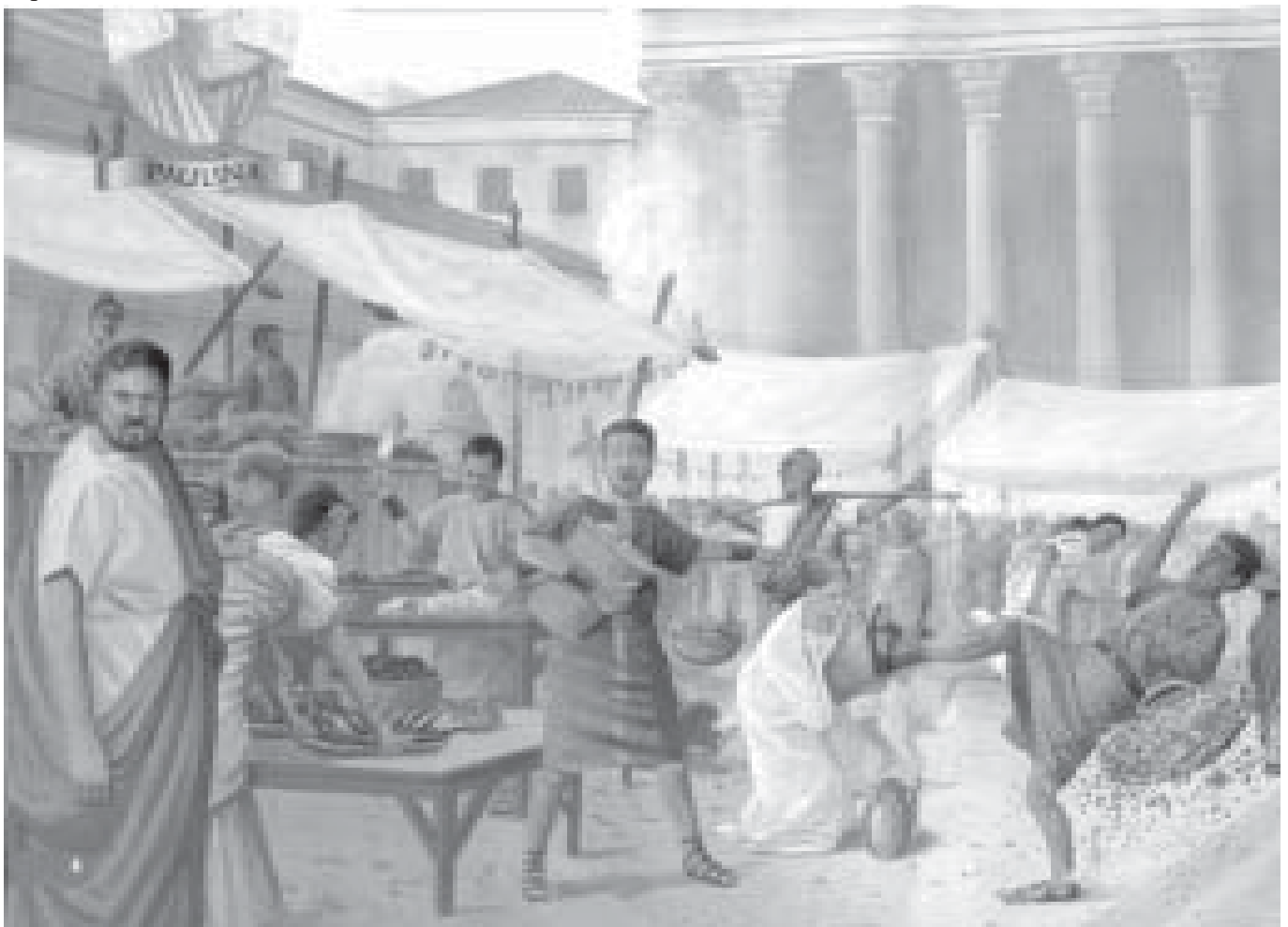t GCSE depth study on the American West. This particular student had previously written some historical fiction set in the Roman period. The work is a good example of effective scene setting through the clever use of:

- historical detail: *Cattle huddled together in a tight, crowded group against the fence of the huge pen.*
- strong verbs and adjectives: *driven by the howling wind.*
- an effective simile: *the rain …cutting at their faces like a lashing whip.* (very in keeping with the context of the American West)

History departments have approached historical fiction in a wide variety of ways. Some history departments have

Figure 4: An artist's reconstruction of a Roman market.[10]

Figure 5: Extracts from historical fiction on Roman life, written by Year 7 pupils.

Extract 1

I went past one last shop that was selling hot foods and drinks to have in the streets or take home. The reason they sold hot foods and drinks on the market is because many flats and houses have no cooking stoves. Then I finally got to the wine shop. I tried lots of wines and when I started walking home I was rather dizzy.

Extract 2

He walked up to the mensa and spoke to the caupo. "Cervisia placere." The innkeeper turned away, got the drink for Gaius and handed it over. Gaius paid the innkeeper and sat down. He gazed at the foaming nectar in his hands and felt his sorrows flush away as he swigged.

Extract 3

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, I show you a battle of gore, a battle of death, a battle of gladiatoooorrrrsssssss!"

The crowd went completely wild with enthusiasm as twelve men ran out into the sand covered arena. Five of them were Thracians, four were Retarius and the last three were Samnites. They all stood in a polygon shape around the arena, each the same distance away from the next. At the signal they all charged towards each other, swinging axes, swords and nets in all directions with the aim of killing someone to amuse the crowd.

My best friend was in the battle.

Extract 4

Nero was famous for his speeches. Because they went on for ever. Gaius's blood boiled as the gates were shut while Nero was talking.

"I," said Nero, "am sure that you all enjoyed that as much as I did" and so he went on - for three hours! Gaius looked out over the crowd and saw a woman giving birth in the fourth row because no one was allowed to leave while Nero was going. A group of men in the sixth row pretended to be dead so they could be carried out to be buried, and for what? So that so-called emperor can give his ego a fix?

Figure 6: An example of historical fiction writing in Year 10.

Huge, dark, bubbling clouds unleashed their anger as they rumbled in the distance. They fired out bolts of lightning, growing fiercer as they came closer, moving faster, driven by the howling wind. Cattle huddled together in a tight, crowded group against the fence of the huge pen. When the storm reached the town of Abilene it seemed to halt its advance, hovering above the small town. The wind whipped up the sandy floor and the rain hurled down upon the wanderers who dared to venture outside, cutting at their faces like a lashing whip.

worked alone whilst in others there has been collaboration with their English department colleagues. There are obviously advantages and disadvantages in each case. Nigel Watt, Head of history at All Saints School, Weymouth, chose the former option and his account can be found on the *Each* web site. By contrast, in Holbrook High School, Ipswich, the history and English teachers collaborated closely. The story writing task was introduced in history lessons where all Year 7 students researched characters and settings. The work was then taken over by the English department who dealt with dialogue and the drafting and redrafting of the stories. Next year, the intention is for both the history and English departments to have an input into the drafting process. So as you can see, the variations of approach are considerable.

All the schools involved with the Each project have reported on the enthusiasm of students, especially boys, and the raised profile of history in the school as well as the quality of the students' history. In at least one of schools, both the history and English departments have agreed that the final story was the best piece of work the student had ever produced.

We would like to acknowledge the help of John Mills of St John's School, Episkopi, Cyprus and Dale Banham of Holbrook High School, Ipswich and thank them for the work of their students.

When you try out the ideas in this article in your own school you might like to take advantage of an added incentive for your pupils. The publisher John Murray and the Historical Association are together sponsoring an historical fiction writing competition. See the insert in this edition of Teaching History or go to the John Murray web site for an entry form (www.johnmurray.co.uk).

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First person writing is difficult for children and needs careful teaching.