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Historical Fiction in Young Adult Literature

Good Young Adult Historical fiction is described in *Literature for Today's Young Adults*¹ by many strong points. The first being “a setting that is integral to the story,” this means that in order for a book to be considered historical fiction it must be set in a historical time and place. Not only must the setting be historical, it must be “An authentic rendition of the time, place, and people being featured.” Young adult readers would not want to immerse themselves in anything less than a complete setting. To write historical fiction an author must know about the era in which they are trying to immerse the reader so that “He or she can be comfortably creative without making mistakes.” This is to say that the author may elaborate on a historical story without butchering all the historic details. The author must create a story that is both authentic and creative in a way where the reader emerges from the piece feeling as if they know an event or figure from history personally. It is mentioned *In Literature for Today's Young Adults* that “Readers...[should feel] as if they have lived [in the time period] for at least a few hours.” It is important for the reader to be able to relate to a historical fiction through setting as well as characters. In any and all fiction it is a universal fact that the characters must be relatable in some form. Readers must be able to identify with a character even on tiny note. In Historical Fiction for young adults, the main characters must be recognizable from a historical perspective but also alluring to young readers. As a result most historical fiction centers on a well-known time in history or a notable person from a historical era.

¹ All subsequent quotations except the one by Laurie Halse Anderson are taken from chapter 8 of *Literature for Today's Young Adults* as shown on your website.

Ever since I was a child I found that anything historical immediately grabbed my attention. From the time I could read I voraciously devoured all kinds of literature, over time I discovered that I truly enjoyed historical fiction. When I was growing up the young adult choices for historical fiction were limited. There was many times where I would be looking for good historical fiction and would become disappointed because I found the young adult section material to be too cliché and limited. Before I knew it I was handed adult historical fiction by my local librarian. The first book I recollect reading which initiated me into my transition of literature was *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Tracy Chevalier. Reading this book was the first time historical fiction made sense to me. I felt that Chevalier took an obscure event in history and wove an elaborate tale around the event. Her characters are believable and the plot is a unique take on one of the most mysterious and loved paintings in history. Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* put the power of the writer in perspective for me. Chevalier took every creative license with her story but as a reader I didn't feel cheated or short changed with how she chose to outline her plot or characters. I chose this as one of my main works because even though it is not classified as a young adult piece of literature, *Literature for Today's Young Adults* classifies it as a common work referred to young adults by teachers and librarians. The general consensus that it is a considered a book to be referred to young adults has to do with both the subject matter and the age of the protagonist. Griet is sixteen year old hired to work in the home of Johannes Vermeer. She is naïve, and learns about the world in a way that many young adults can be able to relate to.

The second work I chose to focus on is one of my all-time favorite books, *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden. Much like *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, this work is about a young girl who faces adversity and learns about herself against the back drop of a pre WWII Japan. As a

reader I came away feeling as if I had been transported to a different place and time after reading *Memoirs of a Geisha*. As a writer I find Golden's work an amazing piece of historical fiction and find that it meets all of the standards outlined by *Literature for Today's Young Adults* for good historical fiction. Sayuri, the main character, progresses from childhood to adulthood throughout the novel. She makes countless sacrifices to succeed in Kyoto and become one of the most renowned Geishas of her time. The story actively follows her adolescence which would be age appropriate for teenagers reading the book and catalogues her struggles maturing in a very sexually aware environment. It also shows her own maturation into a Geisha, to being her own woman and becoming insistent on taking control of her own life. It is clear that Golden adequately researched Geishas and gives the reader a clear vision of an example of their life. By placing the story in the early 1900's he also successfully shows the effects of war on the lifestyle. As a reader I felt that even though the novel was not specifically on WWII, the effects of the characters are pivotal and show a raw take on the reality of war and how it can effect ones environment and personal life.

The two texts above although not specifically for young adults are suitable for teenagers who want to branch out of generic princess themed series. For a younger audience I have included two works by Karen Cushman that detail young women in medieval England. Both *Catherine, Called Birdy* and *The Midwife's Apprentice*, detail a Medieval lifestyle that is not within the confines of a palace or a court. This is refreshing for readers of the genre who are used to reading about monarchs and soon to be teenage rulers. For those more interested in Kings, Queen, Princess, and Princesses I have also included a few works by Carolyn Meyer from her series about young royals. I specifically chose the Tudor emphasis because I love the Tudor Period and am currently writing a Novel about Anne Boleyn, her subject in *Doomed Queen*

Anne. Her series in my opinion is for a younger audience and would be a great introduction to Tudor history. She writes in a way that make famous figures such as Elizabeth I, Anne Boleyn, and Catherine of Aragon seem personable, all while maintaining a sense of historical accuracy. For those interested in history closer to home, I also included *Fever 1793* by Laurie Halse Anderson. Anderson is argueably one of the most well-known young adult authors of our time, and I was curious to see what her take on history was. I was surprised to find that Laurie Halse Anderson is an advocate of the genre and is aiming to make the historical fiction as popular as fantasy or science fiction.

Historical fiction is a beautiful but vastly overlooked area of literature. In respect to Young Adults, I felt as if the selection was slightly limited when compared to science fiction or fantasy. Historical fiction is just like any other fiction because it details people and places. Historical Fiction can be used to inspire empathy and sensitivity to people in different settings and cultures. It can also serve to be informative and teach about other times. As Laurie Halse Anderson said “I believe historical fiction can become just as popular as fantasy. ..Both fantasy and historical fiction allow readers to examine the human condition from a safe distance, apart and away from their daily lives.”² If more historical fiction was marketed as being positive and not dry and dull I think it many more people would write it. Until then it is up to the author to present what our society can consider as boring, as something fun, immersive, and worthwhile to allow a reader to explore different places, times, and people all from the comfort of their own lives.

² Halse Anderson, Laurie. “Good Historical Fiction=Historical thrillers.” *Mad Woman in the Forest*. Wordpress.7 October 2010.Web. 11 May 2013.

Annotated Bibliography

Chevalier, Tracy. *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. New York: Dutton, 1999. Print.

Girl with a Pearl Earring centers on Vermeer's prosperous Delft household during the 1660s. When Griet, the novel's quietly perceptive heroine, is hired as a servant, turmoil follows. First, the 16-year-old narrator becomes increasingly intimate with her master. Then Vermeer employs her as his assistant--and ultimately has Griet sit for him as a model (summary is adapted from goodreads.com).

This is a great example of Historical fiction because Chevalier takes a question from history and spins an elaborate story from it. She is familiar enough with the time period to where the setting is believable and the reader feels transported, yet the story is original enough so the history doesn't overshadow the characters. Griet goes against what other people in the book want in order to help the painter she really cares about. When a crisis erupts from her sitting for Vermeer, she is resilient and starts anew. This book can be significant for young adults because it shows the life goes on, and what can at one point seem like a disaster can actually just be turning point.

Golden, Arthur. *Memoirs of a Geisha: A Novel*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997. Print.

The protagonist of this peerlessly observant first novel is Sayuri, one of Japan's most celebrated geisha. We follow Sayuri from her childhood in an impoverished fishing village, where in 1929, she is sold to a representative of a geisha house, who is drawn by the child's unusual blue-grey eyes. From there she is taken to Gion, the pleasure district of Kyoto. She is nine years old. In the years that follow, as she works to pay back the price of her purchase, Sayuri will be schooled in

the art of becoming a Geisha. She will also acquire a magnanimous tutor and a venomous rival (summary is adapted from goodreads.com).

This historical fiction is an example of an adult book that is suitable for young adults because it is a coming of age story. The story is not greater in explicitness than any other Young Adult novel, and Golden's work is a beautifully told story. There are many themes that are young adult appropriate in *Memoirs of a Geisha* such as rivalry, love, free will, and destiny. Like *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, *Memoirs of Geisha* seems to transport the reader back in time to an incomparable period in Japan's history. The story deals with a before and after WWII setting in a way that isn't intimidating because it focuses on the protagonists struggles rather than a nations struggles.

Rees, Celia. *Witch Child*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick, 2001. Print.

Mary Newbury's story begins in 1659, the year her grandmother is hanged in the public square as a witch. Mary narrowly escapes a similar fate, only to face intolerance and new danger among the Puritans in the New World. How long can she hide her true identity? Will she ever find a place where her healing powers will not be feared? (summary adapted from goodreads.com).

The first Young Adult work on our list, *Witch Child* is a darker, more mature read. *Witch Child*, is a book about the Salem Witch trials but it is unique in the way where the protagonist does actually have powers. This would be a good transitional read for those who like fantasy because it does have descriptions of magic. It also details the life of the puritans versus the Native Americans so readers have the advantage of getting a taste of two cultures in one context.

Cushman, Karen. *The MidWife's Apprentice*. New York; Harper Trophy. 1996. Print

Beetle is rescued by a midwife named Jane and starts working for her for food. Beetle works continuously and tirelessly for Jane and comes to learn the practice of midwifery. She helps Jane deliver several babies and becomes quite successful over time. She starts to become quite popular among village people and Jane starts to trust her. When Jane sprains her ankle, Beetle must take over the practice and starts referring to herself as Alyce. After she fails to deliver a child safely and must call on Jane for assistance Alyce leaves her place as midwife and goes to work at Inn. Over time she realizes Midwifery is her true calling and she begs Jane to let her continue her practice (summary adapted from goodreads.com).

Cushman's work seems to be more character driven than plot driven, which is a sign of fantastic fiction. It is refreshing when Young Adult Fiction explores the life of a person who is not widely known. In this case our protagonist is completely fictional and represents the life of a lower middle class medieval woman. This is also a work where the protagonist is on a quest to find her true identity. Cushman provides amazing details about Medieval England, and the book stands out due to the facts about the practice of medieval midwifery which helps to drive the story forward and does not put a lag on the plot.

Cushman, Karen. Catherine Called Birdy. New York; Harper Trophy. 2004. Print.

In the 1290, Catherine is growing up the daughter of Baron in a Manor in England. When she is given away in betrothal Catherine becomes defiant and is determined to drive each suitor away. A year goes by and her plots to avoid marriage succeed until her match is made official with a middle aged man who has previously been married. When the day comes when she must accept this man her betrothed she runs away and finds it does no good. She realizes her father holds

complete authority and can physically force her into marriage (summary adapted from goodreads.com).

The strong themes throughout *Catherine, Called Birdy* are why many young adults have been enjoying this book since it was released. The book is told in first person in diary form. Birdy struggles to be accepted by her family but is a victim of the constraints of her time. Birdy details her hatred for her parents, which younger or all teens may identify with, she is frequently temperamental, and she is capable of scheming to get what she wants. Birdy is a stereotypical teenager living in another era. This can cross the divide for young people into historical fiction.

Halse Anderson, Laurie. *Fever* 1793. New York; Aladdin. 2000. Print.

Its summer 1793, and the streets of Philadelphia are abuzz with mosquitoes and rumors of fever. Down near the docks, many have taken ill, and the fatalities are mounting. Mattie's concerns of fever are all but overshadowed by dreams of growing her family's small business into a thriving enterprise. But when the fever begins to strike closer to home, Mattie's struggle to build a new life must give way to a new fight-the fight to stay alive (summary accredited to goodreads.com).

This story details a time in American History that is fatal. It would be a great book to use in addition to American History course because at times American History can be dry if overly taught. This book would be fantastic as a supplemental read or on its own because it shows the struggle to survive with an outbreak of disease centuries ago. The story is about death but it also shows the difficult decisions a teenager must make for her own good and for the wellbeing of the family business. It illustrates the maturation of a teenager as she grows into a business savvy woman. The story is told from different perspectives and angles so it gives a very well rounded portrayal of living in a time period where people were dying in hundred from yellow fever.

Zusack, Marcus. *The Book Thief*. Knopf Books. 2005. Print.

It is 1939. Liesel Meminger is a foster girl living outside of Munich, who scratches out a meager existence for herself by stealing books. With the help of her accordion-playing foster father, she learns to read and shares her stolen books with her neighbors during bombing raids as well as with the Jewish man hidden in her basement (summary adapted from goodreads.com and Ixchel Baeza's book talk).

Although the protagonist, Liesl is stealing in this story, she is stealing books and information. She is daring to be bold in a time when people were gunned down for the mildest disobedience. She is willing to put her life in danger to pursue what she thinks is right and her passion. Told within the context of Nazi Germany, the story is darker, as it is told from the perspective of death. The narration from death could spark a discussion between children and parents or students and teachers about the creative use of death as a narrator, and how it contributes to a story about the holocaust.

Meyer, Carolyn. *Beware Princess Elizabeth*. 2001. Print.

Elizabeth Tudor's teenage years are hardly those of a fairy-tale princess. Her father has beheaded her mother; her jealous half-sister has her locked away in the Tower of London; and her only love has betrayed her in his own quest for the throne(summary adapted from goodreads.com).

Meyer takes one of the most recognizable faces from history and gives her a teenage voice. It is easy to see how the life of Elizabeth I can seem distant and confusing. The tower of London is a

common setting for fiction and the monarchy of England has been almost devalued due to the constant limitations put on them by some literature. Meyer gives Elizabeth a voice readers can identify with. Her struggles seem more family oriented since they are told from her perspective. Meyer makes Elizabeth I's early political and personal easy to understand for younger readers and clarifies her place in history while sticking to historical accuracy.

Meyer, Carolyn. *Doomed Queen Anne*. 2002. Print.

Though born without great beauty, wealth, or title, Anne Boleyn blossomed into a captivating woman. She used her wiles to win the heart of England's most powerful man, King Henry VIII, and to persuade him to defy everyone, including his own wife, to make her his new queen. But Anne's ambition proved to be her fatal flaw (summary adapted from goodreads.com).

Also by Carolyn Meyer, this book tells the story of Elizabeth I's mother Anne Boleyn. True to Meyer's style it is very historically accurate and deals with fatal flaws in people, particularly the protagonist. It deals with rivalry, envy, greed, love, and family. It shows a younger Henry VIII which is often overlooked by history and is an important aspect to Tudor history which is often forgotten by many classrooms. Although History considers Anne Boleyn to be greedy and overly ambitious I think as a reader that she was actually a very strong woman. I find it disappointing that with all research Meyer did about Anne Boleyn that she considered to portray her as almost evil and fatally flawed. However, Meyer does give Anne a voice that is different from any other woman in history. The book could give young people a chance to discuss why women who are different are portrayed as 'power hungry,' in fiction. Readers could ponder what effect Anne's unique personality had on how others viewed her in her time and in our present time.

Meyer, Carolyn. *Patience Princess Catherine*. 2004. Print.

England anxiously awaits Prince Arthur's betrothed—the Spanish princess who will be its future queen. But when Arthur dies not long after the wedding, Catherine of Aragon's fate becomes uncertain. Will the king and Catherine's parents arrange a marriage with Arthur's brother, Henry, or will she return to Spain a widow? Through all this turmoil, the young princess's resolve remains unshaken (summary adapted from goodreads.com).

In this book Catherine of Aragon is faced with serious obstacles. She comes to England and is immediately poverty stricken. She cannot have the type of life that she is accustomed too and grows from her adversity. Henry VIII's first wife is often remembered as being an overly rigid and religious old lady, but here Catherine is shown as spirited and creative in her own survival in a new place. The character is inspiring, and the history of Arthur dying and Henry having to wed Catherine is important for young adults to know to clarify the ultimate schism of England with the Catholic Church.

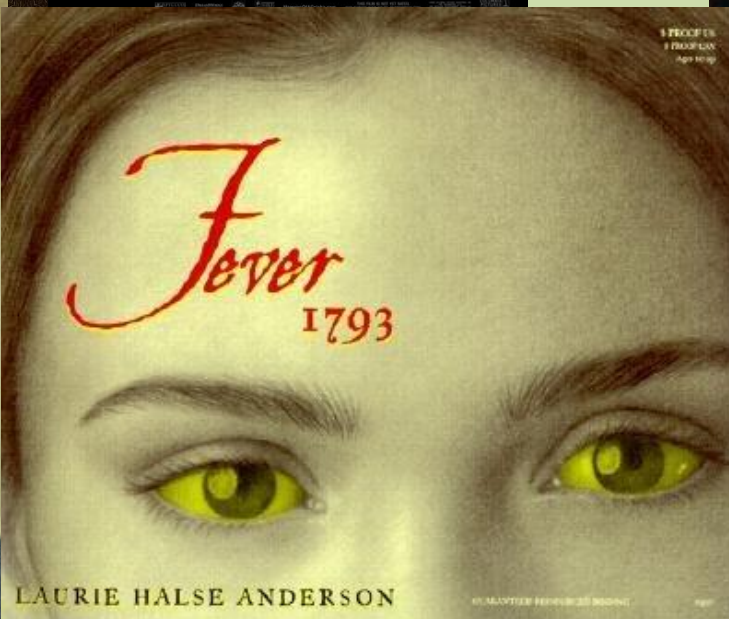
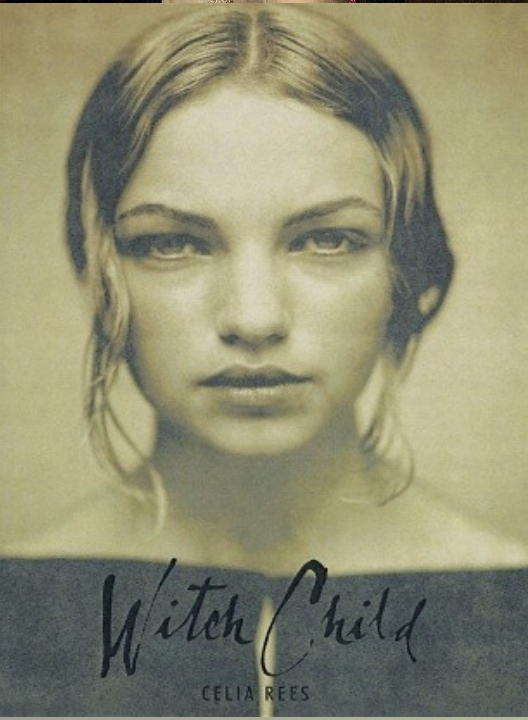
Longshore, Katherine. *Brazen*. Viking Juvenile. 2014. Print.

Mary Howard has always lived in the shadow of her powerful family. But when she's married off to Henry Fitzroy, King Henry VIII's illegitimate son, she rockets into the Tudor court's inner circle. Mary and "Fitz" join a tight clique of rebels who test the boundaries of court's strict rules with their games, dares, and flirtations. The more Mary gets to know Fitz, the harder she falls for him, but is forbidden from seeing him alone. The rules of court were made to be pushed...but pushing them too far means certain death. Is true love worth dying for? (summary accredited to goodreads.com).

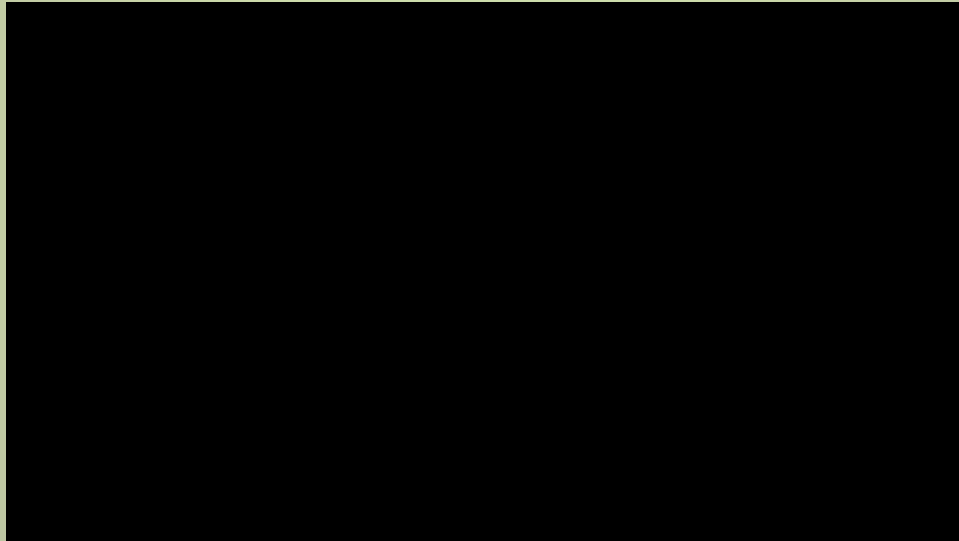
Brazen, shows the politics behind the Tudor court and the reasoning behind many of the matches that were made. Mary Howard must learn to understand these politics so she can out smart them in order to be with the young man she loves. Told by an outsider of the Tudor court, this perspective could give the reader a less biased, more factual account of the effect of court politics. It could also serve an insight into the royals of the time not previously expanded upon by the other Tudor works in the bibliography. Mary and Henry Fitzroy fight to be together and work against a greater power that tries to separate them, which both is conducive for the reader on personal level to witness such a strong protagonist facing a difficult obstacle. Also it gives a further look into the Tudor court and into Henry VIII and his motivations behind his decisions as told through the eyes of a young girl. Young people can connect with being told they're too young to be with someone they care about. They may feel the need to fight authority on the issue much like Mary and Henry Fitzroy fight the Tudor court in order to be together.

Historical Fiction in the YA Genre





Laurie Halse Anderson on Historical Fiction



Memoirs of a Geisha

- Recommended for YA
- Setting integral to the story
(WWII in Japan)
 - Character Driven
- Tells history in a way that is palatable for the reader
 - Stays true to facts
 - Detail Oriented
 - Remains Creative

Memoirs of a Geisha

By Arthur Golden



"I think that all of us who write about the past feel a deep and haunting connection with it.

Socrates said that all knowledge is possessed by the soul and it's just a matter of remembering it. I believe that to be true."

—Karen Essex