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ENG-112B

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## Annotated Bibliography

### Historical Fiction from a Young Adult Perspective: Accuracy and Storytelling

#### Rationale:

Historical fiction is a double edged sword, and while it works to get young readers interested in the events of the past—incredibly important in this day and age—many books will often take creative liberties with the source material. All books are subject to some degree of bias and author agenda, but here I will analyze whether staying as true as possible to the source material helps or hinders the effect that Historical Fiction aims to have on young readers.

Now more than ever, history is being challenged by people whose agenda seeks to harm others or cover up inconvenient historical events. (See: Kanye West denying the holocaust, Misinformation in the media, etc.) While history is taught in schools, it is often skimmed over and inaccurate, leaving children with half-truths or even no information at all about important historical events. Especially in today's climate, people seem to be both incredibly aware of history and yet also disconnected from it, internalizing it as myth or fantasy instead of actual events that have happened to real people. This is a dangerous mindset that has contributed to the rise in hate crimes across America. For example, many people do not understand that slavery's end was not a sudden, clean decision, and in many ways there are still social programs in place that target minorities and mimic slave-like conditions. However, because slavery is seen as “a

thing of the past,” even if awareness is spread about these issues, there is pushback as so many people simply don’t believe it. Thus, the boon of historical fiction is putting into perspective not only these events and how recent they were, but also how close they were to our present day.

In chapter 4 of *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, attention is given to the importance of realism in fiction, and I think this is especially a concern when it comes to historical fiction. The chapter in *Literature for Today's Young Adults* focuses on realism in the sense of depicting the harsh truths about life, and while that is extremely prevalent in historical fiction, it also runs the risk of being dramatized for the purpose of making a better story. Many times, the author is forced to choose between adhering to traditional literary tropes. Many authors take care to avoid this, and often include notes at the end of the texts describing any changes they may have made compared to the historical accuracy.

Part of the problem, though, is that much of our own history is not easily accessible and a good amount of it is unknown. In one of my examples, *The Clan of the Cave Bear*, the author focuses the story around a period of history that we have no written records of, as the story takes place during the Late Pleistocene, and centers on a tribe of Neanderthals interacting with early humans. This piece of historical fiction is important, for the reason that it takes a group of people commonly seen as savage, barbaric and stupid, and humanizes them for the audience, allowing us a window into what their life might have looked like. However, this book is almost entirely based on conjecture and speculation, even if it is based upon the limited evidence available.

## Annotated Bibliography

Journey for a Princess by Margaret Leighton

Leighton, Margaret Carver. *Journey for a Princess*. Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961.

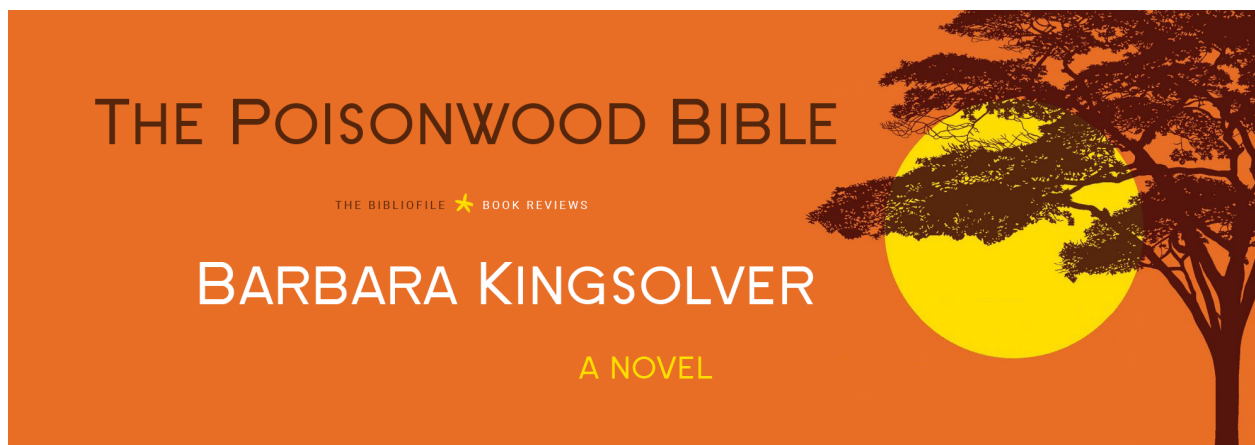


This book has personal significance to me: I read it when I was myself in high school, as I planned to use it as research for my own historical fiction novel. The story is a coming-of-age tale, centered around Princess Elstrid, the last child of King Alfred the Great, as she is caught in a political struggle between her father, Viking invaders, and her true beloved Count Baldwin II of

Flanders. Notably, Elstrid is very different from most YA heroines in her passiveness, something she must overcome when she is captured by her spurned ex-fiance later in the book. Leighton did a lot of research into the lives of Medieval women for the purposes of this book, and stuck as true as possible to historical events, but this was complicated by the fact that a lot of Medieval sources are lost to us. Beyond that, Leighton did take some creative leeway with the characters, including the name of the main character, whose name is recorded as Ælfthryth rather than Elstrid (a more direct translation of her name would have been Elftrudis. Leighton cites the books *Life of Alfred* by Bishop Asser and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, but these books center on the kings and do not go past the year 888. All that being said, even with the inaccuracies, I believe *Journey for a Princess* is an invaluable work of historical YA fiction, not only because of the accuracies that are there and that the author dedicates to, but also for Elstrid's charming character. I feel young girls especially will see themselves in her.

The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver

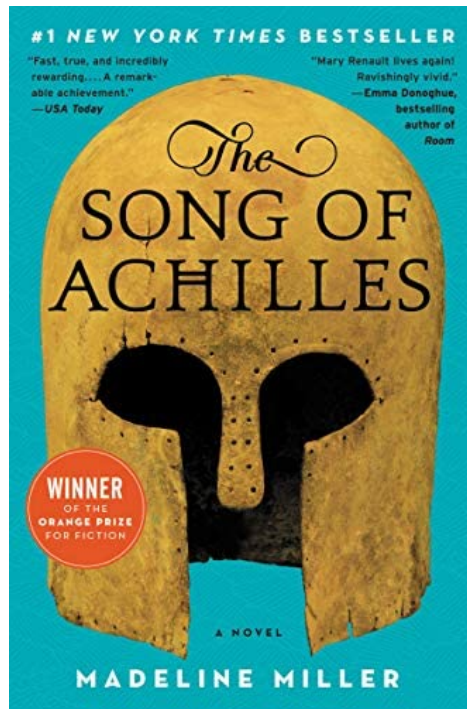
Kingsolver, Barbara. *The Poisonwood Bible*. Paw Prints, 2008.



*The Poisonwood Bible* is set in 1959, during the period of time in which rampant colonization of Africa by European powers was still in full swing. The novel centers around the four daughters of a baptist preacher: Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May. All four girls exist under the thumb of their fanatical father, and find that the Congo and its people challenge their views and allow the girls to finally find their freedom and follow their own respective paths in life to happiness. Like *Journey for a Princess*, this book is a coming of age that features young women who must travel far from home on a journey of self discovery, but has the benefit of being set much closer to the present day and is therefore much easier to research historically. While the book focuses on the time period rather than any one event, the freedom that the girls find is contrasted by the people of the Belgian Congo fighting for their own independence, which they gained in 1960, right in the middle of the novel. I will admit one pitfall that, in my opinion, the book suffers due to being written from the perspective of a white family who effectively are colonizers, despite being helped by the Congo, and at least two of the girls helping it in return. While Leah marries a Congolese man, Anastole, and the two devote themselves to helping the people around them in the fight for independence, we still are seeing this history through a white lens. However, I believe even with this issue, the book has a lot of merit, especially on the overall connection between mankind and nature.

The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller

Miller, Madeline. *The Song of Achilles*. Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2022.



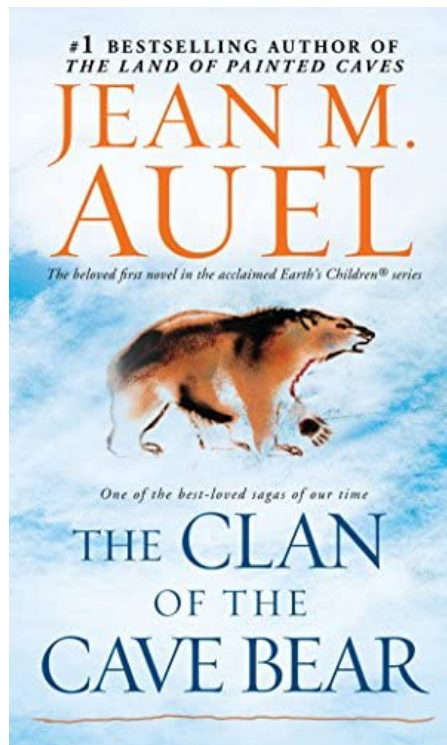
While myth might not be seen as historical fiction, the Trojan War has evidence for having actually happened, though obviously not as exactly described in the Iliad. Thus, I count *The Song of Achilles* as historical fiction not only for this, but for how the Trojan War and its myths continue to influence the relationship between Greece and Turkey to this day.

*The Song of Achilles* is notable for how it portrays Achilles and Patrocles relationship as a distinctly queer one, which has been the center of scholarly debate for some time. W.M. Clark reports in the article "Achilles and Patrocles in Love", that while many scholars in antiquity were adamant about the homosexual nature of the relationship, modern scholars often disregard this entirely or excuse it as being misinterpreted. The debate about the prevalence of queer people in

history has been a heated one in academia for some time, and often evidence of queer relationships is excused by historians as the two being “close friends,” and that the definition of friendship was different with different contexts back then. *The Song of Achilles*, however, explores that queer history fully.

The Clan of the Cave Bear by Jean Auel:

Auel, Jean M. *The Clan of the Cave Bear*. Crown Publishers, 1980.



*The Clan of the Cave Bear* is an interesting example that I feel pressed to include due to how unique it is. This book is historical fiction, but it takes place in prehistoric times, during the Late Pleistocene when Europe was mostly inhabited by Neanderthals, and when modern (Cro-Magnon) humans were beginning to inhabit the area. The book centers on a young girl named Ayla, who is separated from her mother and adopted by a tribe of Neanderthals. She faces

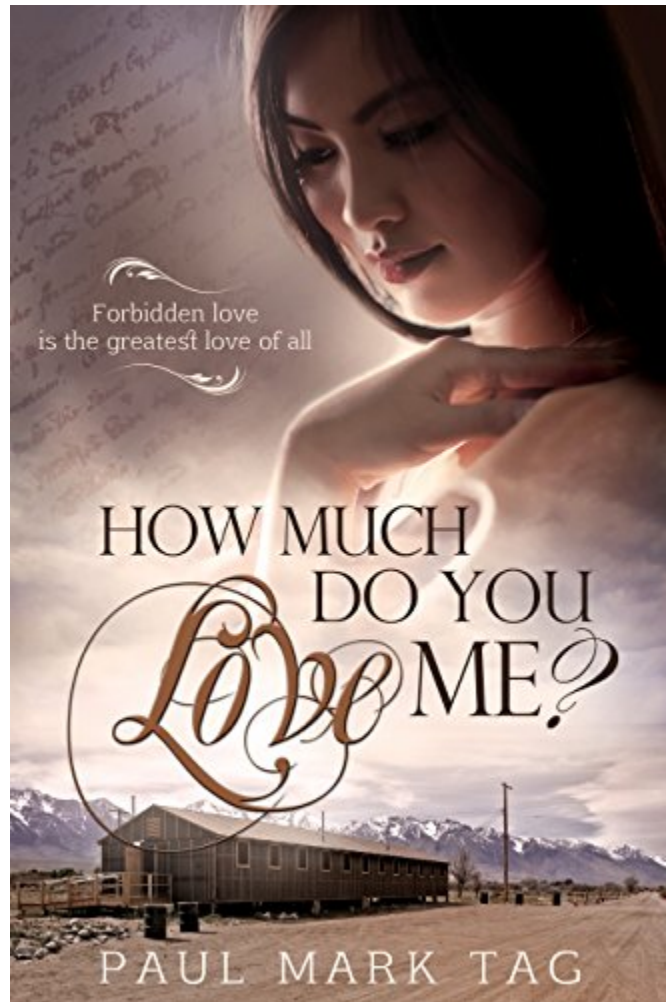
a mixture of kindness and persecution, and bears what is essentially the first hybrid child, her son Druc. The book is extremely brutal and has a bittersweet ending; the man who assaulted Ayla becomes the tribes leader, banishing Ayla to go back to her own people. However, her son is forced to stay behind with his father, which leads to resentment in later books and, thematically, the downfall of Neanderthals as a whole.

This book demonstrates one of the major pitfalls with historical fiction: the further back you go, the less information you have to work with. Most of the events depicted in *The Clan of the Cave Bear* are likely completely fabricated. They may have been based on evidence of truth, but ultimately there is no way to know. In fact, recent research has disproved aspects of the story: Auer's Neanderthals do not speak conventionally, but use sign language to communicate, because it was believed that Neanderthals did not possess the ability to talk. In reality, Neanderthals did possess a hyoid bone, which is needed for the development and formation of sounds and language, making it likely that Neanderthals could speak verbally. (Arensburg, 1989).



How Much Do You Love Me by Paul Mark Tag

Tag, Paul M. *How Much Do You Love Me?* Sweetwater Books, an Imprint of Cedar Fort, Inc., 2014.

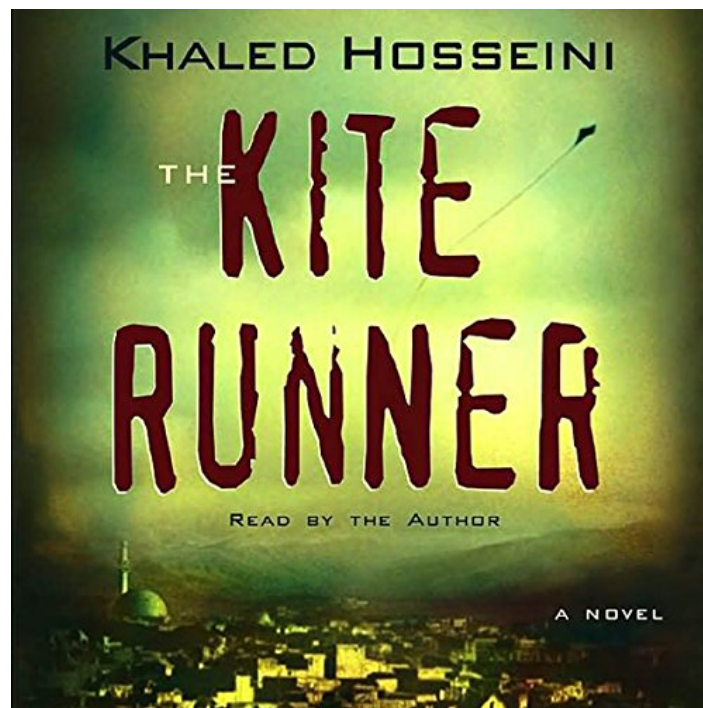


I actually found this book because the author was doing book signings at a Barends and Noble, and I went in with my dad to visit the Starbucks there. *How Much Do You Love Me* is a historical romance, taking place during the Japanese Internment Crisis of World War 2. The story is told in two parts: from the perspective of Keiko, a Japanese woman, and her white lover James, and the prejudice they face as James goes to war while Keiko is sent to an internment

camp. The other half of the story is told by Kazuko and her younger brother as they uncover what really happened at the internment camp, and the truth behind the death of their aunt Misaki. There is a twist at the end that recontextualizes the entire story, and makes it incredibly entertaining to go back and read. One problem I found was that the text seemed a bit light on the more bitter details behind the truth of internment, but when speaking to the author, I was made aware that some of the information was hard to come by. Many people are still very divorced from the Japanese Internment, and this book is a wonderful way to recontextualize that.

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini

Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. Doubleday Canada, 2022.

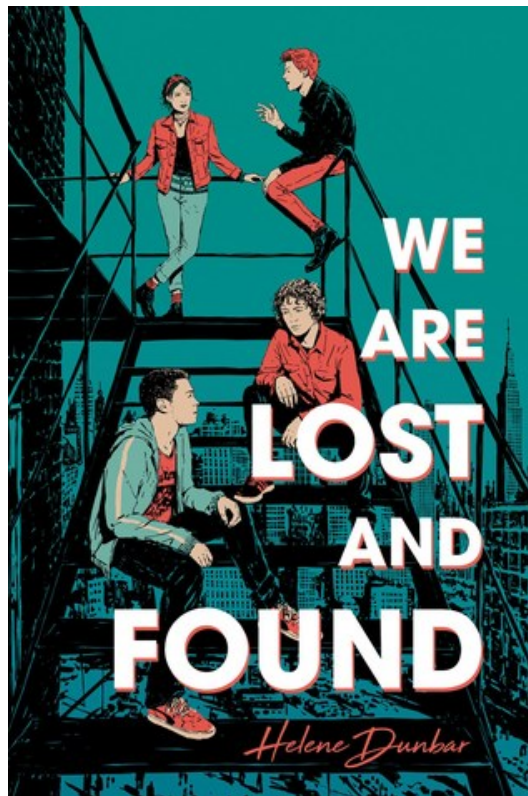


*The Kite Runner* centers on the conflict in Afghanistan and the war that needlessly decimated the country. While I do consider this historical fiction, the fact that this was written by

an Afghan-American author who based most of this off of his own accounts puts it slightly into memoir territory. The central character is Amir, who details his peaceful life in Afghanistan that quickly turned chaotic, his immigration to the U.S., and his memories of Hasan, a childhood friend who becomes pivotal in Amir's life. This book is much closer to us in time: many of us remember the rampant news stories concerning the war in Afghanistan, even if none of us can name what the war was truly over. Many of us do not understand the reason behind the war and while this answers no questions on that, it does put into perspective the lives of the people affected.

We are Lost and Found by Helene Dunbar

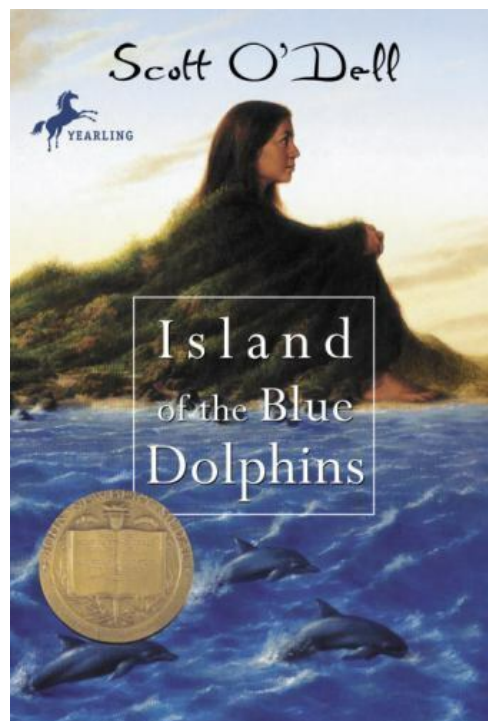
Dunbar, Helene. *We Are Lost and Found*. Sourcebooks Fire, 2020.



I focused on this book for my book talk, but I'm putting it here because it is a wonderful example of historical fiction, especially about a time that is very rarely discussed. The AIDS crisis was not only horrifying for the people who were affected, but it was swept away incredibly quickly and continues to be a shameful secret, even with today's modern medicine meaning that someone with HIV can live a very long life, bear children, work and essentially live happily. At the time, getting AIDS was literally a death sentence, and in the book, AIDS is a specter that hangs over all of the characters, especially James who witnessed death first-hand because of it. The author spent a good deal of time researching this period, and I feel this is important to speak about.

Island of the Blue Dolphins by Scott O'Dell

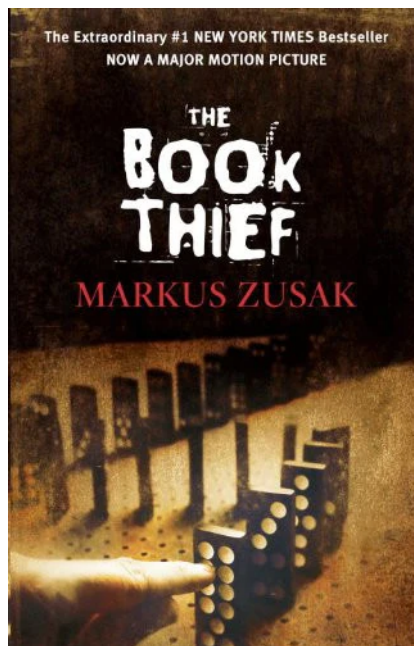
O'Dell, Scott. *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. Puffin, 2016.



*Island of the Blue Dolphins* is deceptive with its ending; where initially we are led to believe we are reading a story about a young woman surviving on an island all alone, abandoned by her tribe and eventually being rescued, the book subtly hints at the true story: the dislocation and kidnapping of natives from their home, disrupting and destroying their way of life, and leaving a barren land in their wake. There is a follow-up at the end of the book, detailing the main character's fate: that upon being taken to the missions with her people, Karana became extremely sick due to the sudden change in her diet. She is left untreated, and dies less than two weeks after her "rescue".

The Book Thief by Markus Zusak

Zusak, Markus. *The Book Thief*. Picador/Pan Macmillan Australia, 2019.



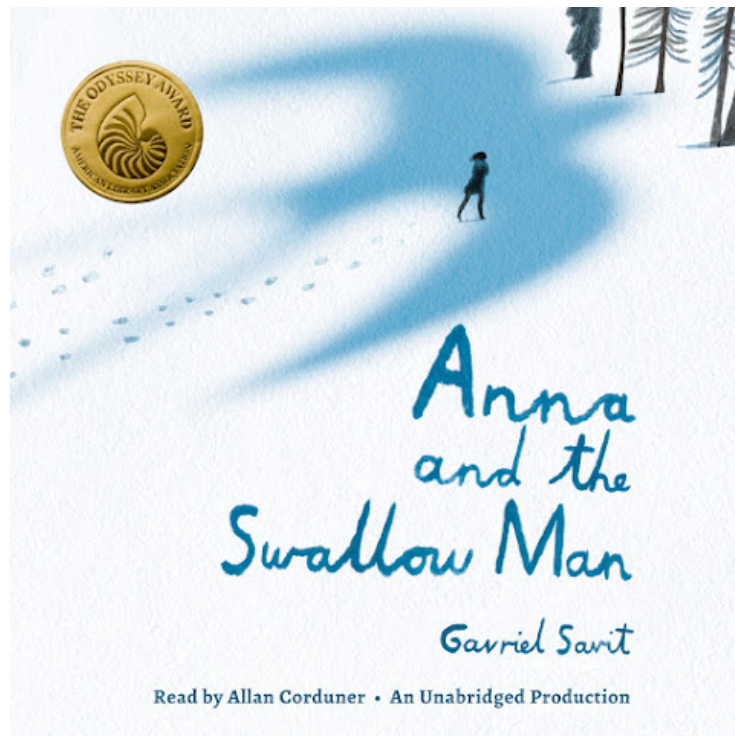
*The Book Thief* is commonly taught and read by young adults in schools, and the experiences of people living in Nazi Germany are often explored in historical fiction, and I believe the quote at



the very end explains why: Death tells the main character as he collects her soul “I am haunted by humans,” and the book does heavily focus on the duality of humanity, its propensity for amazing good and incredible evil. Rarely do we have a more perfect example of this than the events of World War 2.

Anna and the Swallow Man by Gavriel Savit

Savit, Gavriel. *Anna and the Swallow Man*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2017.

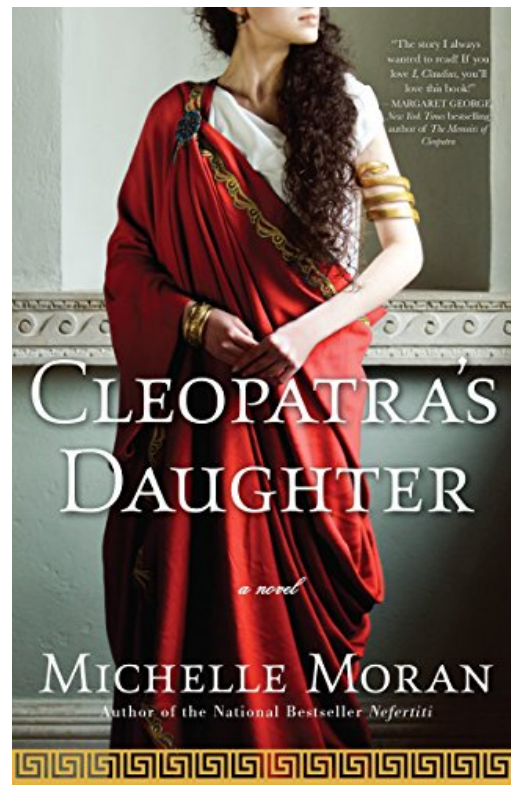


*Anna and the Swallow Man* is told from the perspective of a small girl, also experiencing World War 2 and the death of her father at the hands of the Nazis. Yet again, we see the exploration of the utter depravity of human nature, but also the magic we hold in us, as Anna jaunts through the book as though she were in a fairytale. Telling a historical fiction story by way of fairytale puts it in relation with many myths; indeed, most myths are based on history, and

inversely, many historical events are later said to be myth. With the rise in Holocaust denial throughout America, this is an important distinction to make to young viewers.

### Cleopatra's Daughter by Michelle Moran

Moran, Michelle. *Cleopatra's Daughter: A Novel*. Broadway Paperbacks, 2010.



The story of Cleopatra ends in tragedy, but many are not aware that she had many children with her lovers, including a daughter named Cleopatra Selene. The story focuses on this young woman in a Game of Thrones style story, detailing the girl's experience being torn from her homeland and forcibly relocated to Rome. Historical accounts detail that Selene and her twin brother were chained and dragged behind an effigy of their dead mother upon coming to Rome (Roller, 2003), and the story begins with such an account. Fortunately, the life of such a spectacle

as Cleopatra's daughter was heavily recorded, so we have many documents of not only her life, but of the life of her daughter.

#### Final Thoughts:

I love history almost as much as I love reading, and esoteric history I especially appreciate. I love speculation and conjecture, and historical fiction gives me that in droves. It is, inherently, fiction, and while based in real events, it has been reinterpreted through a hundred different lenses. However, historical fiction provides us with something inherently valuable: the ability to reach back into the past and identify with the people of that time. I think we tend to forget that the people of antiquity, or during World War 2, or across the world, are human just the same as us.

#### Additional Citations:

Arensburg, B et al. "A Middle Palaeolithic human hyoid bone." *Nature* vol. 338,6218 (1989): 758-60. doi:10.1038/338758a0

Clarke, W. M. "Achilles and Patroclus in Love." *Hermes*, vol. 106, no. 3, 1978, pp. 381–96. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4476069>. Accessed 5 Dec. 2022.

Roller, Duane W. "Kleopatra Selene." *The World of Juba II and Kleopatra Selene*, 2004, pp. 92–106., <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203321928-9>.



Nilsen, Alleen Pace, et al. *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. Pearson, 2014.