

Historical Fiction

Historical fiction is defined as a story that is set at least a generation (25 years) prior to when it was written. By reading historical fiction children experience life in the past vicariously, gain opportunities for critical thinking, make judgments about the past with insights from a historical perspective, see the interdependence of humankind, and develop a feeling for the continuity of life. The writing style of historical fiction is of two types. Some fictional stories are based on actual people and recorded events of history. Other stories are based on social history with no reference given to actual people or recorded events. The former style is based on reconstruction of the past through research; the latter is based on recreation of the past through memory. Both forms are fully acceptable, but the stories based on real people and events must adhere to greater standards of accuracy. Some works of fantasy include travel to historical times and events.

Criteria for evaluating historical fiction include telling a good story, balancing fact with fiction, being accurate and authentic, integrating the research with the story, adhering to the true facts of history, showing when possible more than one point of view, reflecting the spirit of the times even though modern views may seem enlightened, using authentic language of the time period, and illuminating problems of today through an examination of the past.

Some Terms to Know

Archaic words	words that were commonly used in an earlier time that are very uncommon in present-day language.
Authenticity	genuineness, accuracy; standards of authenticity must be applied most rigorously to stories that give a prominent place to real people and real events.
Conflicting loyalties	not being sure which of two opposing viewpoints to adopt.
Contradiction and distortion of facts	misrepresentation of historical facts.
Cultural perspective	the perspective of a cultural group.
Historical perspective	the perspective of recorded history.
Recorded events	historical events that have been documented in writing.
Social history	the history of the way people lived and interacted; in historical fiction, the facts of social history dictate the background for how the characters live and make their living; what they wear, eat, study, or play; and what conflicts they must resolve.

Guide to Evaluating Historical Fiction¹

- Does the book tell a good story?
- Is fact blended with fiction in such a way that the background is subordinate to the story?
- Is the story as accurate and authentic as possible?
- Does the author provide background information in an afterword or author's note that will help readers distinguish between what is fact and what has been fictionalized?
- Does the story accurately reflect the values and norms of the culture depicted?
- Does the author avoid any contradiction or distortion of the known events of history?
- Are background details authentic, in keeping with accurate information about the period?
- Does the story accurately reflect the values and spirit of the time?
- Are different points of view on the issues of the time presented or acknowledged?
- Does the dialogue convey a feeling of the period without seeming artificial? Does it reflect character as well as setting?
- Is the language of the narrative appropriate to the time, drawing figures of speech from the setting?
- Does the theme provide insight and understanding for today's problems as well as those of the past?

¹ Guide excerpted from *Children's Literature in the Elementary School* by Charlotte Huck.