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PRACTICE

Using Artifacts to Study Historical and Realistic Children's and Adolescent Fiction in the Classroom

KEVIN J. POWELL AND EWA MCGRAIL

5:20 A.M.
Wednesday April 18, 1906
Chin and Ah Sing's tenement

"Chin cannot see. He cannot move. He can barely breathe. In the darkness, he hears his father cough. 'Are you alright, Chin?'" (p. 27)

In *The Earth Dragon Awakes*, Newbery Award winning author Lawrence Yep tells the story of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake through the eyes of Chin and Henry, an eight-year-old and a nine-year-old boy. Chin lives in a Chinatown tenement, while Henry lives in an affluent part of the city. Before the earthquake, the two friends loved to spend their free time reading and talking about heroes in popular "penny dreadful" novels. These serial stories gained popularity with teenagers in the late 19th century because of their sensational depictions of swashbuckling criminals and ne'er-do-well heroes. As a result of the earthquake, Chin and Henry experience real life heroics from their loved ones and friends. The two boys witness the uplifting ways individuals and communities bind together in tragedy to work for the common good.

Since the time period, customs, and events portrayed in this young adult historical fiction are distant, readers in today's classroom may find this text difficult to understand (Kiefer, Hepler, & Hickman, 2007). Teachers will need

to provide the necessary background knowledge to aid comprehension of this text (Youngs & Serafini, 2011). But how might a teacher most profitably do that? We believe that choosing to use artifacts in exploration can be an extremely valuable "way in" to help students develop the necessary background knowledge to be able to read and connect to a book such as Yep's *Earth Dragon Awakes*.

Studying relevant artifacts, that is, the authentic remnants of history that tell how people lived, who they were, and what they did (Fuhler, Farris, & Nelson, 2006), can aid in comprehension of such complex texts. Through such explorations, students will find learning facts and history both interesting and exciting, in comparison to only reading and absorbing such material from content area textbooks. There is, however, another good reason to use historical artifacts. Notable among the new Common Core State Standards (2010) are those that require students to become proficient in the "use of technology, including the internet, to produce and publicly write and collaborate with others" and "to gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information."

The use of artifacts connects to this renewed focus on interdisciplinary teaching, information literacy, critical literacy, and multimedia composition.

Exploring Artifacts with *The Earth Dragon Awakes*

Fortunately, the internet has a treasure trove of audiovisual texts and pictorial material that can support readings from many points in history. We began the artifacts exploration activity by providing a brief overview of various kinds of artifacts in connection to historical and realistic fiction read in today's language arts classroom. These types, developed by the NCTE Assembly on American Literature (2003), include:

- **Visual Arts Artifacts**
Paintings, sculpture, and other works of visual art that help students understand the cultural setting of a literary text they study.
- **Political History Artifacts**
Speeches, protest posters, and cartoons capturing the political views of various groups that help students comprehend the place and time of a text.
- **Social History Artifacts**
Diaries, photos, music, clothing that help students learn about the cultural norms of the time of a text.
- **Oral Histories**
Folk songs, interviews, and other oral histories that expose students to alternative views of a text's cultural setting.

- **Domestic Architecture**
Buildings or furniture that invite students to explore what exterior and interior spaces reveal about the cultural setting and period of a literary text.
- **Cultural Geography**
Natural and man-made landscapes and surroundings that help students make connections between relationships of people of a text to their environments.
- **Ritual and Ceremonial Artifacts**
Objects such as Victorian calling cards or Puritan gravestones and other sacred and secular ritual objects that help students analyze the ways people of a text define order and the role of religion and spirituality in their lives.

For our own part, we brought in a number of different artifacts for the students to get a sense of the variety of artifacts available for use in the classroom. We brought in an old “penny dreadful” novel as an example of a cultural artifact. We brought in an original copy of *Collier's Magazine* published shortly after the San Francisco earthquake in 1906 as an example of a political history artifact (1906, May 5). We also brought an original copy of the *Atlanta Journal* from Jimmy Carter's presidential inauguration in 1977, and an original copy of the *Atlanta Constitution* from the first moon landing in 1969 as additional political history artifacts (1977, Jan 20 & 1969, Jul 21).

As a primary source of information for people for the past century and a half, newspapers and magazines include a wealth of information to analyze, from the headlines on the front page to the editorial page to the comic strips

and advertisements on the back page. In fact, our graduate students discussed how the newspapers helped them feel closer to the events described. An investigation like this one can allow young readers to vicariously experience the life and conditions of the people and times depicted in children's and adolescent literature, by taking them back into a specific time or place with a newspaper or magazine that a person from that time might have actually read.

This “traveling back in time” aids understanding of the problems characteristic of the time period, and of the ways in which people at that time dealt with these problems (Temple, Martinez, & Yokota, 2011). We believe it also helped students connect to other history they may have gleaned from textbooks and resulted in a richer understanding of the past. Artifact exploration, and accompanying discussions, can complement well the history these texts cover (Morgan & Rasinski, 2012).

While the various artifacts circulated, we shared an excerpt from Lawrence Yep's (2006) *The Earth Dragon Awakes*. In the excerpt we chose, Yep details the first moments of the earthquake, when Chin, one of the two protagonists in the novel, feels the sudden jolt of the earthquake and large cracks begin to spread on the walls surrounding him. He calls for his father and finds a small table to hide under. After reading and discussing the excerpt, we led a whole class discussion on the merits of analyzing *Collier's Magazine* to help readers better understand the earthquake in San Francisco in 1906 and Yep's novel. The graduate students marveled at the photos of destruction of homes and public buildings, the pictures of homelessness, and the story of an eyewitness account in the magazine. Coupled with the pictures and the eyewitness account from *Collier's*

Magazine, the excerpt we read from the Yep's novel evoked a powerful response from the graduate students. They felt an emotional connection to the words we read from Yep's novel as well as to the artifacts they examined. They wanted to learn more about the San Francisco earthquake, they made connections to the earthquake in Haiti in 2010 and the earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011, and they discussed the power of historical fiction—that it can pique students' interest and help students understand the complexities of historical events. For recommended historical and realistic fiction books, see Appendix A.

We also discussed the “penny dreadful” artifact and how examining these dime store novels of the time may help today's students put themselves in the shoes of the characters in Yep's novel. From the political history examples in old newspapers to the cultural geography examples that led to discussions of the architecture in San Francisco before and after the earthquake in 1906 and a discussion of “penny dreadfuls,” Yep's novel provides a rich reason for and anchoring point for artifact exploration and a better understanding of the historical time in which the book takes place. Appendix B includes links to recommended artifacts organized by type of artifact for *Earth Dragon* and other novels.

We concluded the discussion with other ways to use the several artifacts we circulated in classroom instruction. One graduate student mentioned how she analyzes the advertisements in old newspapers with her students to compare the language of a historical fiction novel they are reading with the language of the advertisement in the newspaper. Another graduate student explained how she conducts a gallery walk as an icebreaker activity before reading a

historical fiction novel with her class. She creates a gallery-like setting where students walk around the classroom analyzing and discussing artifacts related to the book they are going to study. After this introduction to the merits of incorporating artifacts into literature instruction, the graduate students located and shared artifacts they found online for the books they read in our course. Appendix B includes links to the artifacts as well as a description of the artifacts the students found.

Your Turn to Use Artifacts in Literature Instruction

We have shown that teaching with artifacts in literature instruction can be a powerful way to help students develop the background knowledge and make connections to the content they explore in historical and realistic books they read in the English language arts classroom. In hoping that you will use this strategy in the classroom, we offer additional guidelines.

First, select historical fiction or realistic fiction appropriate to the grade level you teach. Second, consider what kind of background knowledge (i.e. cultural, political, time period) you think students may have difficulty connecting with. Generally, the further back in time, the harder it will be for students to “relate to,” especially when the period is outside of living memory.

Third, find artifacts that are as specific to the time and place as possible in assisting you in providing this background knowledge. Choose a range of artifacts (see the artifact typology we list above) to provide a rich learning experience.

Fourth, circulate artifacts in class so that students can explore them independently. At the time you distribute an artifact, tell a story about the people, the times, and the events that the artifact represents. Invite questions and discussion about the artifacts students study.

Discuss with students how these artifacts connect to the historical and realistic fiction text they read in class. Let them know that the artifact would have been as real to a person from that time as the students’ iPhones and Facebook accounts. Prepare relevant scenes or quotes from the literary work to scaffold this conversation.

With some modification, you can use this artifact exploration activity at all educational levels to help students better understand the literature they read. Librarians and media specialists are excellent resources to help you find artifacts and to develop activities for exploring them in your classroom. As Kapitzke (2001) states,

School library media specialists (SLMSs) do much more than simply provide learning support to students. In addition to teaching students the essential twenty-first-century skills they need to succeed, SLMSs also excite them about the process of learning and stimulate their curiosity through research, technology, and information problem solving. (p. 450)

Such team-taught lesson on artifacts is a win-win for everyone involved. Teachers share expertise in literature instruction, while school librarians share expertise in information literacy and information problem solving skills. We welcome you to take this opportunity for collaboration.

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Appendix A. Recommended Historical and Realistic Fiction Books, K-12.

Grades K-3

Just as Good: How Larry Doby Changed America's Game. Chris Crowe (2012). Set in 1948, this picture book tells the story of Larry Doby, the second African-American to break baseball's color barrier. Historical subject: American Civil Rights Movement.

Goin' Someplace Special. Patricia McKissack (2001). A young African-American girl who goes through a series of obstacles to go to one of the few integrated places in segregated Nashville: the public library. Historical subject: American Civil Rights Movement.

Grandfather's Journey. Allen Say (2008). A Japanese-American man recounts his father's journey to America. Historical subject: immigration.

A Boy Called Dickens. Deborah Hopkinson (2012). 12-year-old Charles Dickens works in a factory and shares stories about his community. Historical subject: Charles Dickens.

The Elephant from Baghdad. Mary Holmes (2012). A story set in the 8th century about King Charlemagne's friendship with Haroun al Rashid, a great ruler of the East. Historical subject: Islamic empire.

Grades 4-8

Billy Creekmore. Tracey Porter (2008). An orphan embarks on a cross-country journey in search of his father. Historical subject: early 1900s in America.

Someone Named Eva. Joan Wolf (2011). Blond haired, blue-eyed Milani is taken to a school in Poland to be trained as a "proper German" for adoption by German families. Historical subject: Czechoslovakia during World War Two.

Across Five Aprils. Irene Hunt (1987). Life on an Illinois farm during five years of the Civil War. Historical subject: the Civil War.

No Promises in the Wind. Irene Hunt (1970). A young boy runs away from home during the Great Depression because there is not enough food to feed the whole family. Historical subject: the Great Depression.

Way Down Deep. Ruth White (2011). A baby named Ruby June is found on the doorsteps of a local boarding house. Historical subject: Appalachian West Virginia in the 1950s.

Trouble Don't Last. Shelley Pearsall (2003). Samuel, a 12-year-old slave, and Harrison, the elderly slave who helped raise him, try to escape to Canada. Historical subject: the Antebellum South.

Feathers. Jacqueline Woodson (2008). A new white student moves into a predominantly African American school in the winter of 1971. Historical subject: race relations in the 1970s.

Grades 9-12

Marathon. Boaz Yakin (2012). In this graphic novel, follow Eucles, famously known for preventing the fall of Greece in 490 B.C., when he takes his journey from Sparta to Athens. Historical subject: Ancient Greece.

Boy in the Striped Pajamas. John Boyne (2006). Bruno, the son of a Nazi officer, befriends a boy in striped pajamas who lives behind a wire fence. Historical subject: Auschwitz, World War Two.

The Gathering Storm. Robin Bridges (2012). A blend of history and fantasy, set in St. Petersburg, Russia in the 1880s. Katerina has a special power that may change the fate of Imperial Russia. Historical subject: Imperial Russia, late 1800s.

Stitches. David Small (2009). A graphic novel with autobiographical elements about the author's teen years; Small recounts the struggles that ensue when he becomes mute as a result of throat surgery. Realistic subject: Cancer.

Code Name Verity. Elizabeth Wein (2012). Spy Julia relays her capture and fight to keep alive after landing in Nazi-occupied France during World War Two. Historical subject: France and Great Britain, World War Two.

Levis & Clark. Nick Bertozzi (2011). A graphic version of the explorers' journey, including perspectives of the characters with them. Historical subject: Western Frontier, early 1800s.

Appendix B Recommended Resources for Historical Artifacts, By Book Title

Title	Artifact
<p><i>The Earth Dragon Awakes</i> Lawrence Yep</p>	<p>Political History Photographs and articles documenting the effects of the 1906 earthquake from <i>Collier's Magazine</i> to help students understand the political context in which the text is written. London, J. (1906, May 5). The story of an eye-witness. <i>Collier's Magazine</i>, 37(6), 22-24. Palmer, F. (1906, May 5). San Francisco in ruins. <i>Collier's Magazine</i>, 37(6), 13-14.</p> <p>Social History An excerpt from the 1936 film, "San Francisco," starring Clark Gable and Jeanette MacDonald. The scene includes a fictional depiction of the earthquake with innovative special effects. Emerson, J. (Producer), & Van Dyke, W.S. (Director). (1936). San Francisco [Motion picture]. United States: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/.</p> <p>Visual Arts Painting titled "Despair" by Edwin Deakin at the Oakland Museum of California. Depicts the emotional toll and destruction on the city of San Francisco after the earthquake. Deakin, E. (1906, Jul 10). Despair. Retrieved from http://museumca.org/picturethis/exhibits/paintings-californias-past.</p> <p>Domestic Architecture A resource guide on the history of Chinatown in San Francisco, including photos and descriptions of the buildings in the neighborhood. Retrieved from http://www.pbs.org/kqed/chinatown/.</p> <p>Oral History First person audio interviews and letters from survivors of the San Francisco earthquake in 1906. Stamburg, S. (2006, April 17). San Francisco: Memories of an earthquake. National Public Radio. Retrieved from http://www.npr.org/.</p>
<p><i>Across Five Aprils</i> Irene Hunt</p>	<p>Political History Political cartoons and newspaper editorials to help students understand the political context in which the text is written. Copley, John N. 1893, Documenting the American South, http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/copley/ill4.html</p> <p>Oral History Music and video clips from Ken Burns's documentary series on the Civil War to help students get various points of view on the cultural setting of the novel. http://www.pbs.org/civilwar.</p>
<p><i>Billy Creekmore</i> Tracey Porter</p>	<p>Cultural Geography Photographs of circus posters from the early 1900s to help students relate to the circus set over 100 years ago. Retrieved from Library of Congress. http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/picamer/paCircus.html.</p>

Appendix B Recommended Resources for Historical Artifacts, By Book Title, Continued.

Title	Artifact
<p><i>Way Down Deep</i> Ruth White</p>	<p>Cultural Geography and Social History Appalachian pioneer's mountain life and their children to help understand the cultural context of mountain life in mid-century United States. (1940): University of Kentucky. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com.</p>
<p><i>Marathon</i> Boaz Yakin</p>	<p>Visual Arts A painting by the 19th century British painter Frederic George Cotman of Eucles —the hero of the Battle of Marathon in Ancient Greece. Cotman, G. (ca. 1850-1920). The death of Eucles. Retrieved from http://www.artvalue.com/photos/auction/0/46/46138/attributed-to-cotman-frederick-the-death-of-eucles-2287284.jpg.</p>
<p><i>The Gathering Storm</i> Robin Bridges</p>	<p>Domestic Architecture Color photographs and vivid descriptions of mosques, schools, churches, and monasteries in Imperial Russia. Retrieved from Library of Congress website: http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/empire/architecture.html.</p>

Kevin J. Powell is a doctoral student at Georgia State University. As a former elementary school teacher-librarian and middle school language arts teacher, Kevin focuses his research on student talk in small group contexts and collaboration between language arts teachers and teacher-librarians in inquiry-based instruction.

Ewa McGrail is an Associate Professor of Language and Literacy at Georgia State University. In her research, Dr. McGrail examines the literacy and technology connection; teacher education, professional development and technology; and copyright and media literacy in and out of the classroom. She also explores innovation and technology application in instruction.