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Emilee Hussack

West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Pauline Skowron Schmidt

West Chester University of Pennsylvania, pschmidt@wcupa.edu

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Carpe Librum: Seize the (YA) Book

We're Not Kidding: Nonfiction Texts to Use across the Curriculum

Emilee Hussack
Pauline Skowron Schmidt
West Chester University
West Chester, Pennsylvania

The use of nonfiction texts in the classroom is becoming increasingly vital to maintaining our focus on meeting Common Core State Standards. With the Common Core emphasis on literacy across the curriculum, nonfiction texts are an ideal way of applying a literary focus to historical events and social developments. Yet, we have all read a dry, impersonal nonfiction article about, say, a nonexistent bike share program in New York City, among other topics. Students tend to become disengaged when the nonfiction they are exposed to is written in this manner. This is where young adult authors can save the day! With the young adult literature genre becoming central to our secondary classrooms, we can now look for YA nonfiction texts that highlight historical events and multicultural conversations while engaging the student reader with creative, humorous, and exciting voices. To meet the Common Core State Standard for ninth- and tenth-grade literacy in history

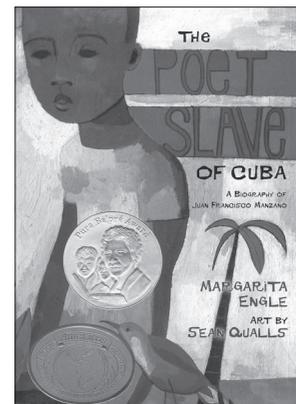
and social studies, teachers must ask students to analyze a series of events to determine cause and effect (RH 9-10.3); the following texts address particular events in history that demonstrate important causes or effects of landmark cultural movements.

The strength of these texts is their engaging voices and the variety of styles used. Importantly, these YA authors take precious care of their subjects, respecting the authenticity of the history while crafting appealing narratives that shake free of the usual rigidity of the nonfiction text. By making an effort to introduce YA nonfiction texts into the classroom, teachers can help students uncover remarkable dramas and exciting events that are perhaps hidden in our day-to-day lives. YA texts will hopefully excite students and encourage them to reach into their own realities to search for meaningful narratives.

The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano

Margarita Engle, art by Sean Qualls (New York: Holt, 2008)

Margarita Engle has said that writing a historical novel in verse is like “time travel, a dreamlike blend of imagination and reality.

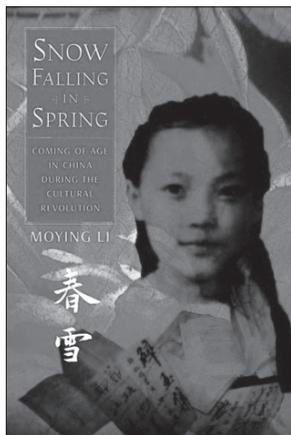


It's an exploration" (<http://www.margaritaengle.com>). Indeed, her verse novel *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano* ties the historical to the poetic, taking the reader back in time to tell the story of Juan Francisco Manzano, raised as a slave in Cuba during the early 1800s. While history notes that Manzano developed a passion for poetry, the poems that comprise the text are Engle's and are crafted through a number of perspectives and voices to create a rich story of struggle and survival.

The novel is listed as suitable for a lower middle school reading level but could be beautifully incorporated into a higher grade level as a text demonstrating verse poetry as well as to examine Cuba's history of the racial strife and political uprisings. There is a wealth of historical information to explore here. There are key historical

dates woven throughout the texts as well as a helpful section of historical notes and the author's research through primary documents. Finally, grounding the text in authenticity, pieces of Manzano's poetry are reproduced in both the original Spanish as well as in English.

The Poet Slave is a nonfiction text that not only introduces poetic verse to the classroom but also brings to the student readers a history often neglected. By exploring Manzano's battle to shape his identity as a Cuban and as a poet against brutal injustices of slavery and racism, shared struggles are identified and cultural connections are made. Both students and educators will benefit from an examination of *The Poet Slave of Cuba*.



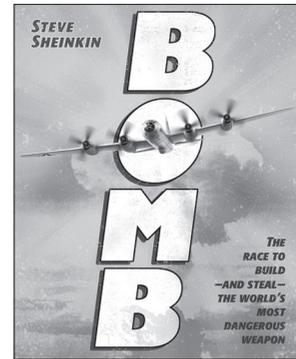
Snow Falling in Spring: Coming of Age in China during the Cultural Revolution

Moying Li (New York: Farrar, 2008)

Moying Li's childhood memoir of growing up in China during the Cultural Revolution is one girl's simple account of surviving

her family's time of poverty and navigating homesickness while living away at boarding school. Yet, there is nothing simple about Li's account, as it gives the reader an intimate perspective on the development of Mao Zedong's oppressive rule through powerful propaganda and the persecution of those standing for freedom. Li's story takes us on an extraordinary journey. The novel starts with her time as a child in a peaceful Beijing where she was raised by her parents and her spirited grandmother and taught to value education and intellectual freedom. Eventually, the reader is faced with the gradual takeover by the Communist Party and Chairman Mao. Being able to see from Li's interior perspective, the reader learns of the use of political propaganda, how blind allegiance slowly persuades one to betray another, and, ultimately, the inevitable enslavement that occurs when intellectual freedom is eliminated.

Li's voice is powerful and honest, yet particularly sensitive to the struggle between her love for her country and her love of learning. Hers is a story of remaining true to one's principles, which, for Li, is her passion for learning and continued education. And, through her personal story of adolescent struggles of homesickness and uncertainty, she also tells us the story of a determined country that endured one of history's most ruthless regimes. In weaving the events of the Cultural Revolution with her own coming of age, Li crafts a nonfiction text that engages the reader in an important cultural conversation of the power of propaganda and the importance of intellectual freedom.



Bomb: The Race to Build—and Steal—the World's Most Dangerous Weapon

Steve Sheinkin (New York: Roaring Brook, 2012)

Steve Sheinkin, a former textbook writer, claims he is "making up for his previous crimes," and he certainly has gained tremendous ground with his new nonfiction text *Bomb: The Race to Build—and Steal—the World's Most Dangerous Weapon*. It is a text that has won much critical acclaim, including the 2013 YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction, and deserves every award it has earned. Sheinkin uses his textbook background to incorporate heavy primary sources in a way that reads like a movie script: engaging and exciting. Telling the story of the birth of the atomic bomb, the reader is introduced to the "characters" of Otto Hahn, Robert Oppenheimer, and even a vacationing Albert Einstein. Sheinkin expertly weaves together three narratives: Oppenheimer's work in the science of the bomb, the Soviet's elaborate spy ring determined to steal the secrets of the bomb, and the Allied forces of World War II plotting to destroy the German nuclear program.

As a nonfiction text, *Bomb* shines as a page-turning narrative that maintains historical authenticity through the use of extensive primary sources. At times, readers can forget they are reading a nonfiction text, as Sheinkin adds a unique focus on the character development of the major players of the bomb project. This focus engages the reader within a story that could otherwise become complicated and cast aside as “boring.” Instead, *Bomb* brings to life a story of espionage, international tensions, and, ultimately, the dangerous thirst for world power.

As a classroom text, *Bomb* would engross even the most reluctant reader while still demonstrating the importance of primary sources and historical accuracy. Sheinkin includes an extensive bibliography to provide additional sources to any interested students or to an educator seeking related material.

Conclusion

With the growing emphasis on a student’s ability to explicate nonfiction texts, the use of these creative texts would beautifully supplement a curriculum by gen-

erating student engagement and interest. While continuing to demonstrate the importance of historical accuracy, these YA texts (and many others similar to them) will enhance a classroom reading list or feature as additional readings that any educator would confidently recommend. Furthermore, such nonfiction texts operate as mentor texts to show how primary sources can be intertwined into a creative narrative and how the histories of our communities are, ultimately, rich with real-life adventures. 

Emilee Hussack is an MA student at West Chester University and recently completed her secondary certification. Her interests include composition and rhetoric, Modernist poetry, and hip-hop. Emilee can be reached at EH764303@wcupa.edu. **Pauline Skowron Schmidt** is an assistant professor of English education at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. When she is not busy teaching, she enjoys reading YA literature. Email her at pschmidt@wcupa.edu.