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# “The More Things Change . . .”: A New Generation of Historical Fiction

Pauline Skowron Schmidt

*West Chester University of Pennsylvania*, [pschmidt@wcupa.edu](mailto:pschmidt@wcupa.edu)

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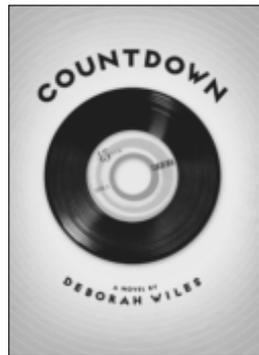
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# Carpe Librum: Seize the (YA) Book

## “The More Things Change . . .”: A New Generation of Historical Fiction

By the mid-1990s historical fiction “had become a significant new category of young adult literature” (Cart 105), and thankfully so! It seems that a plethora of early pioneers paved the way for some remarkable historical fiction. Particularly fascinating is the emergence of several series all set in the 1960s and yet tremendously varied in terms of subject matter and location. As Joan A. Knickerbocker, Martha A. Brueggeman, and James A. Rycik state, “authors of historical fiction can go where historians cannot” (161), which is essential for this particular decade. Even now, “The Sixties” remain a controversial decade for young people to understand. Textbooks (and possibly teachers) might gloss over the gritty elements of that part of American history. I feel that the three authors discussed below invite readers to join them in inventive and diverse journeys through the 1960s.

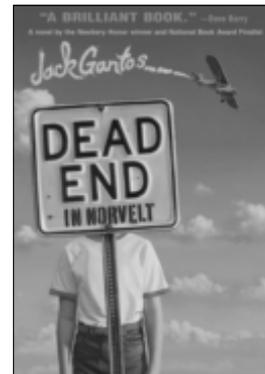
*Countdown* by Deborah Wiles focuses on twelve-year-old Franny Chapman, who is struggling to grow up amid family drama, balancing her relationship with her best friend, and trying to make



sense of the news she’s hearing about an event referred to as “the Cuban Missile Crisis.”

What’s unique about this text, and the second book in the Sixties Trilogy, *Revolution*, is how seamlessly Wiles incorporates photographs of people such as President Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., along with cartoons, news stories, propaganda, and song lyrics. In this unique approach to telling the story, various components engage the reader in the private experiences of Franny, intertwined with the public Cuban Missile Crisis faced by the entire country.

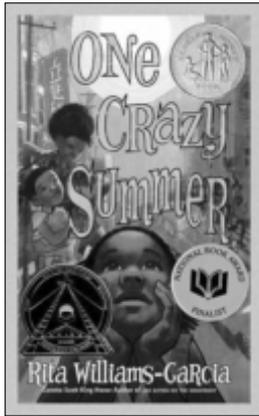
With quite a different tone and mood, Jack Gantos tells a semiautobiographical, historically accurate tale in *Dead End in Norvelt*. The small-town setting unfolds as the reader learns the historical significance of what the New Deal termed “subsistence homesteads.” That initiative started in 1934, but when we enter Norvelt in 1962, the once-



utopian community is beginning to lose its luster. Readers also learn that Eleanor Roosevelt was instrumental in developing and implementing the homesteads.

Young readers may especially love the book’s narrator: Jackie Gantos. He is “grounded for life” by his quarreling parents and gets assigned some pretty strange chores throughout the summer. The humor is certainly dark and a little bit twisted, but many readers will embrace the oddities of this narrator and all that he experiences over the summer.

*One Crazy Summer*, by Rita Williams-Garcia, explores the summer of 1968 in Oakland, California, through the experiences of three sisters: Delphine, Vonneta, and Fern. Rich, luscious dialogue and vivid narration establish the narrator as a lovable young girl trying to make sense of the pivotal Civil Rights Movement in our nation’s history. The girls



are sent to Oakland to be with their mother for the summer—a mother who abandoned them seven years earlier. They are trying desperately to get to know her,

to gain her attention and affection, and to understand why she would have anything to do with the Black Panther Party.

Again, the narrative voice is welcoming and honest; the reader truly sees what it must have been like for African American children at this important but, sometimes, dangerous time in history.

These three texts offer intriguing perspectives on different regions of the 1960s United States. Young people will enjoy the cultural study of this decade through the lens of these narrators; and they may even learn a thing or two about history. 

**Pauline Skowron Schmidt** is assistant professor in English Education at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. When she is not busy teaching, she enjoys reading YA literature. She has been a member of NCTE since 2003. Email her at [pschmidt@wcupa.edu](mailto:pschmidt@wcupa.edu).

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