A Veteran Teacher's Lessons: Bring Books into Your Classroom

All of us have favorite books. I am guessing yours include beautifully written memoirs and histories; perhaps during your younger days a novel with a historical setting inspired your interest in the past. We need to give our students the insights and exhilaration that comes from reading powerfully written books, both non-fiction and historical fiction.

A well-chosen non-fiction book can help students tackle difficult controversial issues. For example, our students read Sonia Nazario's book on immigration, *Enrique's Journey*. Nazario is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who chronicles the journey of a 12 year Honduran boy to the US in search of his mother. On his odyssey Enrique faces, "unimaginable peril, often clinging to the sides and tops of freight trains, Enrique travels through hostile worlds full of thugs, bandits, and corrupt cops, but he pushes forward, relying on his wit, courage, hope and the kindness of strangers." Hear how students at San Diego's Crawford High School felt about reading Enrique's Journey in their video book report. The Enrique's Journey website has lots of good curriculum ideas for secondary teachers.

In our US History class, we not only read *Enrique's Journey* for the historical unit on immigration but also to get our students, many of whom are immigrants, to tell the stories of their families. The book became a springboard for the Journeys website, where our students interviewed parents, aunties, uncles, grandparents, classmates, and community members about their journeys to the United States.

Memoirs are a great way to bring history alive for our students. During our unit on the Civil Rights Movement, US History students read Melba Pattillo Beal's poignant memoir, *Warriors Don't Cry*. Beal was one of the Little Rock Nine, the first African

American students to integrate Little Rock's Central High School in 1957. Her first-hand account as a non-violent "warrior" confronting racial segregation is told through her eyes as a teenager. Our World Studies sophomores read Elie Weisel's memoir *Night*, describing the horrors of the Holocaust. After reading this book, they would not forget how fifteen-year-old Eliezer was rounded up with the Jews of Sighet, Hungary, suffering the agonizing journey through the Nazi concentration camps, including Auschwitz and Buchenwald. The educational organization Facing History and Ourselves has excellent study guides for both *Warriors Don't Cry* and *Night,* and also loans class sets of books. Even if you don't have time to read an entire book, choose a chapter that puts students in the historical moment you are teaching about. Nothing is more powerful.

Let me end with a pitch for reading historical fiction in your social studies classes, as well. Novels, like Tony Morrison's *Beloved*, describe the depredations of slavery more powerfully than any lecture ever can. Let your students experience the terror of the trenches in World War 1, even if they only read one chapter from *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Who better than John Steinbeck telling the Joad's story to have our students feel what the Dust Bowl and migration to California were really like during the Great Depression? We've used many novels for our classes, *The Things They Carried* to chronicle US soldiers' experiences in the Vietnam War, *In the Time of the Butterflies* to document a Dominican dictator, and *How Green Was My Valley* to trace the transformation of a Welsh coal mining town during the 19th century. Surely you have a favorite piece of historical fiction which transported you to another time and place. Don't be afraid to share it with your students.

When our social studies students leave our classes, we want them to remember the important content of our courses. A well-chosen memoir or poignant historical fiction can bring a distant historical event alive. A well written piece of non-fiction can

connect students to the big issues of our time, making our courses livelier in the process.