

Whose Story?

Andover Middle School Library Program Plan

By

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Summary

A school library has many important functions. Two of these are to increase students' motivation to read and to teach information literacy. The "Whose Story?" program at the Andover Middle School library will introduce historical fiction to students, with the goal of motivating them to read, and will begin to teach them related information literacy skills.

Keywords: library, school, historical fiction, information literacy, motivation

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Program Site & Target Group

Andover Middle School Library, in Andover, Kansas, is a typical middle school library. It houses a large collection of fiction and nonfiction as well as a number of reference sources. The total enrollment at AMS is 627 students in grades six through eight. This school is largely homogeneous: white students make up 85% of the student body and only 14% of students qualify for free or reduced lunches. About 52% of students are male, 48% female. The school has met the “Standard of Excellence” for reading and science for the past several years, demonstrating high scores. Math scores barely missed the cutoff for this award. Average daily attendance is 95%.

Currently, the library provides check out, resource materials, and computer and internet usage to students and teachers. Typically, the librarian collaborates with language arts teachers and gives book talks to their classes on a regular basis but does not work much with other teachers, other than to pull resources for them. Many times, the book talks and the work that is done with language arts teachers center on fiction and reading skills, not information literacy. While the collaboration with language arts teachers is a great strength, the lack of collaboration with other subject areas and the small amount of time spent working on information literacy are two areas for growth in the AMS library.

At AMS, one requirement for the social studies classes is to read historical fiction each nine weeks, or four times a year. These assignments are followed by projects and presentations in class. Unfortunately, many students coming into middle school already have negative perceptions of historical fiction, “It’s boring,” “I don’t like it,” “It isn’t relevant to me.” In order to encourage students to not only complete the assignment but also to enjoy reading a new genre and make connections between historical fiction and the history on which it is based, teachers and the librarian will have to work to combat these unfavorable stereotypes.

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In order to respond to these needs and because the librarian wished to identify that history is everyone's story, the "Whose Story?" program was created. The "Whose Story?" program is designed to encourage students to find historical fiction that they do enjoy and that can be relevant to their lives. A secondary goal of the program is to introduce students to the concept of reliable sources and to one specific source that is accurate for historical research and primary source documents. This program is a series of library lessons, a reading competition, and other activities related to historical fiction. Lessons will be integrated in social studies classes.

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Historical fiction promotion is one important aspect of the AMS Library's tasks because of the social studies requirement to read one book from this genre each quarter of the school year. Setting aside the historical fiction on separate shelves for easy access is not enough. Many students are not even sure what characteristics define historical fiction. Students need to be educated about the genre and available books; otherwise they will simply grab the first book they find, suffer through it, and complete the assignment just in time.

In order to promote historical fiction and teach a few basic information literacy skills, the librarian will lead a series of four lessons, to be taught during social studies class. The lessons will introduce the story behind history, demonstrating to students that history is more than facts or dates in a textbook.

These begin with an introductory lesson. To begin, the class will list what they think of when they hear "historical fiction." What does that mean? How do they feel about historical fiction? The librarian will then take an informal poll: do students think a novel has to be written as historical fiction in order to be considered historical fiction? Or are books that were published in 1950 and set in 1950 now historical fiction? Why or why not? She will define the genre as

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fiction that is set in the past and explain that no one has really decided how long ago the book should be set to be considered “historical.” Some say that it should be set at least 50 years in the past; others say that some novels originally set in the present day could now be considered historical fiction, if the book was written a number of years ago. History is the stories of individuals and groups. Historical fiction tells these stories, like the social studies book, but in a way that is designed to entertain.

After the discussion about what historical fiction is, the librarian will book talk at least one book. That book will be *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. The book talk follows.

Imagine a cold, dark night. Burying your little brother in an unmarked grave. Riding on a train to a place you have never been, to live with people you have never met. Finding a book that seems like the first good thing to happen in a long, long time, but at the age of nine you are unable to read it, even the title – How to Dig a Grave.

The Book Thief by Markus Zusak is set in Germany during World War II. Hitler and the Nazis have ordered that certain books – books that might harm their cause – be burned.

Liesel Meminger is an orphan in Nazi Germany who cannot read, yet, every chance she gets, she steals a book. When her foster father learns what she is doing, he does nothing to stop her thefts. Instead, he teaches her to read. But when learning to read isn't good enough, her curious nature leads her to a dangerous discovery – her foster parents are hiding a Jew in their home.

Liesel, even knowing the danger, continues to steal books. Her family, even knowing the danger, continues to shelter the Jewish man. Will Liesel be caught? Will they all be caught?

Read The Book Thief to find out what the consequences are for their actions.

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At the end of the first lesson, the librarian will demonstrate how to write a review for the online card catalog. Students will be able to log in and post reviews of the historical fiction they read so that others can view their opinions. The librarian will edit reviews before they are published, but only for grammar and appropriateness. This lesson meets the first goal of the program because it will define historical fiction for the teens that need to select books. It will, hopefully, entice them to look at a good book and realize the appeal of this genre.

The second “Whose Story?” lesson, taught by the librarian, will outline how historical fiction relates to students. This lesson will center on the famous quotation from George Santayana, “Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” The librarian will have students write, for two minutes, their opinion on what this quotation means. Students will share their thoughts and have a short discussion about the quotation, led by the librarian.

The librarian will point out the history is never really just the story of one person. Everyone is connected, so it is the story of each person, yes, but also the story of all people. History helps individuals and groups to know why they are the way they are.

Next, the librarian will have students think about one event in their lives that has contributed to who they are today. It could be a good or bad memory, one isolated event or ongoing activities. They will share with a partner. As students listen to their partner, they should pay attention to how hearing about that event helps them understand each other. History also helps us understand others. It will be pointed out to students that what is currently happening, in their lives and in the world, will be a part of history one day.

Finally, history helps people know where to go in the future. Think back to the quotation: “Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” Students may discuss why it is important not to repeat certain parts of history.

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This lesson helps to relate the study of history to students' lives. In turn this may increase their interest in historical fiction.

Lesson three, and possibly more, if needed, will teach students to find primary sources. Computers and internet access will be used for these lessons. By this point in the semester, all students will have checked out a work of historical fiction to read, which will be their topic for today's lesson.

The librarian will explain that, although there are many internet sites on which information can be easily found, not all of them are reliable – meaning they share unbiased and accurate information. For example, a political candidate's website wants to portray him or her in a positive light, so they may omit information or exaggerate. On the other hand, a newspaper must print factual information in order to sell copies, so they would be reliable. The class will be encouraged to list and explain examples of sources that are and are not reliable.

After discussing reliable sources, the librarian should go over the definition of a primary source – a material that was written, produced, or created during the time being studied. She will explain that students will be exploring primary sources that relate to their current historical fiction read. One of the best sites for locating and viewing primary sources is the Library of Congress. Students will be given the link, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures> and browse for pictures that relate to their topic or time period. They will write notes, in a Venn diagram, comparing and contrasting the primary source documents they find and their novel. The lesson will end with students sharing with each other.

This lesson is an important piece of the “Whose Story?” program because it is designed to first introduce some information literacy skills and, secondly, put their historical fiction reading into context, thereby increasing the relevancy of the books they read.

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The final lesson will be additional book talks. Two book talks follow.

***The Sacrifice* by Kathleen Benner Duple**

Do you think your parents love you? How much do you think they love you? Would they go to jail to protect you? Die for you?

Abigail Faulkner and her sister, Dorothy, are about to discover the answer. It is 1692 in Andover, Massachusetts, and the witch hunt is on. It seems as though everyone is involved, whether they are accused of witchcraft or are an accuser. The penalty for witchcraft, even without proof? It's death. When Abigail and Dorothy are accused of being witches, they know the only way out is to accuse someone else. Their mother believes that she can help free them, but at what cost?

This novel is based on events that happened to the author's family in Salem, Massachusetts.

***Cracker!: The Best Dog in Vietnam* by Cynthia Kadohata**

Man's best friend is much more than that in Vietnam. Cracker, a German shepherd, has been trained to find enemy soldiers, traps, and bombs. Many soldiers depend on her to keep them alive and out of harm's way.

Rick Hanski, Cracker's handler, believes that he will be an important piece of the United States' victory in Vietnam. No one else does. What will happen when Rick starts to doubt himself?

These book talks will be followed by asking students to share what historical fiction they have been reading. They will give a one to two minute summary and explain why or why not they would recommend this book to a friend. There will also be a reminder to write reviews of books they have read for the card catalog. Additional book talks may be given by the librarian as

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needed. Sharing books with others is an important part of the reading experience. Students, by seeing their classmates reading and enjoying books, may learn to enjoy the same books, or others like them.

In addition to the library lessons, which will occur weekly for about a month, the library will organize and host a competition among social studies classes. Each class will track how many pages of historical fiction they read during the month that the library lessons take place. Individuals may choose to read more than one book. The class at each grade level with the highest average number of pages read per student will win cookies. Individuals will be rewarded as well. The student at each grade level with the highest number of pages of historical fiction read during this time will earn a \$25 gift card to Barnes & Noble. This contest will motivate students to read beyond the requirements of their assignment.

The final piece of the program will be a fun competition, one that has no class work involved. On the last day of the program, there will be a “Dress as your favorite historical person” day. Students may select a person from history to dress up as for the day. Any student who participates will be eligible to sign up for a drawing for a \$25 Barnes & Noble gift card. While dressing up is not directly related to reading historical fiction or information literacy, it will bring the program full circle by connecting these historical figures to real life and making reading fun.

Resources

This program is designed to use resources that are already available to the library. Many historical fiction novels are already owned because the social studies requirement has been in place for many years, and it is normal part of collection development.

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A second resource that is needed is the participation of teachers. Though this program is designed specifically to meet the needs of the social studies department, the library will still need to achieve the buy-in of each social studies individual teacher.

During the third week, the librarian will need computers for each student, internet access, and the Library of Congress website. A printer will be needed for creating bulletin board and poster materials. Other supplies are available through the school office teacher supply room.

In addition to materials for making the actual program work, the library also needs to acquire prizes. This is the only part of the project that will require additional library funds. Four Barnes & Noble gift cards will be \$100 total, and the cookies and napkins for three classes will cost about \$75. With a total budget of \$200, this leaves \$25 to be spent on supplies for advertising and any other small miscellaneous expenses that might come up.

Publicity

In order for the program to be successful, especially the historical fiction reading competition, there must be publicity. The library will spend as little money as possible on advertising in order to reserve funds for materials and awards. During the morning announcements, there will be messages about the “Whose Story?” program. These will occur three times a week, reach every student in attendance, and are free.

Posters advertising the contests and the program will be put up in the halls, and the library bulletin board will also contain information. These will be inexpensive ways to advertise. All students walk through the halls and spend some time in the library, so exposure will be maximized.

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The social studies teachers will also be asked to promote the program and remind their students. Because the program is tied to their historical fiction reading requirements, they have an interest in making the program successful.

Evaluation

The two simplest pieces of the evaluation will be the participation in the competition and the check out statistics for historical fiction during this time. If those numbers are high, the program can be considered at least partially successful.

Another measuring tool will be a historical fiction survey that students are given both before starting the program and after completing it. Questions on the survey will be:

- What is historical fiction?
- What is your perception of historical fiction? Why do you feel that way?
- Is it important to read historical fiction? Why or why not?
- What is a reliable source? Give one example.
- What is a primary source? Where can you find primary sources?
- How has your perception of this genre changed over the last nine weeks?

This survey allows the librarian and the teachers to determine whether students' knowledge about historical fiction and reliable sources has increased.

The final measure of success will be the projects and assessments that students complete in their social studies classes over the books they read. The librarian can visit with social studies teachers to determine whether or not the program was helpful and if students learned.

Conclusion

The AMS library already has positive programs in place, especially for language arts classes. By collaborating with a wider variety of teachers, the librarian can increase information

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literacy skills across the curriculum. The “Whose Story?” program is a plan to begin collaboration with social studies teachers and increase information literacy by encouraging students to read historical fiction and consider the historical context in which it takes place.

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