What are U.S. Secondary School Teachers' Experiences Bringing Literary Works into Their History Classrooms?

Zoe Nuechterlein

Supervisor: Dr. Aliya Khalid

MSc Education (Comparative and International Education)

Department of Education, University of Oxford

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores U.S. secondary school teachers' experiences bringing literary works into their history classrooms. Eight teachers from seven different regions in the US participated in semi-structured interviews. This study reaches three principal conclusions: 1) the inclusion of literary works in history classes can support learner-centered pedagogy, 2) the connection between teaching literary works and helping students develop empathy is not straightforward, and 3) when bringing in literary works, history teachers engage students with multiple types of reading ("emotional" reading, "critical" reading, and "reflexive" reading).

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Glossary of terms

public school *(U.S. context):* state-funded school

private school*:* independent school

secondary school*:* middle and high school (ages ~12-18)

college *(U.S. context):* university (undergraduate)

standards*:* guidance, set by states, on what students in public schools must learn

NJ*:* New Jersey

IN*:* Indiana

NCSS*:* National Council for the Social Studies (US)

social studies*:* includes history, civics, geography, economics, political science, sociology, psychology, anthropology

ELA*:* English Language Arts

CIE*:* Comparative & International Education

LCP*:* learner-centered pedagogy

CUREC*:* The Central University Research Ethics Committee (Oxford)

Introduction

> *"History is made by a texture of humans. It's not made by an individual. History is made by the people who are forgotten…by the people who get up every day and make bread and, you know, make the earthenware bowls out of which one eats one's food..."* - author Lauren Groff (Louisiana Channel, 2025)

How should we tell our nation's story? That has become an extremely controversial question in the United States (Organization of American Historians, 2025). Issues with the ways we learn history in the US became more obvious to me when I moved to Uruguay two months after graduating from college. I lived in Uruguay for one year. It was my first time living abroad. One night, after we returned from a march commemorating Uruguay's *desaparecidos*, my flatmate asked what I'd learned in my history classes about U.S. foreign policy in South America during the Cold War. I hadn't learned anything about that. As for my Uruguayan flatmate, it was a major discussion in his history classes. I started reading about that history and wondered what else was missing from my U.S. curriculum. Two years later, reflecting on the perspective I gained on my home country when I moved to Uruguay, I moved abroad again, this time to the UK for this graduate program in Comparative and International Education. With this research project, I've had the opportunity to continue learning (from a distance) about education systems in my country of origin.

When it comes to teaching history, a major "issue" remains no matter where you're living: history contains multitudes. We simply don't have time to learn everything about the past. When we add a perspective to the narrative taught in schools, we aren't necessarily *rewriting* the narrative, but we are cutting out some traditional perspectives – we have to make sure we're done teaching by the time the bell rings for the next class period. How can we decide what to teach? The quote at the top of this chapter comes from U.S.-American author of historical fiction, Lauren Groff. Groff said that one of her projects as a novelist is "to sort of breathe life back into the kind of person whom history has forgotten" – not recorded historical figures, but the kind of person who might have lived a quieter life during a certain time (Louisiana Channel, 2025). We shouldn't rely on

fictional works when learning the facts of history (the names, the dates, and so on). But history is much more than the names and the dates. By depicting a person's life and consciousness, literary works can humanize history and make it *feel* more real. What happens, then, when we bring literary works into school history classrooms? With this research, I address that broad question. My conversations with eight teachers from across the country made me feel hopeful.

Overview of this dissertation

In the following chapter of this dissertation, I provide a brief summary of the education policy context in the US, exploring examples from two different states. I then consider those examples in light of debates about education and development in CIE. In the next chapter, I consider an important philosophical premise regarding the nature of "historical truth." With that context in mind, I present my research questions. My literature review explores existing studies about literary works in history education and about the relationship between literature and empathy. After outlining my methodology, I present findings from interviews, with two pauses for brief discussions (on the *how* and the *why* of teaching literary works in history class). In my "final discussion" chapter, I present three conclusions emerging from this study.

Policy context in the US

In the US, each of the 50 states (and the District of Columbia) has its own set of standards for education, including history education. *Figure 1*, below, shows a map of the United States, colored based on "the margin between Harris and Trump" in the 2024 presidential election (270toWin, n.d.). The deep red states were "safe states" for the Republicans, and the deep blue states were "safe states" for the Democrats (270toWin, n.d.). I highlight the states' political leanings because in at least the last decade, the way U.S. public schools teach about history has become a political issue (Solman and Fritz, 2025). I added the book icons to this map to mark where this study's eight participants taught.

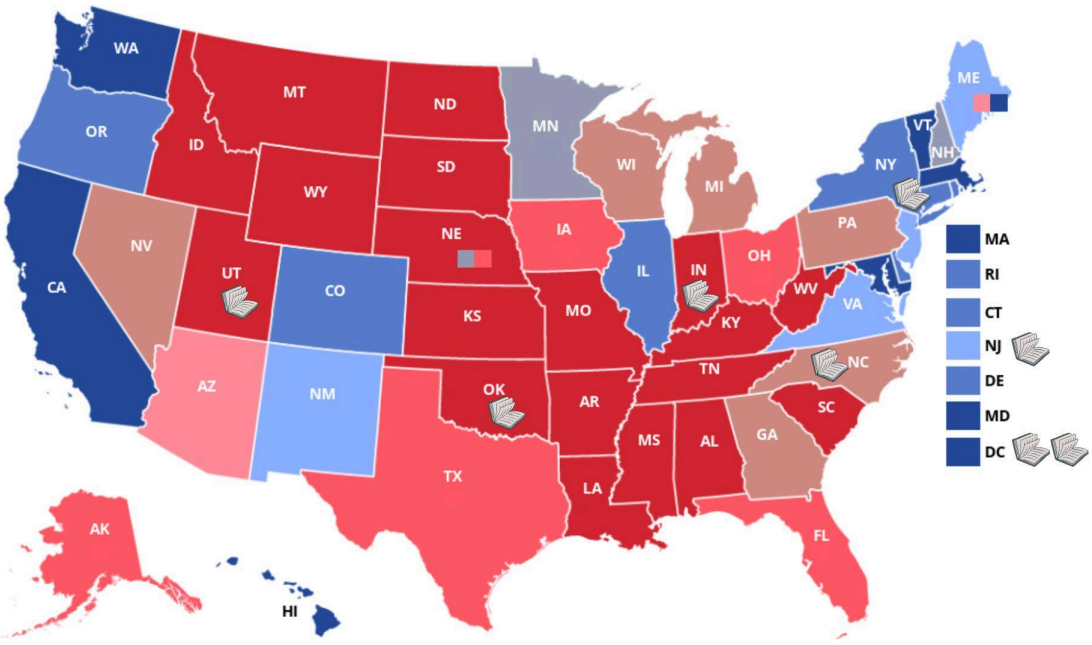

Figure 1: Map of participants in the US

Different states direct educators to teach history in distinct ways. For an example of these differences, we can look at the ways two states direct teachers to cover the U.S. Civil Rights movement. Selections from social studies standards in New Jersey (a blue

state) and Indiana (a red state) are below. One current teacher from New Jersey and one current teacher from Indiana were represented in this study.

New Jersey (last updated 2020)

New Jersey's standards read, "Inquiry-based learning in social studies prepares students to produce and critically consume information in our global society" (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2020, p. 1). New Jersey's focus on "inquiry-based learning" is a nod to its consideration of the National Council for the Social Studies' *C3 Framework,* which I discuss below (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2020, p. 2). New Jersey's Education Department continues: "Today's challenges are complex, have global implications, and are connected to people, places, and events of the past" (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2020, p. 1). It's worth noting that New Jersey clearly states within its school standards that today's social problems are "connected to" historical issues because this view is often rejected by the current Trump administration, which has attacked institutions that aim to "challenge us to confront uncomfortable truths about the past and present" (Organization of American Historians, 2025). New Jersey's Department of Education sets out guidance for interacting with their standards:

> The core ideas are what is most essential for students to learn and represent the knowledge and skills that they should be able to apply to new situations outside of the school experience. Curriculum writers and educators can use these core ideas as the basis for formative, summative, and benchmark assessments. The performance expectations describe what students should know and be able to do. It is expected that curriculum writers and educators will bundle these performance expectations together in meaningful ways as a basis for classroom instruction and to guide the creation of formative, summative, and benchmark assessments.

The standards set out what students should know (and on what content teachers should assess them); curriculum writers and teachers are free to teach this content however they see fit. *Figure 2*, below, shows a selection of "core ideas" and "performance expectations" from the section about "Civil Rights and Social Change (1945 to early 1970s)."

NJ standards: selections from "Civil Rights and Social Change (1945 to early 1970s)"	
Core Idea	Performance Expectations
Social and political systems throughout time have promoted and denied civic virtues and democratic principles.	Analyze the effectiveness of national legislation, policies, and Supreme Court decisions in promoting civil liberties and equal opportunities (i.e., the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, the Equal Rights Amendment, Title VII, Title IX, Affirmative Action, Brown v. Board of Education, and Roe v. Wade).
Since most choices involve a little more of one thing and a little less of something else, economic decision-making includes weighing the additional benefit of the action against the additional cost.	Explain how individuals and organizations used economic measures as weapons in the struggle for civil and human rights (e.g., the Montgomery Bus Boycott, sit downs).
Understanding the interrelated patterns of change by examining multiple events allows for a clearer understanding of the significance of individuals and groups.	Compare and contrast the leadership and ideology of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X during the Civil Rights Movement, and evaluate their legacies.
Historical events and developments were shaped by the unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.	Determine the impetus for the Civil Rights Movement and generate an evidence-based argument that evaluates the federal actions taken to ensure civil rights for African Americans.
Complex interacting factors influence people's perspective.	Determine the extent to which suburban living and television supported conformity and stereotyping during this time period, while new music, art, and literature acted as catalysts for the counterculture movement.

Figure 2: selections from NJ's "Civil Rights and Social Change (1945 to early 1970s)"

Indiana (last updated 2023)

The introduction to Indiana's standards reads, "The Indiana Academic Standards are designed to help educators, parents, students, and community members understand the necessary content for each course, and within each content area domain, to access

employment, enrollment, or enlistment leading to service" (Indiana Department of Education, 2023, p. 2). With this line, Indiana's Department of Education sets its goal as preparing students for future formal roles, whether as an employee, a student, or a member of the military. This goal differs from the New Jersey Department of Education's goal – in New Jersey, standards aimed to ensure that students could "produce and critically consume information" (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2020, p. 1). These two goals highlight differences in ways states conceptualize educational goals. Indiana, like New Jersey, emphasizes that the standards allow some freedom in terms of *how* content is addressed. Instead of referring to curriculum writers and educators, however, Indiana refers to "local school corporations" (meaning Indiana's public-school districts):

> While the Indiana Academic Standards establish key expectations for knowledge and skills and should be used as the basis for curriculum, the standards by themselves do not constitute a curriculum. It is the responsibility of the local school corporation to select and formally adopt curricular tools, including textbooks and any other supplementary materials, that align with Indiana Academic Standards.

Below, in *Figure 3*, is a selection of standards from Indiana's section entitled "The United States in Troubled Times: 1960 to 1980."

IN standards: selections from "The United States in Troubled Times: 1960 to 1980"
Explain the efforts of groups of African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and women to assert their social and civic rights in the years following World War II.
Evaluate various methods and philosophies (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black Panthers, and Malcolm X) to bring about social justice during the Civil Rights Movement.
Assess the social and economic programs of the Kennedy-Johnson era, including policies and legal rulings.
Describe developing trends in science and technology, and explain how they impacted the lives of Americans during the period 1960 to 1980.
Identify and analyze the significance of key decisions of the Warren Court.

Identify the problems confronting different minorities during this period of economic and social change, and describe the solutions to these problems.

Figure 3: selections from IN's "The United States in Troubled Times: 1960 to 1980"

National Council for the Social Studies

To understand the context of history education standards in the US, it is also helpful to consider publications from the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). NCSS is the "largest professional association in the country devoted solely to social studies education" (National Council for the Social Studies, n.d.). According to NCSS, "social studies" include "history, civics, geography, economics, political science, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and law-related education" (National Council for the Social Studies, n.d.). In 2013, NCSS published its *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework*, which it called "guidance for enhancing the rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013, p. 1). The audience for this guidance includes states revising their standards and practitioners looking to strengthen their social studies programs (National Council for the Social Studies, n.d.). The *C3 Framework* focuses on learning through inquiry (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013, p. 12). Particularly relevant for this study is the fact that the *C3 Framework* includes "connections with the English Language Arts/Literacy Common Core Standards" throughout its guidance, encouraging interdisciplinary connections between history and English (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). Additionally, on its website, NCSS promotes books and articles that encourage history teachers to bring literary works into their classrooms, for example, *Inquiry by the Book: Teaching Historical Fiction with the Inquiry Design Model* by Kristy A. Brugar and Annie McMahon Whitlock (2024) (National Council for the Social Studies, n.d.)

Approaches to education and development

In the field of CIE, there have long been debates about the role of education in "development" (Phillips and Schweisfurth, 2007). Two different approaches to development can be observed in the language of New Jersey's and Indiana's standards for history. Aiming to prepare students for the workforce, university enrollment, or military

service, Indiana's standards most closely relate to the human capital theory of development in education. The human capital theory asserts that education is "a good means of...instilling skills, knowledge, and motivations for economic productivity" (Phillips and Schweisfurth, 2007, p. 86). The end goal in Indiana's standards is straightforward: employment, further studies, or service. In contrast, New Jersey's standards relate more closely to the capability approach. Under the capability approach, education helps students develop the "capabilities" to "bring about changes that are meaningful to them" (Phillips and Schweisfurth, 2007, p. 91). In the capability approach as developed by Sen (1999), capabilities are "substantive freedoms" rather than fixed, basic skills (p. 87). As New Jersey more broadly aims to prepare students for "new situations outside of the school experience," there is more freedom and flexibility implied (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2020, p. 1). This study on the teaching of history with literary works fits more neatly in the context of the capability approach – this pedagogy challenges norms rather than providing students with straightforward skills for work after graduation. Still, the standards for both these states are flexible enough for any educator to find ways to adopt this unconventional pedagogy.

'What is historical truth?' and other relevant philosophical background

Conversations about the use of literary works (especially fictional works) in history education touch on foundational philosophical questions about the meaning of historical truth. The meaning of "truth" itself is not without debate (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2025), which further complicates attempts to define "historical truth." In the limited space of this literature review, I will not be able to give these questions the space they deserve. I will, however, provide a brief overview of some of the debates that have informed my thinking about teaching literary works in history classes.

In 1973, Hayden White published his influential book reflecting on the notion of historical truth, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th Century Europe*. In the article "Truth in History and Literature," Ankersmit (2010) wrote that when reflecting on narrative in fiction and historical writing, "everyone will primarily think here of Hayden White, who determined more than any other the course of contemporary philosophy of history" (p. 29). In *Metahistory*, White wrote: "In this theory I treat the historical work as what it most manifestly is: a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse" (p. ix). He continued his argument: "in any field of study not yet reduced (or elevated) to the status of a genuine science, thought remains the captive of the linguistic mode in which it seeks to grasp the outline of objects inhabiting its field of perception" (White, 1973, p. xi). As White implied, it is impossible for a historian to pin down a complete, objective "historical truth" with the modes of communication we have available. To add to this argument, Ankersmit (2010) introduced a hypothetical painting of Napoleon. Ankersmit claimed that this painting would have an object (Napoleon, the real person), a representation of the object (the painting), and the representation's own "represented": the specific aspect of Napoleon depicted in the painting. Ankersmit (2010) elaborated: "suppose that one and the same person is depicted *en face, en profil,* from the backside, etc..." (p. 40). (Next, consider the infinite different facial expressions Napoleon could make, and so on.) Crucially, the real object (Napoleon) and the represented (one aspect of Napoleon) are not equivalent. For any object, there are infinite possibilities for the representation's "represented." In the context of historical writing, Ankersmit (2010)

suggested, representations (historical texts) can only ever represent *aspects* of what really happened – not complete truth (p. 42).

British author of historical fiction Hilary Mantel (2017) also discussed the trouble with "historical truth" as it relates to evidence and language:

> Evidence is always partial. Facts are not truth, though they are part of it – information is not knowledge. And history is not the past – it is the method we have evolved of organizing our ignorance of the past. It's the record of what's left on the record... It's what's left in the sieve when the centuries have run through it... It is no more 'the past' than a birth certificate is a birth, or a script is a performance…

To connect Mantel's (2017) point with White's (1973) writing: Birth certificates, scripts, and works of history are documents whose verbal structures do not fully represent births, performances, or the past. In addition to the limits of language, White (2005) pointed out that many historians today also have the problem of "too much" evidence: "Anyone opening up any topic on 'Google' will find an intimidatingly long list of sources, secondary and primary, that could take a lifetime to examine, much less analyse or interpret" (p. 151). Furthermore, even a lifetime supply of sources could not come close to covering all *aspects* of a certain history. Quoting Shaw (2005), White pointed out that "the full spectrum of life in history" stretches "from individual interiority to the largest historical forces and movements" (p. 175, as cited in White, 2007, p. 150). Ultimately, even if we *could* hypothetically access all those aspects of history, we wouldn't have time to understand and communicate them. That is, the limits of language and records are not the only constraints when it comes to representing a "historical truth" – there is also, of course, *time*.

How do these reflections on "historical truth" inform this project about teaching literary works in history classes? What does it mean to teach "history" if we consider it impossible for experienced scholars of history (let alone secondary school students) to fully grasp "historical truth"? Some scholars have taken these reflections to argue that the border between history and fiction is "fuzzier than as traditionally represented" (Novick, 1998, p. 37). That is not the point I hope to make – it's important to remember that

writing history and writing fiction are two completely different modes. Academic history writing follows a methodology, while novelists write as artists and have no duty to anything other than their imagined characters (Merritt, 2014). Rather, these reflections helped me understand the way I view assessments in history education. If complete historical truth is not accessible, then the extent to which a student has come to "understand history" is not easily measured. That is, perhaps a student doesn't recall a name or date required for a history exam. However, the same student might know other relevant aspects that were not solicited on the test, which they might have learned outside the classroom. Measuring a student's comprehension of historical details taught in the classroom is relatively straightforward. Measuring a student's understanding of a broader historical truth is not – it is not possible for curriculum to cover what Shaw (2005) called "the full spectrum of life in history." That is not to say assessing students' comprehension of foundational aspects of history (such as certain dates) is not important – I believe that of course it is (you have to start somewhere). In this study, however, I'm interested in a different type of historical understanding, one that is more subjective, and less easily measured. Therefore, I have not ventured to research how teaching history with literary works affects measurable student outcomes. Rather, I am interested in teachers' subjective experiences exploring this unconventional pedagogical tool.

My research questions in context

These reflections on history education helped me form an overarching research question: What are U.S. secondary school teachers' experiences bringing literary works into their history classrooms? Additional key questions helped me explore the principal research question:

1) What inspires history teachers to introduce literary materials in their classrooms?

2) What are the logistics of bringing literary materials into history classrooms (especially in public schools)?

3) In what ways does this pedagogical practice shape classroom learning?

The word *experiences* was key for this study. Teachers' experiences are subjective, and at the same time, they provide helpful insights for others working in education, from educators reflecting on pedagogy to policy-makers drafting standards. Thinking reflexively, these actors can understand how others' experiences might apply in their own contexts. Like all of the teachers I interviewed, I am also deeply interested in students' experiences. I do not assume that teachers can speak for their students and their experiences. This study does not present student perspectives directly, and would ideally be read alongside other sources that do. This study considers what teachers have learned while exploring and implementing a unique approach to history education.

Literature Review

Most of the relevant articles I encountered dealt with university contexts, while my focus is secondary school. Perhaps it is intuitive that more of these studies about unconventional pedagogy relate to university education – professors do not have to consider state standards, common assessments, and so on while teaching. These articles still provided helpful insights on the topic. Some scholars, like Levstik (2008), have explored the use of children's literature in elementary school social studies, but I have not drawn from these studies while studying literature in secondary education.[1] One empirical study reported on elementary and middle school teachers' choices of historical fiction in their classes (Whitlock and Brugar, 2022) Quantitative and qualitative data from a survey with 124 respondents suggested that teachers choose specific books for a variety of reasons, from colleague recommendations to personal interest ("I've loved it since I was a child") (Whitlock and Brugar, 2022). My research adds to these findings by considering literary works as primary sources (in addition to considering historical fiction), by describing a high school context (in addition to middle school), and by exploring several teachers' choices and experiences more deeply.

A double-edged sword

One particularly relevant meditation on literary works in history classes came from Clark and Sears (2017).[2] In their exploratory article, Clark and Sears (2017) argued that "in the hands of effective teachers, the double-edged sword of fiction *can be* a valuable and effective tool in the teaching of history" (p. 620) [emphasis mine]. The words "can be" are important here – Clark and Sears (2017) did not report evidence supporting this pedagogical tool; they reflected on reasons why it *can be* "valuable and effective." I agree with the idea that this unconventional source requires careful handling

[1] I have been working part-time at an elementary school while studying for this degree; I am particularly careful not to underestimate the abilities and intelligence of elementary school students! Young students can think deeply about history, but they might not have the literacy skills yet to engage with complicated texts such as classic novels.
[2] While Clark and Sears (2017) focused on fiction, I studied the teaching of all literary works, including, for example, literary memoirs.

to be “effective” in history education. However, I would have worded this argument differently. Referring to “effective teachers,” Clark and Sears (2017) essentially divided teachers into two categories: those who are “effective,” and those who are not. What would it mean to be an “effective” teacher? Surely all teachers are successful in some moments and less successful in others, though successful teaching is an ambiguous concept anyways because success can be measured in countless different ways. To accommodate for the spectrum or ambiguity of “success” in teaching, I would have written something along the lines of: “when approached thoughtfully, fiction can be a valuable tool in the teaching of history.” The language matters because of the claim’s implications. Removing the term “effective teachers” makes it clearer that this tool is available for *all* educators, and that all who do use it should do so with care.

I found the way that Clark and Sears (2017) categorized two ways of teaching literary works to be especially helpful: 1) teaching literature as a primary source, and 2) teaching historical fiction. Primary sources are “raw materials of history”; primary source literary works were written during the period under study (Library of Congress, n.d.). Works of historical fiction are set during a period in which the author did not live (Clark and Sears, 2017). There is potential for overlap here: One could study a work of historical fiction as a primary source if they were studying the period during which the historical fiction was written (rather than the period during which it was set). That is, these two categories describe *ways of teaching* literary works, *not* the literary works themselves. I don’t fully agree, however, with their guidance for teaching within these two categories. Clark and Sears (2017) argued that when it comes to primary sources, a novel represents “one reality” (p. 629) and that it can teach “quotidian details” (p. 628). I would say instead that a novel represents one *imagined* reality. Clark and Sears (2017) wrote that the conversations in Jane Austen novels “did not actually happen, but...feel as if they did,” and so Austen “must have heard, or participated in, versions of such conversations throughout her life” (p. 629). I think we should not underestimate the power of Jane Austen’s (or any writer’s) imagination. We don’t know where all the details of her novels came from, and we should keep that in mind while teaching them – we don’t know if we should accept presented details as “facts.” On teaching historical fiction, Clark and Sears (2017) wrote, “Students can examine what fiction writers say...about what sources they

use and how and compare that to how historians write and talk about using sources" (p. 635). However, unlike academics, fiction writers are under no obligation to report their "methods" or "sources." When they do speak publicly, it is often to promote their books. To me, this exercise in sourcing makes more sense when teaching literary works as primary sources: what do we know about Jane Austen's life, and how might that have affected the way she wrote and the way her work was received? What does that tell us about the place of literature during that historical period?

Literary works in university history classrooms

Corroboration

In the university context, multiple scholars emphasized the value of *corroboration* (in these cases, comparing details from a literary work and other historical sources). Some suggested that the practice of corroboration strengthened students' confidence, which allowed them to become critical readers regardless of the source. One example came from "'All good stories': historical fiction in pedagogy, theory, and scholarship," in which Hower (2018) wrote about her experience teaching Mantel's (2009) bestselling work of historical fiction, *Wolf Hall,* in her undergraduate history classes. She led students to consider literary aspects such as "the narrative arc, character development, dialogue and exposition, tone and voice," and so on (Hower, 2018, p. 85). Considering the text as history, she asked them to "also ruminate on choice: what the novel includes, what it omits, what it changes, and why" (Hower, 2018, p. 85). To ruminate on those omissions and changes, Hower's students had to corroborate Mantel's representation with academic historical sources. Referencing Burt (2007) and Demos (2005), Hower (2018) explained that she made use of the "fidelity model of criticism" in her classroom because "spotting mistakes – especially anachronism – is often the first manifestation of historical knowledge, of feeling 'at home' in a subject, which in turn demonstrates competency and readily transforms into more substantive critique" (p. 87). In Hower's experience, students perceived fiction as "more open to judgment" than conventional historical sources (Hower, 2018, p. 86). She wrote that this impression led her students to produce "incisive commentary" with confidence (Hower, 2018, p. 86). Hower (2018) continued:

> This reaction serves as an instructive stepping stone...they are emboldened to turn a critical eye they once reserved for literature onto academic history, to pose tough questions to foremost scholars; by the same token, they become less dismissive of historical fiction, willing to consider how it might express learned insights. (p. 86)

Similarly, in his essay "Novel Truths: The Things They Carried and Student Narratives about History," Lennon (2007) wrote that reading The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien (1990) "keyed" his undergraduate students "into the ways that we...strive to become resistive readers as we create our own historical stories and understandings when encountering future texts" (p. 178).[3] Lennon (2007) added:

> ...what is truly wonderful about using this text is that students become aware quite quickly of the bias in the reporting of history and become adept at questioning [all] the sources that they use. (p. 178)

Contextualization and sourcing

Discussing the teaching of literary works as primary sources, some professors emphasized the practices of *contextualization* and *sourcing*. Along with corroboration, contextualization and sourcing are key "history-specific strategies" for students (Boerman-Cornell, 2015, p. 211). Contextualization "refers to the reader's ability to locate the historical actors and actions in space and time" (Boerman-Cornell, 2015, p. 211). Sourcing requires students to understand the "opinions, positioning, and bias" of a source's creator (Boerman-Cornell, 2015, p. 211). In her essay "A Novel Approach: Using Fiction by African American Women to Teach Black Women's History," Bunch-Lyons (2000) described contextualizing while reading Phillis Wheatley's poetry in an undergraduate class:

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[3] As Lennon (2007) noted, *The Things They Carried* is a literary work that "defies easy categorization" – it has been labeled "metafiction," "creative nonfiction," "magical realism," "war novel," and so on (p. 175).

> ...few [students] failed to see how eighteenth-century society constructed Wheatley as a black woman. Wheatley's race and gender served to peripheralize her entire existence in the Anglo worlds of Boston and London. Because she was a woman of African descent, her abilities to think and write expressively were called into question. (p. 1701)

Additionally, Bunch-Lyons (2000) described sourcing while reading Gayl Jones' 1976 novel *Eva's Man*: after reading a newspaper profile on Jones, "the students discussed the possibilities of the existence of parallels between Jones's fiction and her personal life" (1705). Also working in the undergraduate context, Schroeder (2007) described sourcing in a less exploratory and more critical way: "If novels are to be interpreted as primary sources, then they must be submitted to the sort of checking and cross-checking that other primary sources undergo to establish their relevance and reliability" (p. 211).

Questioning the nature of history

Some professors described how reading literary works in history class led their undergraduates to engage in deep, complex discussions about the nature of history. For example, as Hower's students grew to regard both academic history and historical fiction in more balanced ways, they began to develop deeper understanding of the nature of history itself:

> Students come to question it all, asking fundamental [questions] about the nature, purpose, and practice of literature and of history in a way I thought reserved for post-graduate encounters with new historicism and postmodernism. (Hower, 2018, p. 86)

Lennon (2007) emphasized the importance of questioning the notion of historical truth: "Simply, I want [students] to understand the ways in which they construct meaning. In all of my classes, therefore, I place the idea of 'truth' under the microscope" (p. 172). Lennon (2007) explained that *The Things They Carried* helped him challenge simplistic notions of truth: "What O'Brien does specifically in this novel is force us to...question the validity of factual truth (and its overall usefulness)" (p. 174). Bunch-Lyons (2000) also

noted that the study of fiction "allows one to employ a nontraditional teaching methodology in history that challenges notions of the discipline" (p. 1708). She explained that discussions about fiction helped her students apply new frameworks to their understandings of historical narratives:

> For many students taking the course, this was the first time that they truly understood what is meant by the 'intersection of race, class, and gender.' ...The works chosen for this course, especially the novels, allowed students to see how race, class, and gender, along with in color, hair texture, body size, and a host of other identities, continue to shape the day-to-day lives of African American women. For my students the phrase 'the intersection of race, class, and gender' is no longer simply a string of buzz words but instead has practical application for their everyday lives while also opening up new ways of understanding the world. (Bunch-Lyons, 2000, p. 1708)

On empathy

Empathy is notoriously tricky to precisely define (Cuff et al., 2016). Debates involve questions such as: is empathy cognitive or affective? (Cuff et al., 2016, p. 147). Also: to what extent is the observer's empathic emotion "congruent" with the observed individual's emotion? (Cuff et al., 2016, p. 148). The concept immediately becomes relevant to this study due to the long tradition of belief in literature's power to "promote readers' empathy" (Denham, 2024, p. 84). This belief prompted numerous empirical studies on literature and empathy in education in the 1960s and 70s, and the studies' apparently promising results have long since influenced education policy in the US, promoting practices like early literacy programs (Denham, 2024, p. 85). However, Denham (2024) argued, that research did not actually establish a definitive connection between empathy and literature; considering the limits of its methodological choices, it "raised more questions than it answered" (p. 85). Given the lack of consensus on the meaning of empathy, it is not surprising that empirical studies attempting to measure empathy have been compromised by issues like what Denham (2024) called "definitional inconsistencies" (p. 85). Denham (2024) added that especially in psychological literature, "vague and inconsistent definitions have too often stirred the mischief of mistaking

(mere) terminological disputes for factual ones" (p. 86). Denham (2024) did, however, provide a definition emerging from recent "convergence" in psychological literature:

> Empathy now more often, if not always, designates what is sometimes called *affective empathy*: the first-personal experience of affective states (including emotions, motivations, and visceral sensations) in response to observations (perceptual or otherwise, veridical or non-veridical) of natural manifestations or second-order representations of those states in another, while maintaining awareness of self and other as distinct subjects of experience (p. 86)

It is notable that this definition says nothing about behavior. According to Cuff et al. (2016), another common debate regarding empathy relates to whether or not it necessarily has "behavioral outcomes." Cuff et al. (2016) wrote that "several authors have argued that empathy has no associated behavioural outcome in the immediate sense" (p. 149). That is, even if a clear link between reading literature and empathy could be established, the effects or benefits of that empathy still wouldn't necessarily be clear or straightforward.

Cottingham (2005), writing in the context of U.K. secondary history education, provided a helpful concept for this project: "reflexive empathy." He explained that a notion of "historical empathy" in which students "enter the past" has largely been discredited, as many dismiss it as "logically impossible, intellectually futile and giving rise to stereotyped and anachronistic views" (Cottingham, 2005, p. 50). Cottingham (2005) proceeded to argue that at its best, the combination of history and literature can lead students to challenge such stereotypes and to "appreciate the complexity and diversity of people's lives" (p. 49). Reflexive empathy, he wrote, "encourages students to examine their own lives, beliefs and attitudes in the light of their understanding of people's lives in the past" (Cottingham, 2005, p. 50). As students employ reflexive empathy, they enter the realm of what Cottingham (2005) called "spiritual education" (p. 46). To explain spiritual education, Cottingham (2005, p. 46) quoted Andrew Wright (2000):

> Ordinary education is transformed into spiritual education at that point when learning ceases to skim over the surface of a subject and instead begins to grapple with issues of ultimate meaning and truth that constitute the very marrow of our humanity. (p. 11)

Methodology

Reflecting on methodology and philosophical positioning

In this section, I'll explore the ways in which my philosophical positioning has influenced my methodological choices. The choice of methods is intimately linked to my philosophical positioning, including my ontology and epistemology. While investigating my research question, I generally employed a constructivist ontological perspective and an interpretivist epistemological perspective, which led me to approach this study with qualitative methodology.

Embracing constructivism, I uphold the belief that there are "multiple, constructed realities" in education, which individuals and groups generate (Elliot, 2023, p. 14). My constructivist ontology aligns with an interpretivist epistemology. My sense of epistemology differs from positivism, which relies on "the belief that objective accounts can be given" (Punch & Oancea, 2014, p. 18). Some researchers in the positivist tradition argue that quantitative methods work to "prevent biases from unduly influencing…results and conclusions" (Wieman, 2014, p. 13). Researchers embracing interpretivism, however, consider biases to be inherent and unavoidable regardless of methods. Instead of attempting to squash all bias, we *reflect* on biases to reach informed conclusions. I generally agree with Lincoln et al. (2018) as they wrote, "we are persuaded that objectivity is a chimera: a mythological creature that never existed, save in the imaginations of those who believe that knowing can be separated from the knower" (p. 140). Therefore, to ensure the rigor of this study, I focus on reflexivity – ongoing, critical reflection on my positioning and my assumptions (Pillow, 2015; Elliott, 2023).

I hesitate to include a separate "researcher's positioning" section in this chapter because I have aimed to reflect on my positioning throughout the entire project. I don't believe these reflections can be neatly summed up in one section, though I will include a few points in this brief paragraph. My participants and I all grew up attending U.S. schools, and therefore basic discussion of the broader U.S. education system in our interviews was not necessary. However, none of the eight participants taught at a school I have either attended or worked at, so each interview involved discussing the specific

context of the teacher's school (including demographics, etc.). It's worth noting that at the U.S. public schools I attended, literary works were not present in my history classrooms. I was open to hearing any reflection that teachers brought to the interviews. While this lack of lived experience made it necessary to ask a number of basic, practical questions in interviews, it also helped me approach the research with openness.

Collecting Data

Research method

I conducted eight semi-structured interviews online. Online interviews allowed me to conduct interviews across seven regions in the United States from my campus in England without expending significant resources to travel to these locations. With semi-structured interviews, I could prepare a common set of questions for participants while leaving room to "probe beyond the answers" and seek both "clarification and elaboration" through dialogue (May, 2011, p. 134). A benefit of the semi-structured interview (over the structured interview and the unstructured interview) is that it allows participants to "answer more on their own terms" while still providing some "structure for comparability" (May, 2011, p. 135). Each interview lasted about one hour. I provided the same interview guide to each participant with three themes and eight potential questions (see *Appendix A*). As intended, the interviews themselves were more flexible and conversational, though I referenced the questions in the guide to introduce new topics. Seven of the interviews were recorded on Teams (with consent). One interview, due to technical difficulties, was not recorded, and I took notes as we spoke.

Participants

This study is exploratory in nature and focuses on subjective experiences. Therefore, it was not important to recruit for certain demographic characteristics to form a representative sample. While recruiting participants, I aimed to reach a diverse group, but time constraints and the unique experience required to participate meant I was not otherwise selective when teachers identified themselves as meeting the criteria.

To recruit participants, I started by posting a form in a private Facebook group called "iCivics Educators." I joined this Facebook group in 2020 while I was working at iCivics, a nonpartisan U.S. nonprofit. This Facebook group, which was created for K-12 civics/history teachers in the US, has 3,300 members. Next, I posted my recruitment form publicly on a discussion forum for history teachers. I had expected to find more participants through the large iCivics network and the public forum, but quickly realized that it was particularly difficult to reach busy teachers toward the end of the U.S. school year. To address this issue, I used snowball sampling (I asked participating teachers to introduce me to colleagues who fit the criteria), which helped me find teachers outside of existing connections (May, 2011). Overall, seventeen teachers who met the criteria expressed serious interest in participating. I reached out to all of these teachers, and of the seventeen, eight followed through to schedule an interview. These eight participants are listed in *Figure 4* below.

Participant pseudonym	Years teaching history in the US	Type(s) of school	Grades levels taught
Naomi	2009–present	Public schools in North Carolina	6-8, 11
Lori	2011–present	Public schools in New Jersey	10
Grace	2013–2022	Public schools in Oklahoma	9-12
Dave	2005–2024	Private school in Washington, DC	9-12
Nick	2019–present	Public schools in Indiana	7-12
Elena	2009–2023	Private school in Washington, DC	9-12
Valerie	2001–2011	Public school in New York City	10-12
Jessica	2015–2023	Public schools in Utah	7, 11-12

Figure 4: Participant information

Analytical approach: Grounded Theory

While analyzing data, I have taken tools from grounded theory (GT), which was first developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. In grounded theory methodology, findings are *grounded* in the data and reasoning is inductive – researchers start with the data rather than starting with theoretical assumptions (Lindqvist and Fosberg, 2022). Research is therefore "led and guided by participant experiences" (McCall and Edwards, 2021). Charmaz (2006) further developed GT to name Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT), which rejects positivism and positions the researcher as a "co-constructor" of data (Lindqvist and Fosberg, 2022). As its name implies, CGT aligns with my constructivist beliefs about the nature of reality. CGT values openness and curiosity (Lindqvist and Fosberg, 2022) and incorporates doubt at every stage in the research process (Charmaz, 2017). With its emphasis on openness, CGT is a flexible methodology that "resists mechanical application" (McCall and Edwards, 2021). Still, I have studied common CGT approaches and tools and incorporated some of them into this project. I listed some of these features and their application in my research in *Figure 5* below.

Feature of Grounded Theory	Application of this feature in my research
Data collection and analysis tend to happen simultaneously (the research process is not linear). Analysis influences subsequent data collection.	I reviewed the transcript after each interview, reflecting on themes. Unanticipated themes came up in interviews. I considered these themes while conducting subsequent interviews (rather than sticking to one strict script for each call).
A thorough literature review is ongoing and may be delayed, rather than occurring in full before data collection. The timing of the literature review in GT research is subject to ongoing debate, but scholars originally advised that students collect data *before* conducting their literature reviews (Dunne, 2011).	The process of developing my literature review was ongoing throughout my project. I reviewed some literature while planning my interviews and employed reflexivity to ensure that this reading did not influence my thinking and planning too heavily (Dunne, 2011). After collecting data, I continued to develop the literature review.
Coding is the principal tool for data analysis. There are at least two phases of	I started the coding process by reading through each transcript carefully and

coding, starting with an initial phase to review the data and ending with more selective and focused coding phases (Charmaz, 2006). The phases of coding are not linear; they may be messy (Lindqvist and Fosberg, 2022).	naming each segment of the data. In later coding phases, I identified "significant or frequent" codes in order to synthesize and organize my data (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). As themes became apparent, I moved back and forth between the "initial" phase and the synthesizing phase (the process was not linear).

Figure 5: Applications of Constructivist Grounded Theory

The Coding Process

As I recorded my interviews on Microsoft Teams, transcripts were automatically generated. Before I began coding, I rewatched each recorded interview while reviewing the transcript and editing as necessary to make sure participants' words were reflected with accuracy. In Constructivist Grounded Theory, Charmaz (2006) explained, coding "shapes an analytical frame from which you build the analysis" (p. 45). Following Charmaz's (2006) guidance, I began with an initial phase of close reading and coding. During this initial phase, I was open to detecting any themes or theoretical possibilities latent in the data. I worked with line-by-line coding, moving quickly to "spark [my] thinking and spawn a fresh view of the data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 48). I coded with gerunds, rather than noun forms, to maintain focus on action and moving processes (Glaser, 1978; Charmaz, 2006, p. 49). The initial codes that emerged, developed using NVivo software, are displayed in *Appendix B*.

Initial coding was followed by focused coding, which involves sifting through data by grouping the most significant and/or frequent initial codes (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). In this phase, my coding was more "directed, selective, and conceptual" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). I evaluated my initial codes to discern helpful ways to categorize my data. CGT allows for messiness – perhaps even encourages it – so I occasionally stepped back into the initial coding phase as changes became necessary. That is, focused coding helped me understand what initial codes would work well for categorizing my data.

Some scholars in the Grounded Theory tradition then employ axial coding, which "specifies the properties and dimensions of a category" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60). This

coding phase involves looking for "relationship identification" between codes (Simmons, 2018, p. 3). In analyzing my data, I took tools from axial coding to understand the relationships among my focused codes and to sort them into additional categories. Rather than adherence to CGT rules for coding, perhaps most important in my coding process was the commitment to an open mindset and what Charmaz (2006) called "theoretical playfulness" (p. 71). This sense of play allowed unexpected patterns and themes to emerge throughout the analytical process.

Considering ethics

While designing this study, I reviewed the "best practice guidance" from the University of Oxford (University of Oxford Research Support, n.d.). I took particular care in reviewing the guidance on qualitative research; data collection, protection, and management; conducting research interviews; and research conducted outside the UK. The university's ethics application process helped me prepare for interviews and data collection with careful consideration of participants' anonymity. The approval letter from University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) for my research is included in *Appendix C*.

It was important to ensure that teachers fully understood what it meant to participate in my project before confirming consent. See *Appendices D, E, F,* and *G* for my participant recruitment poster, recruitment form, participant information sheet, and consent form, all of which I sent to potential participants before scheduling interviews. In addition to providing these documents, I consistently asked participants if they had any questions and made it clear that they could reach out to me at any time if any concerns came up. It has also been important to maintain participants' anonymity. To do so, I have included pseudonyms and disclosed personal information only when necessary. When I was unsure about the disclosure of any specific details, I reached out to the relevant participant to ask their opinion and follow their preferences. While I would have loved to write my findings section in more of a narrative form to tell the rich stories of participants, doing so would have run the risk of revealing more personal information than necessary. As multiple participants emphasized the importance of anonymity, I have

kept this form of story-telling limited in my report. This commitment to limited disclosure allowed for greater comfort among participants and, as a result, deeper conversations and more meaningful findings.

Findings

Like Clark and Sears (2017), I categorize history teachers' practices into two principal ways of teaching literary works, broadly defined: 1) teaching literature as a primary source, and 2) teaching historical fiction. Though these two categories describe *ways of teaching* literary works, *not* the literary works themselves, throughout this study, the works within these categories – primary source literary works and historical fiction – did not overlap.

Figure 6 below shows the literary works that each participant discussed teaching during this research project. These texts span all ways of working with literature in history class, from primary source analysis to historical fiction readings. Some of these texts were assigned to students in full; others were assigned only in excerpts. For some of these teachers, the works listed came from multiple different history classes. For example, the texts listed for Elena came from her World History, European History, History of Contemporary East Asia, History of South Asia, and U.S. History classes. Elena assigned the full book of *Night* by Elie Wiesel and the full stories of "A Madman's Diary" by Lu Hsun and "Soldier's Home" by Ernest Hemingway; she assigned excerpts from the remaining texts listed.

Participant pseudonym	Literary works taught across history classes (either in full or with excerpts)
Naomi	*The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair (1905) *12 Angry Men* by Reginald Rose (1954) *Fever 1793* by Laurie Halse Anderson (2000) *The Seeds of America* trilogy by Laurie Halse Anderson (2010) *Code Name Verity* by Elizabeth Wein (2012) *Hidden Figures* by Margot Lee Shetterly (2016)
Lori	*Life is So Good* by George Dawson and Richard Glaubman (2000)
Grace	*All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque (1928) *Ishmael* by Daniel Quinn (1992) *March* trilogy by John Lewis (2013-15)
Dave	*Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852) *Looking Backward* by Edward Bellamy (1888)

	Family by Ba Jin (1931-32) *Ragtime* by E. L. Doctorow (1975) *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien (1990)
Nick	*Epic of Gilgamesh* *Hymn to the Nile* *Marriage of Martu* *The Odyssey*
Elena	*The Ramayana* *The Baburnama* *The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano* by Olaudah Equiano (1789) *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair (1905) *A Madman's Diary* by Lu Hsun (1918) *Soldier's Home* by Ernest Hemingway (1925) *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque (1928) *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck (1939) *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank (1947) *Night* by Elie Wiesel (1956) *A Viet Cong Memoir* by Truong Nhu Tang (1985)
Valerie	*The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925) *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway (1925) *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck (1939) *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller (1953) *Inherit the Wind* by Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee (1955) *Night* by Elie Wiesel (1956)
Jessica	*The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair (1905) *Slave Narratives* (a collection of histories by formerly enslaved people organized by the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-88) *Mississippi Trial 1955* by Chris Crowe (2002) *While the World Watched* by Carolyn McKinstry (2011)

Figure 6: Literary works in each teacher's history classroom

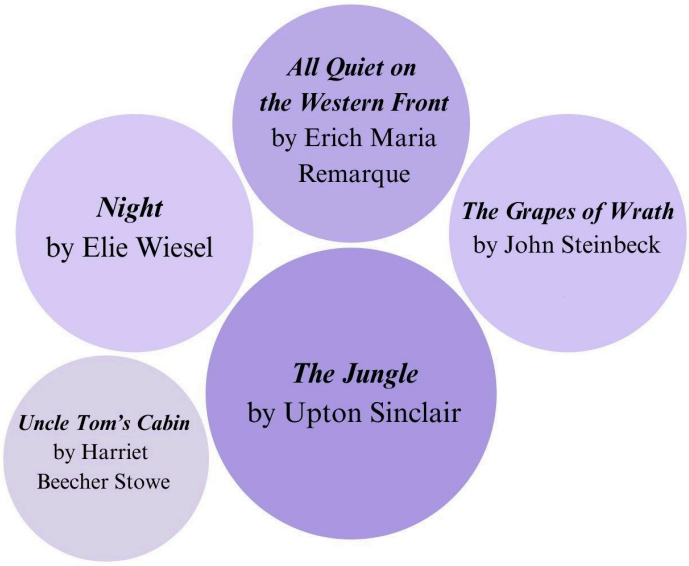

Figure 7: Chart of books that were referenced in multiple interviews, created on Canva.com

Teaching literary works as primary sources

When considering literary works to be primary sources, teachers often approached these works much like they approached more traditional nonfiction primary sources. As Nick emphasized, "I think it's important that we don't artificially and arbitrarily categorize text and literature as literature and nonfiction" when both constitute valuable primary sources. He continued: "Because even though, yes, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* did not happen, and the *Marriage of Martu* did not happen…they still are historical documents because these are the pieces of literature that were being read or heard or written or absorbed and consumed at the time by the society." Literary works, just like diary entries, speeches, news articles, and correspondence, are relevant historical artefacts.

When reading literature as a primary source, teachers emphasized context such as the author's identity and intentions, just as they would for more traditional primary sources such as speeches or newspaper articles. While teaching *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Grace asked her students, "How can what we know about the author inform how we read this? Why do we think he ended up anti-war? What were his personal experiences?" On *The Jungle*, Jessica found it helpful to ask students to consider Sinclair's purpose and the extent to which he might have "sensationalized" details. Dave

also recounted exploring the author's intentions when teaching *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "Beecher Stowe…said, 'everything I've ever read, you know – none of it exposes the actual horrors of reality.' And so she purposely made [her novel] as graphic as possible. It's interesting." Valerie went a step farther, claiming that the author's positioning is perhaps even more important to discuss for literature as compared to more traditional historical primary sources. When teaching *The Great Gatsby*, she asked students to "think about this person who's writing in this time period trying to encapsulate it." She contrasted this discussion with lessons on "a news article or a picture or something like that," in which the "author" didn't necessarily spend so much time "trying," in some way, to "encapsulate" an era. For Valerie, reflections on novelists' positioning led to additional historical considerations, such as, "Why are all of these [US-American] authors moving to Paris in the 1920s?"

Teachers also considered the reception and impact of literary works when reading these works as primary sources. For example, the three teachers who mentioned *The Jungle* highlighted that introducing Sinclair's novel helped them teach about the passing of the Food and Drug Act. Naomi explained that in this unit, students read excerpts from *The Jungle*, letters between Teddy Roosevelt and Upton Sinclair, and excerpts from the Food and Drug Act to learn about the ways in which Sinclair's fiction influenced policy. Elena claimed that *The Jungle* is important to history because "it did change people's minds" and it shows that especially during that part of the 20th century, literature was "powerful." Continuing with the thread of literature "moving people to action," Elena recounted discussing Hitler's efforts to ban *All Quiet on the Western Front*. She would ask her students: As we read this book, "why do you think he does that? Why would he make that choice?" Grace had a similar approach to teaching Remarque's novel. That novel "had very mixed, very mixed public reception," she said. "Some were hypercritical of it. Some were very receptive to it. It was ultimately banned by the Nazi regime. And so we were able to unpack this, not just the text itself, but the publication of text. And so that's another history lesson in and of itself." She asked her students of the book's publication: "What was the outcome for Germany writ large?"

In some cases, the notable impact of a literary work led history teachers to bring it into their classrooms even when they didn't find the work to be successful or engaging in

a strictly literary sense. For instance, discussing his decision to teach *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Dave said that though he doesn't consider the book "the greatest novel in the world," it is still "incredibly important." With help from additional primary sources like newspaper articles, he discussed with students how Beecher Stowe's novel was "wildly successful" in the North and "completely denounced" in the South. Dave had some similar motivations for teaching *Family*, noting that Ba Jin's 1931 novel became very popular in China and that the author was later persecuted in the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution. Additionally, after highlighting the impact of *The Jungle,* Elena implied that she didn't consider extended reading of that particular novel important for her classes: "I feel like *The Jungle* can accomplish what I need it to accomplish in a few excerpts," she said, "which is just like, 'Man, those factories are gross. They really need to do something about that. Immigrants were so mistreated.'" In a related discussion, Jessica said that she touched on some literary works and their reception in class without asking the students to take the time to read the texts themselves. While her students didn't read the novels *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in class, they did discuss the reception of those texts and their historical implications in class.

In Lori's case, *Life is So Good* was an ideal primary source because the context in which it came to be was illuminating in itself. *Life is So Good* is a 2000 memoir by 103-year-old George Dawson, the grandson of enslaved grandparents, who wrote in part about his experience learning to read at age 98. Lori started these classes by just asking her students: "Why?" She said to them: "He's living in America in the 1900s, when our grandparents were alive… Why did he just learn how to read?" Lori mentioned that the vast majority of her New Jersey public school students were White. As she taught about the legacies of slavery in the US, these reflections were a helpful starting point for her 10th grade students.

Emphasizing primary sources in history class

Teachers emphasized the importance of learning how to critically read sources by assessing and understanding bias – a type of classroom reading that is typical for primary sources and less often encouraged for secondary sources like textbooks that present as balanced. Of course, Dave said, "maybe a textbook purports to be balanced – and, you

know, to survey everything – even though by definition it can't be." There is certainly room for critical reading of relatively balanced textbooks. Still, Dave said, primary sources that voice opinions generally give students a more straightforward "chance to evaluate" an argument than textbooks that "try to" be balanced or objective. "I don't have to tell you this," Dave said, "but students really need to grapple with primary resources. Who's the author? What's their bias? What's the perspective? How were they received when they wrote this? Did anybody read it? Did it change anything?" Knowing how to evaluate a text in this way, he said, is "an important skill for all of life." Grace cited similar benefits of teaching critical reading skills with primary sources. She said, "I can't stress enough the value of inquiry…So I'm not presenting this [source] as fact. It's a jumping off point for us to question and challenge and look at new sources." Grace emphasized that while this type of reading is most common for primary source texts, it's important to learn for all types of sources: "I think building the skills of historians with sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration is something that has to happen regardless of the type of source."

Teaching historical fiction

There were fewer conversations about historical fiction than about literary primary sources throughout this project. Some teachers explained that while they appreciated historical fiction in general, they never considered assigning it in their classes. Dave, for example, said, "There's a lot of historical fiction out there, which, you know, I read in my spare time sometimes, and it's all great." But in class, he said, he "never did reach for that genre." Grace said that perhaps historical fiction is "overlooked" in history education, but that she "[doesn't] think it's always the best choice in a history classroom, unless you have objectives in mind that get students to historical outcomes."

A few significant examples of teaching historical fiction did come up during interviews, though. Jessica described her experience teaching the historical fiction young adult novel *Mississippi Trial, 1955*. Jessica said that she generally tried to "stick to primary source documents," but that in this case, she turned to historical fiction to provide students with a "story that they could better connect with." In *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, a fictional sixteen-year-old White boy, Hiram Hillburn, narrates his friendship with

a fictionalized fourteen-year-old Emmett Till and watches the trial for the murder of Till.[4] Jessica said that her students related to this novel because the narrator, like them, was a teenager. Additionally, Naomi described her experiences teaching several different historical fiction novels over the years: *Fever 1793*, the *Seeds of America* trilogy, *Code Name Verity*, and *Hidden Figures*. Naomi said that historical fiction "humanizes" history education and provides different perspectives often missing from textbooks. For example, when discussing the history of space exploration, she said, they could "listen to JFK's 'to the moon' speech," but with *Hidden Figures*, "you get these women who had children, you're getting to see a little of the 'life' part, that normal everyday life aspect." Naomi emphasized that in this way, historical fiction can diversify teaching materials. Sometimes certain perspectives are not represented in available primary sources; historical fiction can make them available through research and imagination. Naomi, a White woman, said she included some of these historical fiction novels because she wanted her students to "see themselves in these stories." She explained, "We want male and female protagonists, we want people of color, and not to just focus on the stories of White males." She recounted a private conversation with one of her students, a Black girl, who told Naomi she really connected with the protagonist of the *Seeds of America* trilogy (also a Black girl), and that this connection helped her better understand both her own feelings and the relevant history. Both Jessica and Naomi also emphasized that when it came to teaching historical fiction, historical accuracy (and evidence that the novelists "did their research") was crucial.

What makes a text literary?

In this study, I invited teachers to discuss any text that they considered to be a literary work – "literary" was broadly defined and extended beyond fiction. Some of the key texts discussed were nonfiction. For example, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, George Dawson and Richard Glaubman's *Life is So Good*, and Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* are literary nonfiction memoirs. Describing

[4] In 1955, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Black boy, was abducted and lynched after he was accused of whistling at a White woman in a grocery store in Mississippi. The two White men who murdered him were acquitted by an all-White, all-male jury.

what makes a piece of nonfiction like *Life is So Good* literary, Lori said, "he's writing as though you're closing your eyes and you're there." She went on: "He talks about the way the plastic felt in his hands… He really got into the 'senses level.' …I do think it kind of reads like a novel." Discussing what makes *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* literary, Elena also emphasized the descriptions of sensory experiences:

> In the passage that I have the students read, he's talking about being thrown aboard a slave ship, and *the sights, the smells, the sounds* [emphasis mine], the not being able to understand the other languages because these are people from different groups in Africa, and then being just totally bewildered, and then being beaten because he wouldn't eat.

In all examples of literary nonfiction discussed in this project, the author wrote with vivid details that invited readers to inhabit another person's consciousness.

Brief discussion: Ways of teaching literature in history class

These findings suggest that university practices involving literature in history class are to some extent transferrable (with adjustments, of course) to the secondary-school setting. Like Bunch-Lyons (2000), Schroeder (2007), and Lennon (2007), all eight participating teachers discussed sourcing and contextualization while teaching primary sources; all emphasized that students need sound understanding of authors' biases. Teachers such as Grace also emphasized the importance of "inquiry" while sourcing and contextualizing, highlighting the importance of honoring students' agency (their abilities to raise questions themselves). This reflection on student agency connects to conversations about learner-centered pedagogy in CIE (Thomas and Schweisfurth, 2021).

Discussions on historical fiction, which were less common in this study, generally centered on student engagement. Teachers did not report discussing the perspectives of authors of historical fiction. Once it was established that authors "did their research," the authors themselves were largely absent from these conversations, which contrasts with the ideas that Clarke and Sears (2017) presented. Naomi touched on Cottingham's (2005)

reflexive empathy as she recounted how one student's understanding of a character in the historical fiction novel *Seeds of America* led her to a better understanding of herself. Grace, claiming that historical fiction is only useful in class if it leads to "historical outcomes," was more focused on disciplinary knowledge and skills.

These findings suggest that the inclusion of primary source literary works in history class is more straightforward than the inclusion of historical fiction. Primary source studies consistently present opportunities like sourcing; reasons for teaching historical fiction are more varied. Whitlock and Brugar (2022) explored teachers' choices of historical fiction for their classes; future surveys could shed light on choices for primary source fiction as well.

Reasons for bringing literary works into history class

Corroborating

Like the university professors referenced in my literature review, multiple secondary school teachers highlighted corroboration – the process of checking the details of two or more historical texts against one another – as a valuable opportunity that comes with studying literature in the history classroom. Discussing her teaching of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Grace explained: "Comparing the textbook to *All Quiet* is a really interesting exercise because you're corroborating. You're fact finding." Grace asked her students questions such as,

> Do we think the way he's describing the conditions of the trenches is accurate? How would we improve this text? What would we change about the way he describes Paul's experiences in the Army hospital? … Okay, let's read about the mustard gas and the uniform and the mask that they wear. Let's look at the pictures. Is that how you were envisioning it?

When I asked her what she meant by "improving" the novel, she specified that she meant improving the text's "factual accuracy." In Grace's classes, improving the text's accuracy could mean many things, from writing the story itself differently to including an appendix for a certain section. Grace said her students really enjoyed these exercises "because they

love being right." She explained, "if [students] think they know more than the author in this case, that's also a really exciting way to engage them because you know, young people are figuring out themselves and their place." Similarly, Jessica said she asked her students, "how much of this is accurate?" when she taught *The Jungle*. Like Grace and Jessica, Valerie asked students to reflect on the novels' historical accuracy: "Whenever I brought literature in, a lot of the questioning was along the lines of, 'Where does this book get it right? Where does this book take more artistic license?'" Rather than focusing on improving the text's accuracy, though, Valerie then asked her students, "How does the artistic license help you better understand the era?" Conversations about "artistic license" did come up in Grace's classes as well – she explained that her "improve the text" exercises "forc[ed] us to unpack the features and functions of fiction."

Reflecting on the nature of history

Some teachers discussed how bringing literary works into history education can help start conversations about the nature of "history" as a discipline. Valerie said, "One of the most important things to me in teaching history…is moving away from the idea that history is a list of names and dates." She continued:

> I honestly and truly believe that history would be many students' favorite subject if we could all take it as human experience… They know that when they're reading a book, they're reading about people. And so [it's] my never-ending quest to make sure students understand history not as a bunch of things that were driven by leaders and that were, like, a march through time, but that history is just what humans did every day in different circumstances. *Literature does that in a way that historical sources just don't.* [Emphasis mine]

Dave reflected on the different types of historical knowledge that come from reading literary works and traditional historical sources. At one point during our interview, he said, "I could dump everything that I teach about the Great Depression and just assign [*The Grapes of Wrath*], and I think we'd be in the same place." When I asked him to say more about that, he said that of course it was an exaggeration:

> Because you wouldn't know who was president. You wouldn't know what caused the Dust Bowl and you wouldn't know what was going on back in New York while all these, you know, corporations were swallowing up the land and evicting

> all the Okies, you know, so the context matters, too. … I think you'd walk away with far less understanding of the actual facts…but I think [what you learned about the era] might stick in your brain more.

With limited classroom time for each topic, teachers have to decide what types of historical learning to prioritize. Dave said of this hypothetical example concerning *The Grapes of Wrath*: "I think it's interesting – you probably end up in an equally good place." He added that what constitutes the "best" way of teaching and learning about history "depends on your values and perspective, and maybe what you're told to do by the school board."

Establishing emotional connections

Many of my interview discussions with teachers had to do with the emotional aspect of reading literary works. Elena said she often turned to literature when she "[wanted] the students to understand a particular emotional aspect of a period of history." For example, she said, "when I introduce [*Night*], it's like, I want you not just to read the primary sources about Auschwitz – which we do – but I also want you to understand the truth[5] of the experience, to get inside the emotional aspect of a character." Dave elaborated on the emotional understanding that comes from reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*:

> You know, [Beecher Stowe] creates characters… You don't want Eliza to be captured by the traitor. And you realize how precarious it is to try to escape… I mean, you can talk about [the slave trade], but then you personalize it with Tom himself, right? It's horrifying in a way that, you know, even if he doesn't exist, and you know he never existed, you can feel it in a way that you might not with just some cold statistics.

Lori also emphasized the emotional effects of reading the first chapter of *Life is So Good*, in which Dawson narrates his experience witnessing the lynching of a 17-year-old Black boy when he was ten. Each year, Lori brought her class outside and read this chapter aloud to her students. After reading, she said, "I have them come back into class, and at

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[5] To explain what she meant by "truth" in this sense, Elena quoted *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi (2003): "do not, under any circumstances, belittle a work of fiction by trying to turn it into a carbon copy of real life; what we search for in fiction is not so much reality but the epiphany of truth."

that point, they're usually silent because that was an emotional read. Which, for my students, is…well, they're not silent ever." Lori then gave her students time to sit with and reflect on their emotions. She asked them to journal and "just reflect," adding, "I don't even care what you write about as long as it's something that you thought about while we were reading this." She said, "it's a way [for them] to put words to the feelings that the chapter gave them, because I know they were listening, and I know they know why we read it."

Several teachers highlighted students' emotional connections with characters around their age. These teachers found that students connected deeply with characters of their own age even when other markers of identity like nationality, race, gender, etc. were not shared. Discussing students' reactions to *Life is So Good*, Lori said:

> A lot of students reflected on the fact that the boy was 17. That was a big thing that kept coming up with them because I think understanding not just that somebody was killed…but that it was somebody that was like them or could have been them.

As noted above, Jessica also cited the narrator's age as a reason why her students connected with *Mississippi Trial, 1955*. Dave mentioned the age connection for three of the books he taught. He said his students related to *All Quiet on the Western Front* because the narrator is a 19-year-old, and they also related to *The Things We Carried* because the people described were "only a few years older" than them. Similarly, he found that students connected with the novel *Family* because "these characters were teenagers and rebellious and bound by family and bound by politics." I asked Dave what he made of this pattern. He said he thought it was likely easier for high schoolers to relate to characters who "are going through what I'm sure [has] at least crossed the minds of students that age." He also pointed out that students have always connected with literature about teenagers and young people: "Look, you know, why is *Huck Finn* so popular? For all its criticisms…it has [captivated students] for generations. Part of that is, it's not telling the story of two 50-year-olds."

Developing empathy

In addition to general discussions on emotional responses, these interviews included many conversations about reading literature to develop empathy. Teachers implied that working with students to develop empathy was important to them as they taught history. Elena often told her students that the "whole function" of reading primary sources, including literary works, was to "develop empathy from the perspective of those of the people that lived at that time." She said that while teaching Olaudah Equiano's memoir, she aimed to center "the perspective of empathy as a through line all the way." She asked her students questions such as, "What do you feel when you read this? What was he feeling? What would it be like for the millions of others that made this journey?" Valerie said that literary works helped her students empathize with others from the past:

> With *The Grapes of Wrath*, you introduce the Joads. Students get an insight into what it was like to live through this incredibly traumatic time period filled with all these uncertainties because they are experiencing it through the eyes of other people. And it's true of *Night* also, even though *Night* is nonfiction and it's a memoir, you're experiencing it through the eyes of a person – through a human lens, versus a more detached, removed lens… That's something that [literary texts] do that other sources don't.

Lori said that the main reason she read from *Life is So Good* to her students was to foster empathy, noting that it was important to provide students with additional historical context about the prevalence of racial violence after the Civil War: "The chapter is important to develop the empathy, but it doesn't actually teach them a whole lot about the history because it is one instance of racial violence." She specified that the chapter led her to empathize with the narrator, Dawson, and not necessarily other characters. She said that while she herself is a White woman, she "never even considered empathizing with or feeling like the White woman in the story." On the contrary, she "felt like the Black boy in the story – you know, the one witnessing everything." Nick discussed the role of empathy in the context of ancient history as well. He explained:

> [When reading the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, students see that] these are characters with real human desires. They're afraid of death…It's very powerful for teenagers, because teenagers have this feeling of immortality a lot of times, and they're big risk takers. …[The students are] able to experience or empathize at least with the characters in that way.

After discussing her students' reactions to *Night*, Elena asserted that empathy is important for avoiding the repetition of historical atrocities:

> In *Night*, when he's in Auschwitz and he sees the bodies that are there, I'm like, 'What feeling do you have? You read [about what he's] feeling. But what [feeling] do *you* have when you read that? And then [the students] go through like, 'horror, and terror, and sadness.' I'm like, yeah, that's what you're supposed to feel. That's the empathy. That means that hopefully, you know, if enough people read things like this, we're not gonna have these experiences anymore in the world.

Elena proceeded to highlight another relevant point about empathizing with characters:

> But, you know, what's also magical about [literature] is you are lucky enough to be able to take off that feeling at the end of the class in a way that these characters can't. They have to live with them forever.

Teaching difficult history "by proxy" or with allegory

Some teachers acknowledged the possibility of teaching history "by proxy" with literature (or teaching literature as allegory). Nick explained:

> I'm a big fan of this idea…of what's called 'teaching history by proxy.' If there's something that's difficult to teach for one reason or another… It may be a topic that you politically don't feel safe discussing, so here in Indiana, a very red state, I have to be cautious in many ways [in case] I say something that could be construed as a critique of the current administration. So, you teach 'by proxy.'

Nick said that in his classroom, for example, he recently discussed "Nixon and Watergate and constitutional crises" with his students as a way to "teach by proxy" and allow them to make their own connections with current events. He said, "we were able to teach [about constitutional crises] by proxy, and then [students are] able to say, 'oh, I see that happening in the real world in front of me as well.'" Of course, Nick's example in this case doesn't involve literary works – it involves a past crisis and a current crisis. Still, he agreed, a literary work could often stand in for the past crisis to lead to similar understanding. When a literary work prompts understanding in this way, it is often acting as an allegory – a narrative that "'stands in for' a different, hidden idea" (Bude, 2020).

Teaching by proxy or with allegories can be useful for teaching controversial or difficult history, as Nick described, and it can also be useful for captivating students' attention. Grace recalled one colleague who read a Dr. Seuss book with her history class to introduce nuclear armament between the Soviet Union and the U.S. "It got people interested and engaged," Grace said. Similarly, Valerie told one of her classes that "*The Sneetches* [by Dr. Seuss] was actually about the Holocaust." Valerie recalled her students' curiosity: "My 15- and 16-year-old students were like, well, now we have to read it! And so every year, I read to [my students] *The Sneetches* and we talked about it."

Drawing on past experiences and personal interests

The sections above, from "Corroborating" to "Teaching difficult history 'by proxy' or with allegory," describe reasons any history teacher might want to bring literary works into their classrooms – why did these teachers in particular follow through with this pedagogical tool? Some teachers were inspired by their own educational experiences. Grace said the use of literary works in history classrooms was "introduced to [her] through practice" when she was an undergraduate. In college, she said, "I was reading fiction and nonfiction in my history classes and falling in love." She remembered reading the memoir *Under a Cruel Star* in an Eastern European history class and reading the novel *Frankenstein* in a European intellectual history class. "I found it really, really compelling," she said, "and so when I started teaching, I brought that practice with me." Dave recalled learning "more about Russian history than [he] ever would have from a history course" in a college literature course whose syllabus was made up entirely of Russian novels. Teachers also cited their personal interest in literature. Grace referred to her "passion for reading," and Lori said when it came to choosing which subject to teach, "I had this existential crisis of like, do I want to teach English or do I want to teach history? Because I loved both." Valerie explained, "I love books. I love to read. Reading has always been a really important part of how I learn and make sense of things. So it became a really important part of how I taught and asked students to make sense of things." Grace added, "there's a reflective piece of me that says, you know…this is how I

learned. This is what I like. Does it work for others?"[6] Elena suggested that her own passion for literature was in fact what made this tool work in her classroom:

> So for me, you know, I love literature. So I wanted to make it at least a small part of what we were doing during the year, 'cause I enjoy it. And then, because I enjoyed it, I was able to bring that same passion to the kids, and it made them sort of enjoy it. That wouldn't be the same for all of my colleagues in that department, but it worked for me.

Brief discussion: Reasons for bringing in literary works

These findings, like existing literature in the university setting, suggest that the practice of corroboration has benefits beyond improved retention of key details – it also strengthens students' confidence. Grace's reflections on the ways that corroborating helped her young students figure out their "places" resembled Hower's (2018) reports about students feeling "at home" in a subject. In this way, Grace also implied a connection between disciplinary knowledge and more holistic, socioemotional learning. That is, disciplinary understanding can lead students to more general confidence as learners. This unconventional pedagogy can support students' development of capabilities (critical/historical thinking, confidence) that prepare them to pursue their varied goals.

Hower (2018) initially thought such complex conversations on the nature of history were reserved for "post-graduates"; these findings suggest that they are accessible not only to undergraduates, but also to high school students. The use of literary works in history classes leads students to interrogate the borders between subjects such as history and literature. Students begin to question traditional ways of learning, leading them to become more critical and thoughtful readers. As Lennon (2007) noted, however, assessments can get in the way of critical questioning: "Speaking about multiple meanings of truth to a student who wants to know how exactly she will be graded on an essay can be frustrating to both parties involved" (p. 174). Lori put forth a similar idea –

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[6] Grace went on to say that she does actually have evidence supporting this teaching practice from "end-of-year exams [showing] improvements in writing, in reading, and…the types of conversations that we were able to have, and then just the energy and engagement."

when I asked how students reflected on the complicated emotions they felt after hearing Dawson's story, she said that often her students are more concerned with questions such as, "what do I need to say to get a 10 out of 10?" To fully accommodate such discussions about academic disciplines and truth, we would need to challenge traditional methods of assessment.

Though the implications of "empathy" are still contested (Denham, 2024), teachers in this study occasionally presented the benefits of "empathy" as self-evident. For example, Lori said Dawson's chapter was "important to develop the empathy." Elena was most direct as she said, (discussing *Night*), "That's the empathy. That means that hopefully, you know, if enough people read things like this, we're not gonna have these experiences anymore in the world." As discussed, empathy can be a nebulous concept without clear "behavioral outcomes" (Cuff et al., 2016). However, as Denham (2024) pointed out, it's important not to let "terminological disputes" impede meaningful conversations. When Elena's students read *Night*, if they aren't feeling empathy, maybe they're feeling sympathy, or anger, or another powerful emotion that could motivate them to act in their own lives. For Elena, the important point was the prevention of future atrocities, both big and small. That point relates to "reflexive empathy," which "encourages students to examine their own lives, beliefs and attitudes in the light of their understanding of people's lives in the past" (Cottingham, 2005, p. 50). Elena said reading *Night* pushes her students to questions like, "what would do if you were in that neighborhood?" A related question could be, what would you do if you saw something cruel happening in your own neighborhood today? Jessica presented another example of reflexive empathy in action: she said that when she teaches *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, she asks students to critically reflect on the way the narrator responded to the lynching of Emmett Till and to ask themselves, "if you see something in your community today...how could you help the situation?"

The findings about teaching by proxy or with allegory, and especially Nick's comments about teaching in a conservative state, suggest that this unconventional history teaching tool can be particularly helpful as U.S. education policies continue to change. If a certain topic becomes banned or discouraged, teaching by proxy will remain an option. Allowing students to reach their own conclusions (conclusions that may or may not align

with the teacher's preexisting views) is a powerful practice, regardless of political context. Nick described the ways students reached insights independently – this pedagogical method fits within Freire's tradition of liberatory education. Liberatory education contrasts with the banking method in which education is "an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (Freire, 1968/2014, p. 72). In the teaching method Nick described, and in Freire's tradition, students and teachers discover and construct meaning together.

The logistics of bringing literary works into history classrooms

Having freedom to teach nontraditional sources

Of course, all participants in this study worked at schools that gave history teachers the freedom to bring literary works into their classrooms – this project doesn't explore how common it is for teachers in the US to have that freedom. Several participating teachers speculated that many others do not have this degree of freedom. Dave spoke about the freedom and flexibility that comes with teaching at a private school. He said, "This is good news and bad news from the educational perspective: Nobody was watching me…and so that's a lot of trust and responsibility in the teacher. But just from the teacher's point of view, it's total freedom." Similarly, Elena (another private school teacher) said, "we do have so much freedom and we can really play to our strengths…You teach authentically to who you are. So we all had slightly different curriculums, but they all work because we were teaching to our strengths." Dave wondered if public school teachers had "their hands…much more tied." In this study, however, I had the chance to speak with six public school teachers from all different states – with different sets of government curricular standards – who did find the freedom to teach history in this unique way.

Reflecting on this freedom, these public school teachers described positive relationships with their schools' administration. Grace said:

> My principals treated us like the professionals that we were. Now what was complicated is there are certain common assessments that we administer…and we have a little bit of flexibility in the pacing provided by our district coordinator, but

> it's the *content* that must be covered. They don't dictate *how*. And so I'm covering World War I, but it looks different than how my colleague next door is covering World War I. So I absolutely had the flexibility and the professional discretion to make those choices.

Naomi said it was "nice to not be so micromanaged" at her current school, explaining that she is largely "left to [her] own devices." She said she feels trusted by her school's principal, who says, "I love what you're doing" during classroom observations. Valerie, noting that things might have changed since she stopped teaching high school in 2011, said there was "a lot of trust among the administration for the teachers" at her school. She said:

> It was definitely like, I'm in [my classroom] doing what I want, and nobody's really gonna tell me not to, unless I've started doing something egregious…So I got to teach a lot of things that I thought were important, even if somebody else might have chosen not to teach those things.

Lori said, "I haven't had that problem [with a lack of freedom], and I've always had really supportive supervisors." She added, though, that some of her colleagues who work in different schools and locations have had to "tread [more] lightly" when it comes to teaching history with nontraditional sources.

Public school teachers also highlighted the ways in which their use of literary works support their teaching of state history standards. Lori said the first chapter of *Life is So Good* fits into the curriculum during her Civil Rights unit, so she "never even considered asking permission." Naomi mentioned that one of her North Carolina history standards reads, "How has policy changed over time?" She explained that reading *The Jungle* as a primary source helps her address that standard. Grace said she always grounded her teaching in Oklahoma's state standards, adding, "now, granted, the standards are the floor, not the ceiling, right?" Grace explained, "If you look at the Oklahoma state standards for social studies, it's our responsibility to teach reading and writing and speaking and listening." When assigning literary works, she said, she "had backing in the standards themselves."

Assigning reading in history class

How did teachers direct students to read these literary works in history class? Lori, as noted above, read the *Life is So Good* chapter aloud to her class outside every year. She printed a copy of the text for each student. It took her about 25 minutes – less than one class period – to read the whole chapter. She listed a couple of reasons for reading aloud to her students. First, she teaches "collaboratively," meaning she teaches alongside a special education teacher because some of her students have learning disabilities. She said reading aloud made it possible for all her students to "get from point A to point B at the same time." Also, she said, "for comprehension reasons, some kids, actually, I think need to hear it in order to absorb it." Naomi also reads excerpts with her students in class – she said she has been "toying with" the idea of assigning entire works as outside reading, but has not tried that yet. Others did assign reading outside of class. Dave, for example, "would assign a chunk [of reading] each night." However, he said, "students have math, and physics, and you know, sports, and you can only assign a certain amount of reading each night." Grace spoke about setting up "book clubs" for her students. She took inspiration and tips from *Breathing New Life Into Book Clubs: A Practical Guide for Teachers* by Sonja Cherry-Paul and Dana Johansen (2019). This guide, Grace said, is written primarily for ELA teachers, but she found it helpful for assigning literary works in history class, too. Grace explained: students "create their own book club names. They create their own norms and a constitution. They set their own expectations for what they're reading and when."

Challenges for assigning literary works included mitigating online tools that help students skip the reading, and obtaining resources. Elena said she assigns reading "in such a way that encourages [students] to actually do the reading." She noted, "Increasingly, they have all these tools, not just SparkNotes anymore, but ChatGPT could write them a quick summary of [a book] and give them quotes." Elena said she works to "guarantee the integrity" of the curriculum by, for example, reading a little in class and assigning questions that require careful reflection on the text. Public school teachers also spoke about funding for class sets of literary works. For some assignments, Grace said, she "was fortunate to have a district foundation that could fund the purchase of a class

set." In other cases, when all students had internet access in class, she looked for "free online versions."

Providing historical context

Several teachers discussed the ways they supplemented literary works with more traditional sources to ensure students understood the historical context. Most explained that they taught at least some historical context before assigning the literary works. Lori said it was important to find "a balance" between types of resources. She said that her class reads the first chapter of *Life is So Good* "after we've done the full historical context…[covering] who the KKK were, and how they were formed, [and] what lynching is." Grace said she supplemented her classes' book clubs "on the front end and back end" with nonfiction primary sources, and Jessica said she taught fiction "in conjunction with a few other primary source documents." Naomi said her class has already learned about public policy in general before they read *The Jungle*. Elena suggested that while traditional primary sources can provide important context for understanding literary works, literary works can also provide important emotional context for traditional sources. She said that in her U.S. history classes, as "the narrative continues to build through slavery, through Reconstruction, through Jim Crow, through the Civil Rights era…[she keeps] referring back to earlier works [such as Olaudah Equiano's memoir] that we look at when slavery is just beginning." That emotional context helps keep historical narratives grounded in a sense of humanity.

Coordinating with English departments

Some history teachers discussed coordinating with English teachers, whether that meant covering certain themes at the same time in separate classes or co-teaching a humanities class. Dave, for example, said he was able to discuss *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison in his U.S. history class because he knew that all his students had read it in English class. Similarly, while teaching about the Great Depression, Valerie took advantage of the fact that she knew all her students read *The Grapes of Wrath* in English class. Valerie said she often asked English teachers, "What are they reading?" and then asked herself, "How can I bring [those works] into my class?" Grace said, "I always feel

like my English teacher colleagues are my closest allies outside of other history teachers." She said they often discussed opportunities for cross-disciplinary learning. For example, she said, "in ELA, they were learning pathos, logos, ethos. That's not typically something that you're going to be hearing in a history classroom, but it would help us to bring that language over and to unpack it" while analyzing primary sources.

Some teachers discussed "co-teaching" arrangements between history and English departments, which could mean different things in different contexts. For example, for Valerie, co-teaching meant that the curriculum for history and English classes at her school were intentionally aligned and student projects incorporated both disciplines. For Nick, co-teaching involved teaching ancient history and literature in one big classroom alongside an English teacher. Some emphasized that this level of coordination required significant extra time and effort from teachers and only worked when the teachers actively wanted to participate. Due to trouble with logistics, in most cases discussed in these interviews, co-teaching set-ups did not endure over the years. Logistics, however, did not prevent these teachers from engaging with interdisciplinary learning in their own classrooms. Elena said:

> At first [students] thought it was kind of weird that we were reading books together, and I was asking them questions the way that an English teacher would ask… I just start posing the literary questions like, 'Okay, when we read *Soldier's Home*, we need to pay attention to the tone. What's the tone? Do we see any irony here?' …And then they can go along and they can do it, but yeah, it is a little bit weird for them at first. I think because they tend to see teachers as being in discrete silos whereas you know, I like the crossover. You know, we can do both. We can try both.

Final Discussion

The inclusion of literary works in history classes can support learner-centered pedagogy.

Throughout this study, teachers emphasized student agency, suggesting that the inclusion of literary works in history class can support learner-centered pedagogy (LCP). LCP is associated with collaborative, student-led learning (Thomas and Schweisfurth, 2021, p. 299). Embracing LCP, teachers and students "construct" meaning together (Thomas and Schweisfurth, 2021, p. 303). The idea of co-constructing meaning is central to Freire's theory of liberatory or conscientizing education in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* – a work that has greatly influenced the field of CIE (Bickmore and Hayhoe, 2017, p. 16). *Figure 8* below shows examples of ways in which literary works helped these teachers embrace LCP.

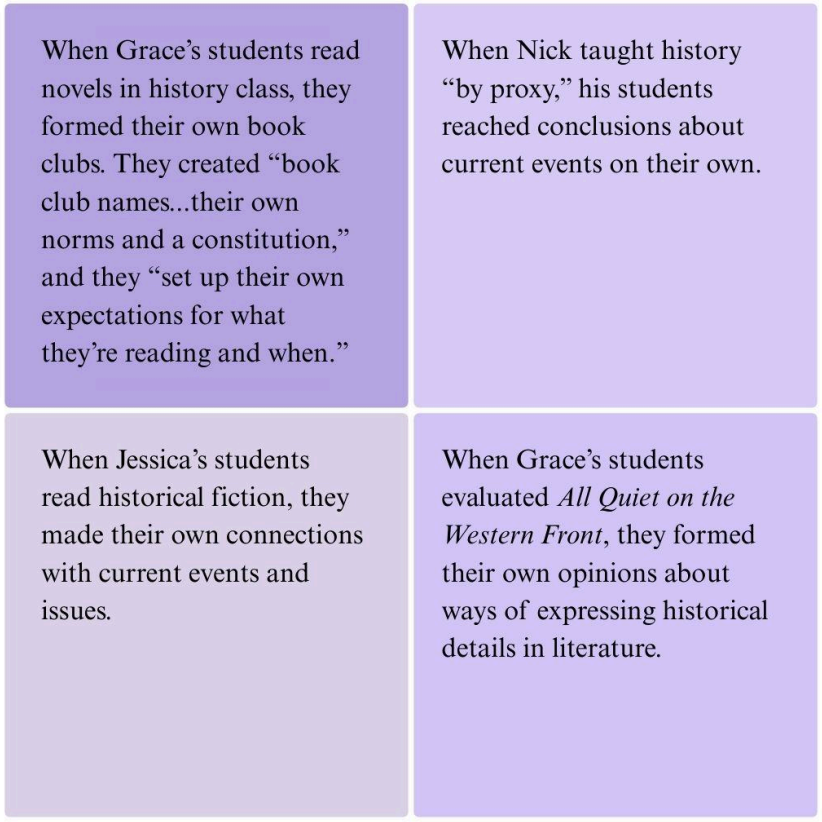

Figure 8: Examples of LCP in this study's findings, designed on Canva.com

The connection between teaching literary works and helping students develop empathy is not straightforward.

The thorny issue of reading, education, and empathy deserves more space. The ways in which Lori and Jessica (both White women) brought literary works into their predominantly White classrooms to teach about the Civil Rights Movement provide space for comparative reflection. Lori taught *Life is So Good*, a memoir. Jessica taught *Mississippi Trial, 1955,* a historical fiction young adult novel.

While discussing the teaching of *Life is So Good*, Lori hinted at a form of selective empathy – she said she "never even considered" empathizing with the one White woman depicted in the chapter, despite sharing her racial and gender identities. Looking at the passage featuring this White woman character, Betty Jo Riley, it's easy to see why Lori didn't connect with her. Betty Jo is not a fully developed character in this story, probably because the narrator, George, doesn't seem to have met her. There are many layers of distance from the action in this passage. We're told that the Riley family's cook overheard a conversation between Betty Jo and her father, then relayed what she heard to George's mom. George overheard that conversation between his mom and the cook. In the passage, we learn that after finding out about her pregnancy, Betty Jo's father threatened to physically abuse her unless she said she was raped. When her father asked if their "hired boy," 17-year-old Pete, raped her, Betty Jo "nodded in the smallest way" (Dawson and Glaubman, 2000, pp. 6-7). This passage, which Lori reads with her students every year, is followed by the heartbreaking, disturbing scene that describes the lynching of Pete. Of course, Betty Jo is not the focus in George's story. Of course, as most readers of *Life is So Good* probably would, Lori connected with George, "you know, the one witnessing everything." This passage helped Lori establish an emotional element in the learning of history. It's worth asking, though: what do we fail to learn about that moment in U.S. history when we neglect to critically consider Betty Jo's perspective?

Jessica had a different approach to teaching about racial violence with literature, which was more firmly rooted in what Cottingham (2005) called reflexive empathy. For context, Jessica's district is both predominantly White ("that's Utah," she said), and "fairly conservative." This type of district was unfamiliar for Jessica – she grew up

surrounded by diversity in Los Angeles, California. She found that teaching *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, in which a fictional White narrator describes his friendship with a fictionalized Emmett Till, helped some of her students understand that history isn't "us versus them" – history can be about friendship and solidarity. It's important to note that Jessica presented diverse perspectives in this unit, teaching primary sources by Black writers alongside this novel. Discussing her teaching of *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, Jessica described a practice of reflexive empathy:

> When we'd read that, we'd see, okay…just because you're not the minority being attacked in the situation…see how it's impacting this kid, too. You have friends who experience things that make you sad. So, what would you do to defend your friend when there's this accusation? … I always try and bring it back to, then what can we do to help the situation? … Do you see something in your community today, whether it is dealing with race [or with something else]? That might not be the exact same thing as *Mississippi Trial*…but it could be something emotionally similar. That's the connection that we would make.

It's not clear if Jessica's students empathized with all the characters in the novel, or primarily with the White narrator. However, the question of "with whom do we empathize," which is deeply personal, becomes less relevant when we turn to reflexive empathy. Rather than asking whose story we center and whose perspective we *feel*, reflexive empathy asks to consider what any given story reveals to us about our present moment, and how we can respond from all of our different intersecting positions.

When bringing in literary works, history teachers engage students with "emotional" reading, "critical" reading, and/or "reflexive" reading.

Throughout this study, three broad ways of teaching literary works in history class have emerged, which we may call "emotional" reading, "critical" reading, and "reflexive" reading. Emotional reading involves reacting however feels natural to a text. When Lori describes her students' rare silence after hearing George's story, or when Elena reminds students of Olaudah Equiano's feelings as he was thrown aboard a slave ship, that is emotional reading. Critical reading involves sourcing, contextualizing, and

corroborating. When Grace asks students to consider the factual accuracy of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, or when Naomi asks her students about Upton Sinclair's motivations while writing *The Jungle*, that is critical reading. Finally, bringing Cottingham's (2005) description of reflexive empathy to the practice of reading, we might refer to "reflexive" reading. When Elena asks students to reflect on what they would've done in Elie Wiesel's neighborhood, or when Jessica asks how students would defend a friend against a false accusation, that is reflexive reading.

All three ways of reading literary works in history class are valuable and should be approached with careful consideration. Reflections emerging from this study's findings are included in *Figure 9* below:

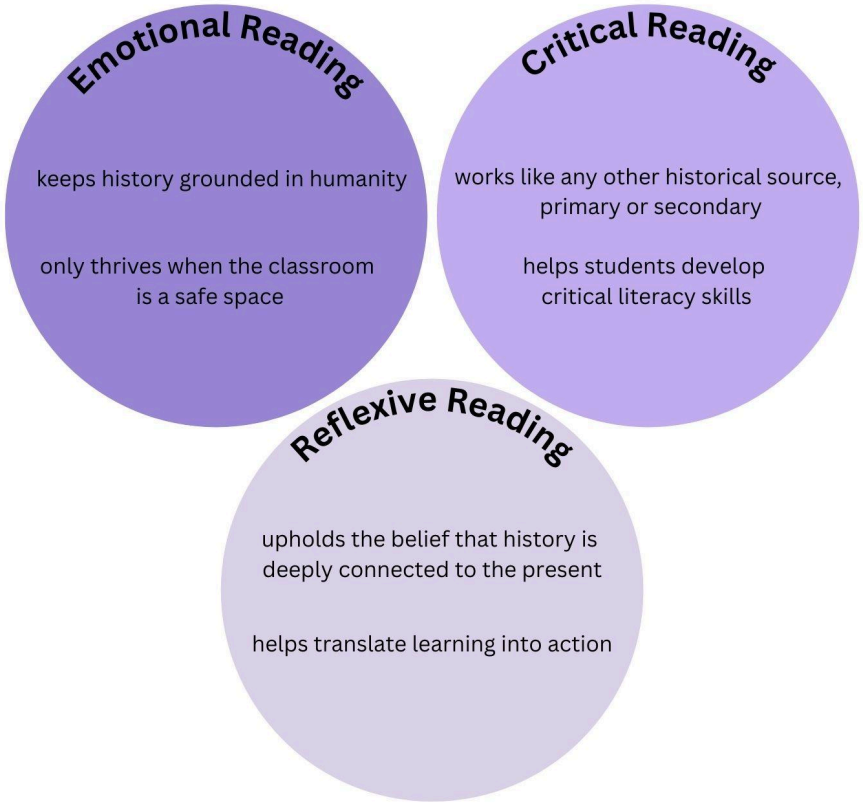

Figure 9: Characteristics of emotional, critical, and reflexive reading, designed on Canva.com

While each of these approaches can be valuable, it is important for teachers to understand their goals. Lori's teaching of *Life is So Good* won't convey historical details like

statistics on its own, so she makes sure to supplement the memoir with additional sources. Jessica's turn to reflexive empathy when teaching *Mississippi Trial, 1955* isn't possible unless her students have some understanding of the historical context, so she teaches the context first.

Conclusion

Social studies education in the US continues to evolve, sometimes in troubling ways. A new set of social studies standards for Oklahoma, for example, has caused controversy for many reasons, including its imperative for teachers to cover "discrepancies" in 2020 U.S. election results (Yang, 2025).[7] This study provides insights about an unconventional pedagogy that teachers can employ regardless of state-required content. Reading literary works in history class helps students develop historical thinking skills like sourcing, contextualizing, and corroborating, all of which can help them counter misinformation, even if that misinformation comes from places of power.

In this study, I analyzed educators' experiences teaching both historical fiction and "primary source" literary works in history class. When teaching "primary source" literary works, teachers focused on (*critical*) historical thinking skills, much like they would for any nonfiction primary source. Teachers turned to historical fiction to appeal to *emotional* aspects of history, and in some cases, to promote *reflexive* empathy. "Primary source" literary works sometimes elicited emotional and reflexive responses as well. Combined with traditional historical sources, literary works helped teachers explore the "texture of humans" that makes up history (Louisiana Channel, 2025).

[7] These standards, which haven't yet come into effect as of summer 2025, did not directly affect Oklahoma teacher Grace, who moved from teaching to another career in education in 2022.

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PI name: Aliya Khalid
PI contact: aliya.khalid@education.ox.ac.uk
Primary researcher: Zoe Nuechterlein, MSc student
Oxford University Education Department telephone number: +44 1865 274024
Oxford University e-mail: zoe.nuechterlein@lmh.ox.ac.uk

Interview Guide – Literary Works in History Classrooms

During your one hour interview, we will likely address the questions/themes below. Additional questions will likely come up during our conversation.

Theme One: What inspires history teachers to introduce (and continue to use) literary materials in their classrooms?

- Which literary materials did you bring to your classroom and why?
- How did you plan your lessons with the literary materials?
- What did the literary works add to your students' understanding of history?
- What were the challenges of discussing literature in a history class?

Theme Two: How do teachers navigate shifting, intersecting identities of teachers, students, and authors?

- To what extent do you believe your identity and the identities of your students affect(ed) your class discussions about history?
- In what ways do/did you discuss "identity" in class?

Theme Three: In what ways do current events and societal issues influence classroom discussions on history and literature?

- In what ways, if ever, do/did current events come up in your class discussions?
- In what ways do/did local and school policies affect your teaching practice?

Don't hesitate to email zoe.nuechterlein@lmh.ox.ac.uk if you have any questions about this information.

(Appendix B) Codebook from NVivo: initial codes (line-by-line coding)

Name	Description	Files	References
(not) coordinating with other classes		1	1
(not) engaging with the class material		1	1
(not) explicitly discussing students' identities		2	2
(not) feeling shame and guilt		2	4
(not) having 'literary' conversations		2	4
(not) including historical fiction		1	1
adapting a reading		2	2
adjusting because of the pandemic		1	2
adjusting to teaching		1	1
administration failing		1	1
administration trusting teachers		2	4
aging as a teacher		1	1
allowing or asking students to take the lead		2	5
always wanting to be a teacher		3	5
appreciating different perspectives or preferences for literature		1	1
appreciating the context in which the literature was written		3	8
appreciating the subject and the re-search		2	4
asking for family stories		1	2
asking students 'what would you do'		1	2

Name	Description	Files	References
assessing the historical accuracy of literature		3	10
assigning excerpts		6	11
assuming a certain popular stance during the interview		1	1
assuming difference between private and public schools		1	3
becoming a teacher		2	5
blurring boundaries between fiction and nonfiction		1	1
bridging multiple subjects or classes		1	2
bringing in literature because of student interests		1	2
bringing passion to the classroom		1	1
bringing the class outside (or to another location)		1	1
building relationships with other teachers		1	1
building the skills of historians		1	2
calling back to previous historical discussions and context		1	2
calling younger generations to action		1	2
captivating students' attention		1	1
carefully planning as a teacher		1	2
challenging subject boundaries		1	1

Name	Description	Files	References
changing English curriculum		1	1
changing perspectives and approaches over time		2	3
choosing a career		2	19
choosing easier books to read		2	4
choosing history		1	1
choosing or finding a teaching job		2	2
claiming superiority of nonfiction over fiction		1	2
claiming that history is not political or opinionated		1	1
co-teaching humanities - English and history		1	5
collaborating or coordinating with the English dept		3	29
combining English and history classes		3	13
comparing approaches to reading literature		1	2
comparing fiction and nonfiction primary sources		2	2
comparing history and literature approaches		1	1
comparing literature from different times		1	1
comparing public and private school		1	2

Name	Description	Files	References
comparing secondary and primary sources		1	1
comparing to other history teachers		2	2
comparing to recent fiction		1	2
comparing types of resources		1	3
compartmentalizing subjects in school		4	8
compiling class materials indepen-dently		1	1
connecting across identities		3	6
connecting history to other subjects		1	1
connecting history to the present		4	10
connecting literature to current events		1	1
connecting literature to history		1	1
connecting to book character of a similar identity		1	2
connecting to film		6	9
connecting with administration		1	2
considering exams and assessments		3	5
considering new methods of teaching		1	1
considering something for future		1	1
considering the purpose of literature		2	2

Name	Description	Files	References
considering the skills of literary analysis		1	1
considering what makes a text literary		1	4
consistently teaching history with literature		2	2
contrasting the school they attended with the school they teach at		1	1
coordinating with other history teachers		2	3
creating a safe classroom		3	10
critically questioning		1	1
current events affecting school life		2	6
de-emphasizing assessments		1	2
defining what counts as history		1	1
dehumanizing		1	1
describing racial tension at the school		1	1
describing school resources		1	1
describing social or racial dynamics at the school		1	2
describing student demographics		5	11
describing student interests		1	1
describing the experience of reading		1	1
describing the race of students		3	7

Name	Description	Files	References
describing the schools' political makeup		2	2
describing their school		4	22
designating importance to a point		1	1
detailing sensory experiences		2	2
developing a classroom community		1	1
developing empathy through literature		2	5
disagreeing with other history teachers		1	1
discovering meaning through discussion		1	2
discussing All Quiet on the Western Front		3	7
discussing American history		1	1
discussing ancient history		1	1
discussing AP standards		1	1
discussing bias in primary sources		2	5
discussing bias in secondary sources		1	1
discussing book banning		1	1
discussing book clubs		1	2
discussing books about teaching		1	4
discussing contemporary reactions to literature		1	6

Name	Description	Files	References
discussing current events and the present		5	10
discussing education policy		1	2
discussing expectations for history education		1	1
discussing Gatsby		1	4
discussing Grapes of Wrath		3	7
discussing historical fiction		1	1
discussing identity and reading		1	1
discussing interest in curriculum or other parts of ed		1	1
discussing Jungle		3	6
discussing legal systems		2	4
discussing literary nonfiction		1	1
discussing literature as allegory		2	6
discussing literature as resistance		1	1
discussing McCarthyism		1	1
discussing memory, image v reality		1	2
discussing music		1	2
discussing Night		2	8
discussing poetry		1	2
discussing secondary sources		1	2

Name	Description	Files	References
discussing social justice and accountability		1	1
discussing social stratification		2	3
discussing tension at the school		1	1
discussing the 'features and functions' of fiction		2	6
discussing the author and their intentions		3	9
discussing the consequences of a novel's publication		3	5
discussing the environment		2	3
discussing the influence of tech, social media etc		2	4
discussing the teaching of difficult histories		1	2
discussing the value of empathy		2	3
discussing Uncle Tom's Cabin		3	22
discussing Western civ		1	1
discussing what history means		2	2
discussing with parents		1	1
discussing women and gender studies		1	1
distancing students from history		1	2
diversifying history		1	1
doubting self		1	1

Name	Description	Files	References
doubting the possibility of teaching literature in class		1	1
drawing on past educational experiences		4	10
earning teaching certification		1	1
empathizing and identifying with a character		3	7
emphasizing authenticity		3	3
emphasizing history education at the school		1	1
emphasizing that a lot of history is heavy		1	3
emphasizing the context of a school		2	3
emphasizing the empathy of history teachers		1	6
emphasizing the importance of history education		1	1
emphasizing the lasting knowing that comes from reading literature		3	5
employing other creative methods		1	1
encouraging interdisciplinary connections		2	5
encouraging students to do the reading		1	1
engaging in challenging learning		1	2
engaging in literary discussions		4	8

Name	Description	Files	References
engaging in PD		1	1
engaging students with literature		2	6
enjoying challenges		1	1
enjoying reading		1	2
establishing class norms		1	1
expecting something different from law enforcement - the state		1	1
experiencing a book differently when reading with students		1	1
experiencing history through the eyes of other people (by reading)		1	2
explaining a lack of literature in the history classroom		1	1
explaining or justifying the method of reading		4	16
explaining or understanding artistic license		1	1
explaining the reasons for including literature		1	1
explaining the school system		1	7
explaining what makes a text literary		1	4
exploring 'human experience' through literature		2	4
failing to combine English and history classes		1	1

Name	Description	Files	References
falling into place		1	1
feeling deeply interested in atrocities		1	5
feeling distance from history		3	3
feeling freedom as a teacher		5	14
feeling interested in both history and English		1	1
feeling interested in marginalized history		1	1
feeling political pressure		1	2
feeling pressure from parents		1	2
feeling protected by certain standards		1	2
feeling surprised by history		1	1
finding an opportunity to bring in literature		2	5
finding balance with different types of resources		3	5
focusing on historical outcomes		1	2
focusing on inquiry		1	8
following administration's rules		1	3
following approved curriculum		1	2
following state standards		2	4
following structure or rules when teaching		1	1

Name	Description	Files	References
following the research		1	3
getting to know the school community		1	1
granting freedom or flexibility to students		2	3
grappling with primary sources		1	4
growing as a teacher		1	1
hearing stories that are often untold		2	5
highlighting assessment results		1	1
highlighting challenges of teaching		2	4
highlighting continued relevance of historical themes		1	1
highlighting differences based on state		1	1
highlighting openness		2	5
highlighting perspectives and lived experiences in history		1	2
highlighting primary sources		3	13
highlighting race		3	20
highlighting subjective qualities of a person		1	1
highlighting the benefits of literature in history		2	5
highlighting the benefits of video		1	2
highlighting the character's emotions		1	2

Name	Description	Files	References
highlighting the diversity of a school		2	9
humanizing		1	2
identifying useful books		5	31
imagining what might go wrong at school		1	1
interacting with literature in different ways		1	1
interviewing for a teaching job		1	3
introducing a key word (for teaching)		1	1
inventing creative assessments or projects		1	1
investing in literacy		1	4
journaling after reading		1	1
kids not knowing about current events		1	3
knowing that fiction is 'biased'		1	1
leading or participating in extracurriculars		1	3
learning about history through literature		2	5
letting the writer do the 'talking'		2	4
linking all students' experiences regardless of race		1	1
linking history-literature to the present day		1	2

Name	Description	Files	References
literature encapsulating an era		1	1
loving history		1	1
loving history and English		1	1
loving reading		2	3
loving teaching and education		1	1
loving teaching history		2	2
making assumptions about an image		1	3
making choices based on family etc		1	1
making choices based on money etc		2	4
making the historical personal		2	4
minimize the singular impact of a certain book		1	1
moving history away from names and dates		1	1
moving past definitions		1	1
moving to action		1	1
navigating societal and personal changes		1	2
negotiating rules in school		1	5
NOT empathizing with a character		1	1
noticing differences in student engagement		5	6
noticing gender and class etc in images		1	1

Name	Description	Files	References
noting effects of US policies		2	4
noting epiphany		1	1
noting the limitations of a single story		1	1
parents focusing on grades		1	1
placing literacy education in history education		1	1
placing the literature in the context of the history curriculum		1	5
planning a new class		1	2
policy changing over time		1	1
preferring primary over secondary sources		1	2
preparing to teach		1	1
printing and distributing the reading		1	1
proceeding chronologically		1	1
providing historical context for literature		3	4
providing literary context for history		1	1
providing reasons why they might have included more literature or why they didn't		1	1
raising questions after reading a story		1	2
raising uncomfortable emotions in class		4	5

Name	Description	Files	References
reaching deeper emotional connection with literature		6	18
reading aloud skillfully		1	1
reading aloud to the class		3	4
reading autobiography		1	1
reading during school hours		2	2
reading fiction as primary source		4	7
reading historical fiction		1	2
reading with students outside of class		1	7
recognizing differences in perspectives and values about history		1	1
recognizing history's aftermath and legacies		1	1
recognizing that there are multiple valid ways of teaching		1	4
recognizing the limitations of novels in history class		1	2
recommending rather than requiring books		2	2
recounting the inspiration to teach history		1	1
referencing trump		1	1
reflecting on 'honors' education		3	5
reflecting on gender		1	3

Name	Description	Files	References
reflecting on historical figures		1	1
reflecting on political tension		1	1
reflecting on positioning in the class-room		5	16
reflecting on students' positioning		5	9
reflecting on teaching style		2	4
reflecting on the author's positioning		4	6
reflecting on the nature of fiction		1	2
relating to a character based on age		4	13
relating to students		1	12
research informing literature		1	1
researching as a phd student		1	1
responding to current events and re-cent history		2	4
responding to disrespectful student behavior		1	1
returning to certain texts		1	1
reviewing 'lessons for life'		1	1
reviewing and complicating history		1	1
school changing over time		1	3
setting expectations		1	3
sharing info about background with students		1	1

Name	Description	Files	References
sharing positive feedback		1	1
showing images		1	4
societal attitudes changing over the last years or decades		2	6
spanning multiple periods in one work of literature		1	1
speaking about the author		1	1
speculating that other teachers don't have as much freedom		2	5
spending a lot of time on a passage		1	1
starting difficult conversations		2	3
striving for objectivity		2	3
struggling to coordinate with the English dept		1	4
struggling with timing		8	22
struggling, as a teacher, to find time for reading		1	3
students expressing concern		1	1
students feeling emotional about history		1	1
students focusing on grades		1	3
students reach conclusions on their own		2	3
students reacting in unexpected ways		1	1

Name	Description	Files	References
studying across the humanities		1	1
studying literature		1	3
studying nonfiction in teacher education		1	1
studying other subjects in addition to history		2	5
studying religion		1	9
summarizing-praising the book		5	24
superintendant passing strict guidance for educators and public schools		1	1
supplementing literature with other materials		1	1
taking initiative as a teacher		2	4
taking students on field trips		1	1
taking time to understand your emotions		1	3
teaching ancient literature		1	2
teaching classics		1	1
teaching different groups of students differently		2	2
teaching different perspectives		2	5
teaching history as human experience		2	4
teaching history by proxy		1	2

Name	Description	Files	References
teaching literature as a primary source		2	2
teaching media literacy		1	3
teaching other subjects in addition to history		3	6
teaching preservice teachers		2	3
teaching putting in extra time and work		2	2
teaching without a textbook		5	6
teaching world history		1	1
teaching younger students		1	2
telling the story of the teaching		1	1
thinking about chronology in history		1	1
thinking of bridges in history		1	1
training to be a teacher		1	1
transferring history class skills to 'life skills'		1	1
trusting and feeling respected by supervisors		2	3
trying to articulate feelings		1	1
understanding history through literature		2	3
understanding state standards		1	1
understanding the complexity and nuance of history		2	2

Name	Description	Files	References
understanding the gravity or extent of the situation		1	1
using mostly nonfiction		2	3
varying student projects		1	2
warning students that a topic is heavy		2	5
watching atrocity or violence (in the book)		2	2
witnessing and narrating		1	3
wondering about what students don't say		2	9
wondering if fiction would work		1	1
working in another career		2	2
working with complex texts		1	1
working with preconceived notions		1	1

Education (Educ) DREC
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY

Applicant: Zoe Nuechterlein
Principal Investigator: Aliya Khalid
Department: Education

Study title: What are US middle and high school teachers' experiences using literary works while teaching history?

(Version: 2.0)

Ethics reference: Education (Educ) DREC - 1436319

Dear Aliya Khalid,

On behalf of the Committee, I confirm that the above research study described in the application and other supporting documentation submitted to the committee has been carefully considered on behalf of the Education (Educ) DREC in accordance with the University's regulations and policy for ethics approval of research involving human participants, human tissue and/or personal data. The opinion is as follows:

Opinion of Research Ethics Committee: Favourable Opinion

Subject to the following conditions:

Decision Date: 15 Jul 2025, 12:04

Opinion End Date: 6 Nov 2026

If favourable, insurance-provided indemnity arrangements will be in place between the decision date and opinion end date and you may now commence your study activities. Should you plan to continue the research beyond the end date above, it is your responsibility to ensure that you request, and receive, an extension (via amendment) from the committee for indemnity to remain in place. You may be required to provide a justification.

Please note the following:

Amendments: Should there be any subsequent changes to the reviewed study, applications for amendments can be made via the Oxford Ethics Application System (Worktribe Ethics).

Reports: Studies considered by OxTREC are expected to submit an *annual progress report* on each anniversary of study approval, until the study is completed. An end of study report is also required.

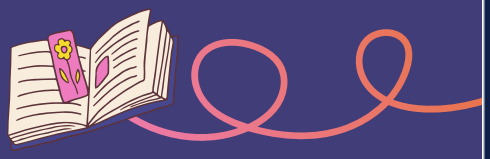
Audit: This study may be selected for audit at the discretion of the Research Governance, Ethics and Assurance Team.

Data safety: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all data collected during the course of the study is stored and transferred safely and securely in accordance with University requirements. Further guidance and advice are available from the Research Data Team. Additional information is available at https://researchsupport.web.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics

Yours Sincerely

Education Ethics Officer





UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

CALLING ALL HISTORY TEACHERS...

HAVE YOU TAUGHT, OR DO YOU CURRENTLY TEACH, HISTORY IN A U.S. MIDDLE OR HIGH SCHOOL?

HAVE YOU USED LITERARY WORKS (SHORT STORIES, NOVELS, PLAYS, ETC) WHILE TEACHING HISTORY?

We are looking for volunteers to participate in an Oxford MSc research project about the use of literary works in history classrooms. You would be asked to engage in an online interview (~60 min) in June 2025. No preparation for this interview is required.

If you are interested in participating, please scan the QR code below to fill out the form. Thank you so much!

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Call for Participants: History Teachers (University of Oxford MSc Project)

Thank you for your interest in this research project! The text below is an excerpt from the project's Participant Information Sheet. Please email zoe.nuechterlein@lmh.ox.ac.uk if you'd like a copy of the full information sheet before submitting this recruitment form. Otherwise, after reading your responses, we will provide the information sheet and a consent form via email before scheduling an interview.

We're conducting this research to learn about ways in which literature can be used in history classrooms. We hope to contribute to discussions on the teaching of "difficult"/emotional/controversial history.

During the recruitment process and beyond, we will collect information such as your contact details, background information, the school you work at, the classes you teach, and your experiences teaching history. A video recording of your interview and a transcript will be stored on the primary researcher's account (if you provide consent). Recordings will not be shared in research outputs. The research team (Zoe Nuechterlein and Aliya Khalid) will have access to the research data. We are required by the University to retain research data for three years after the end of the project (August 14, 2025 – August 14, 2028). By August 2025, we will 'pseudonymize' this data and when possible, remove identifiers from the transcripts/letters/etc.

The findings from the research will be written up in Zoe's MSc dissertation. Zoe will submit the dissertation by August 14, 2025. It will be deposited on the University's repository, ORA, where it will be publicly available. This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: EDUC_1436319).

* Required

1. Full name *

2. Email address *

3. Where do/did you teach history (school name, location)? *

4. What kind of school do/did you teach at (public, private, etc.)? *

5. How many years have you spent teaching history? *

6. Which history class(es) do/did you teach (grade level, subject, etc.)? *

7. What literary works (short stories, novels, plays, etc.) have you used in your history classroom? *

8. Are you available for a one hour online interview in June 2025? *

9. Where are you based (what time zone)? *

10. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

This content is neither created nor endorsed by Microsoft. The data you submit will be sent to the form owner.

Microsoft Forms

Appendix F

PI name: Aliya Khalid
PI contact: aliya.khalid@education.ox.ac.uk
Primary researcher: Zoe Nuechterlein, MSc student
Oxford University Education Department telephone number: +44 1865 274024
Oxford University email (primary researcher): zoe.nuechterlein@lmh.ox.ac.uk

MSc Research Project: Literary Works in History Education

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: EDUC_1436319

You are invited to take part in a research project about the use of literary works in history education. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

1. **Why is this research being conducted?**

We're conducting this research to learn about ways in which literature can be used in history classrooms. We hope to contribute to discussions on the teaching of "difficult"/emotional/ controversial history.

2. **Why have I been invited to take part?**

You've been invited to take part because you've identified yourself as a history teacher in the US who has used literary works while teaching history. 8-10 participants total will take part.

3. **Do I have to take part?**

No. It is up to you to decide whether to take part. Before August 10, 2025, you can withdraw yourself from the research, without giving a reason, by letting us know of this decision.

4. **What will happen if I take part in the research?**

- We will provide you with documents including this information sheet, an interview guide, and a consent form. We will ask for your signature (scanned) on your consent form when you are ready.
- We will have one 60-min interview online over Teams. We will agree on a time for this session. The interview will be semi-structured – we will cover the questions/themes on the interview guide, and additional questions will likely come up during our conversation. We will make sure there are opportunities for you to raise points/topics that are not included in the interview guide if you wish. The interviewer is Zoe, an MSc student and this project's primary researcher.
- With your consent, we would like to record your interview so we can have an accurate record of our conversation. On Microsoft Teams, it is not possible to record audio only, so this will be a video recording. If you aren't comfortable with a video recording, you could switch your camera off. We will only be using the audio for the research project.
- You can ask to pause or stop the interview at any time.
- If you allow us to, we might contact you with further questions based on your interview before August 14, 2025.

6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

It's possible that sensitive topics come up during interviews as we discuss the teaching of "difficult" history. Participants may choose not to answer any questions or ask to pause or stop the interview at any time.

It's possible that you might be identifiable from the research outputs (the MSc dissertation) based on details such as gender, race, years teaching, general location of school, type of school, etc. Unless you request that we use your real name, we will use a pseudonym for your data. You may also request that any details about you be omitted.

7. Are there any benefits in taking part?

We hope the interviewing experience will be interesting and enjoyable for participants. Otherwise, as this is an unfunded MSc project, there will be no direct or personal benefit from taking part in this research.

8. What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

We will collect information about your experiences using literary works while teaching history. Knowledge of your experiences will help us understand the benefits and challenges of bringing literature into history classrooms. We will also learn strategies teachers like you have used for discussing difficult history. During the recruitment process and beyond, we will collect information such as your contact details, personal background information, the school you work at, and the classes you teach.

A video recording of your interview and a transcript will be stored on the primary researcher's account (if you provide consent). The research team (Zoe Nuechterlein and Aliya Khalid) will have access to the research data. At the end of the project, the research data will include transcripts and recruitment form responses – we are required by the University to retain this data for three years after the end of the project (August 14, 2025 – August 14, 2028). By August 2025, we will 'pseudonymize' this data and remove any identifiers from the transcripts/letters/etc.

9. Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

The findings from the research will be written up in Zoe's MSc dissertation. Zoe will submit the dissertation by August 14, 2025. It will be deposited on the University's repository, ORA, where it will be publicly available. As stated above, you might be identifiable in these reports based on details such as gender, race, school type and location, etc. We will remove identifiers wherever possible (where they are not relevant to the findings). Unless you request that we use your real name, we will use pseudonyms while discussing the findings.

10. Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance website at https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights.

11. Who has reviewed this research?

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: EDUC_1436319).

12. Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact Zoe Nuechterlein (zoe.nuechterlein@lmh.ox.ac.uk) or Aliya Khalid (aliya.khalid@education.ox.ac.uk), and we will do our best to answer your query. We will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the University of Oxford Research Governance, Ethics & Assurance (RGEA) team at rgea.complaints@admin.ox.ac.uk or on +44 (0)1865 616480.

15. Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Zoe Nuechterlein

Department of Education

15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6QA United Kingdom

+44 1865 274024

zoe.nuechterlein@lmh.ox.ac.uk

Appendix G

PI name: Aliya Khalid
PI contact: aliya.khalid@education.ox.ac.uk
Primary researcher: Zoe Nuechterlein, MSc student
Oxford University Education Department telephone number: +44 1865 274024
Oxford University e-mail: zoe.nuechterlein@lmh.ox.ac.uk

Consent to take part in MSc Research Project: Literary Works in History Education

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: EDUC_1436319

Purpose of Study: We aim to answer this question: "What are US high school teachers' experiences using literary works while teaching history?" We hope to contribute to discussions on ways of teaching "difficult"/emotional/controversial history.

	Please initial each box if you agree with the statement
I confirm that I have read and understand the Participant Information Sheet for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point up until June 20, 2025, without giving any reason.	
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
I understand the extent to which I could be identifiable from any publications or reports for specific organizations or presentations.	
I consent to being video recorded. (Recordings will not be used in research outputs.)	
Use of quotations: Please indicate your preference (select *one* option): a) I do not wish to be quoted directly. **or** b) I agree to the use of direct quotations in research outputs if I am not directly identifiable (if a pseudonym is used). **or** c) I agree to the use of direct quotations, attributed to my real name, in research outputs.	
I give permission for you to contact me again to clarify information.	
I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	
I agree to take part.	

_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of participant	Date	Signature
_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature