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## Enliven History with Books

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# ENLIVEN HISTORY WITH BOOKS

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Students often consider history to be dull and the textbooks difficult. Because of the many trade books available, however, history can be brought to life. These books create characters, both real and fictional, within settings of actual historical events. Not only are authentic details given, but the motivations underlying a chronology of causes and effects are presented in readable fashion that may be quite different from textbook material. Below are reviews of recent offerings that may supplement the social studies program.

Aliki. A Medieval Feast. New York: T.Y.Crowell, 1983. \$9.95.

The king and his entourage was coming to visit the Camdenton Manor, and preparations for such an event took weeks. The highlight of his visit was the feast. The hunting for game, harvesting of fruits and vegetables, baking, and cooking were enormous undertakings. And what a feast it was! The guests ate course after course of exotic dishes from mid-morning to dark while jesters and minstrels entertained them. (An author's note indicated that Medieval feasting was an art.)

Vividly colored, highly detailed pictures recreate the sumptuous feast. Borders around some of the illustrations identify animals, fruits and vegetables, and spices used in preparation of the meal. Brief labels on the drawings define terms or describe settings apart from the text. Information about the architecture, dress, and customs of manor life in the Middle Ages is reflected in the illustrations as well. Aliki made use of Medieval tapestries and art to authenticate the detail. Possible follow-up activities might include making a mural, researching to prepare a feast menu, and writing dialogue of the table conversation at the feast.

Beatty, Patricia. Melinda Takes a Hand. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1983. \$9.50.

Set in the 1890's, the story relates the adventures of Melinda (thirteen years old) and her older sister Sarah Jane as the two of them are "stranded" in a fledgling Colorado town. They had been traveling from Chicago to California for Sarah Jane's wedding. While visiting the groom's family in Colorado, Sarah Jane received a letter from her intended telling her that he was marrying her because she was so "lonely." (Poor fellow! He meant "lovely," but his handwriting was very poor.) An angry Sarah Jane immediately

cancelled the wedding, leaving her and Melinda without enough money to return home. In the rest of the story, Melinda "takes a hand" many times, by securing employment for her sister, by finding appropriate suitors for her sister, and by helping her friends.

The book is fiction supported with factual historical details. Its colorful cast of characters has one humorous escapade after another. Beatty's stories are characterized by spunky heroines. Fans of her previous books will enjoy Melinda just as much. This book would be great, read aloud!

Ernst, Lisa Campbell. Sam Johnson and the Blue Ribbon Quilt. New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1983. \$11.00.

While Sam Johnson is mending the torn awning from the pig's pen, he discovers that he has a flair for piecing scraps of cloth together into an interesting design. Proud of his efforts, Sam announces his intention to join the ladies' quilting club. After being laughed out of his first meeting (for, after all, how could a man do such delicate work?), Sam organizes all the men into their own quilting club. Both groups work hard on their entries for the county fair quilting contest. When a mishap befalls both quilts on the way to the fair, the clubs unite to create the unique prize winning design.

Delightful illustrations, including a cast of rather humorous animal on-lookers, accompany the text. The border designs on each page are actual quilt patterns and are identified by the author at the end of the book. In addition to its portrayal of one aspect of turn-of-the-century rural life, the book has value in its depiction of men in a non-stereotypic role. It might be used as an introduction to the art of quilting to students and as a stimulus for both boys and girls to design and make a group quilt.

Fritz, Jean. The Double Life of Pocahontas. Ill. by Ed Young. New York: Putnam, 1983. \$9.95.

Fritz casts doubt on the familiar story of Pocahontas' saving John Smith's life in this account of the life of Pocahontas and the settling of the Jamestown Colony. In all likelihood, Pocahontas was John Smith's sponsor for his adoption into her family; she was playing a traditional role as his "sister" in the New World. The weakness, laziness, and ineptitude displayed by the settlers as they attempted to establish a colony is graphically described as well.

Throughout the book, Fritz considers the feelings of Pocahontas about the white settlers, the presumed death of John Smith, her kidnapping, her eventual marriage to John Rolfe, and her subsequent life in England. She poses questions in the text to encourage the reader to speculate along with her. The conflict of identity experienced by Pocahontas as she is caught between two worlds is reflected in the confusion of the Indians as they face the gradual destruction of their culture.

This book is a must in the study of the colonization of America. It is a tragic story, yet sympathetic. Fritz has drawn from written records and engravings to provide some of the dialogue and description. Historical notes and a bibliography are appended.

Goodall, John. Above and Below Stairs. New York: Atheneum, 1983. \$9.95.

Goodall contrasts the lives of English masters and their servants from the Middle Ages to present day in this unusual wordless book. Each period of history is identified by the name of the English monarch and dates of his or her reign. The format of the book is unique in that full pages are alternated with half pages which change the setting and action as they are turned. Beautiful watercolor paintings are filled with period detail that lend authenticity to Goodall's commentary on the historical social class systems of England.

Along with Goodall's previous books about historical England, including The Story of an English Village, An Edwardian Holiday, and An Edwardian Season, among others, Above and Below Stairs would be an excellent supplement to a unit on English history. Students might provide dialogue concerning actual events of the time (or even castle gossip!) to accompany the paintings. The book might also serve as the basis for creative drama activities.

Lasky, Kathryn. Beyond the Divide. New York: Macmillan, 1983 \$11.95.

Set in 1849, the story relates the westward journey of fourteen-year-old Meribah Simon and her father. Shunned by his austere Amish society, Simon is seeking opportunities in the Gold Rush in California. It is a diverse group of emigrants who accompany them on the wagon train, but friendships are formed and camaraderie develops. As the terrain roughens in treacherous mountainous regions, the people change and Meribah is bewildered by the cruelty and violence displayed by her fellow travelers. When the Simons are abandoned by the rest of the train, Meribah realizes that she must find the means for survival. Meribah undergoes a great deal of growth as she learns about human nature and makes a startling discovery; that she can do better than survive—she can live.

Beyond the Divide is not light reading. It is a compelling story with such vivid descriptions that the reader is consumed by the sights, sounds, and even smells of the arduous journey. It is far removed from the romanticized media versions of wagon trains. Superb characterizations make the book as valuable for a study of human character as it is for its insight into the history of the westward movement.

Provinsen, Alice and Martin. The Glorious Flight. New York: Viking Press, 1983. \$13.95. 1984 Caldecott Medal.

Subtitled "Across the Channel with Louis Bleriot, July 25, 1909," The Glorious Flight tells of Louis Bleriot's determination to fly. From the first moment he saw a flying machine on a Sunday outing with his family in 1901, Louis was obsessed. He built machine after machine, suffering numerous and often humorous pitfalls along the way. ("Papa" was not the most expert flier in history!) With "Bleriot XI," Louis finally had a real aeroplane and he became the first person to fly across the English Channel.

The illustrations are exquisite paintings filled with details of city life in France in the early 1900's and of the design of early airplanes. The use of color and light create perspectives

that convey to the reader a sense of watching the flying machines pass overhead, feeling the splashes from the river in unsuccessful attempts, and soaring with Bleriot on his flight. The book would be useful in a study of aviation history, comparing Bleriot's inventions with airplanes of the Wright Brothers and the emotion of his flight with that of Lindbergh's.

Speare, Elizabeth George. The Sign of the Beaver. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983. 1984 Newbery Honor Book. 1984 Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction.

Thirteen-year-old Matt and his father have claimed some land in the Maine territory and built a cabin on it. When his father goes away for what is supposed to be about two months to get the rest of the family, Matt is left to guard the cabin and care for the corn patch. When a stranger steals his gun and a bear ransacks the cabin for food, Matt realizes he must find a way to survive. Through a relationship with a proud young Indian boy, Matt learns to provide for himself as the months pass and it appears that his family may never return. The two boys develop what could be considered a friendship. What does occur is a growing respect for each other. Matt gradually begins to understand the cultural heritage of the Beaver clan and the "code" of the wilderness.

The Sign of the Beaver is an adventurous survival story filled with details about life in the wilderness in the 1700's. Students might compare it with other survival stories, such as Island of the Blue Dolphins, My Side of the Mountain, or Julie of the Wolves. Students might also respond to an underlying theme, that of the confusion of the Indians about the movement of white settlers to lands that are "owned" by no one.

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