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DOING THE DECADES

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At a high school or middle school not far from you, they're "Doing the Decades." Students, guided by social studies and English language arts teachers, work in learning teams to explore the ins and out of the 1920s, 1950s, or other periods. They examine major historical events, inventions, life styles, the cost of groceries and automobiles, sports, and other aspects of the social landscape. They may interview family members about what teen life was like in the decade *du jour*, view old movies, and learn the "latest" songs and dances. They may examine photo albums, their parents' high school annuals, or collections of historic photographs. They may listen to classic radio programs.

At Salem High School in Conyers, Georgia, one such decades unit is under way. Classes here are grouped heterogeneously. Interdisciplinary teaching is the rule rather than exception, due by and large to the school's membership in the Coalition of Essential Schools, the national network of schools that, under the leadership of TheodoreSizer, are implementing a series of restructuring principles. Evaluation, whenever feasible, is based on authentic public exhibitions as opposed to pencil and paper tests. Students may create murals reflecting "their" decade, present skits, role play important historic figures, create "you-are-there" videos, and develop magazines modeled after *Life* or *Ebony* into which they put the results of their individual research.

Literature of the era is normally one dimension of "Doing the Decades." High school youngsters studying the 1920s may read *The Great Gatsby*, while those investigating the 1930s may read *The Grapes of Wrath*, contemporary novels published in 1925 and 1939, respectively. From the perspective of the late 1990s, these novels shed light on life in their times. Teachers are likely to incorporate other genres as well: the short stories of Hemingway and Faulkner, the poetry of Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, the plays of Thornton Wilder and Arthur Miller.

Young adult literature of two sorts may help teachers Do the Decades well in their classrooms. First, there is a wealth of historical fiction set in each period of American history. In these works—in, for example, novels such as Carolyn Meyers' *White Lilacs*—writers painstakingly recreate times and places

consistent with historical records. The San Francisco earthquake, the Depression, the Civil Rights Movement, the Viet Nam War—these and other pivotal events of history may bore young people when they come straight out of the history book or a teacher's lecture. When linked to young characters *experiencing* those events in a work of fiction, however, the same history may capture the interest of many teens.

This article provides an overview of a number of such books—quality historical fiction—for each decade of the twentieth century.

Other works, those not written as historical fiction, mirror the times in which they were written. S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, for example, is timeless in many respects, but it also captures the life style and cultural mores of working class adolescents near Oklahoma City in the 1960s. For middle or high school students studying a decade different from their own, *The Outsiders* or other YA titles written at the time can be quite useful. A fairly sophisticated learning task would be to compare and contrast the home life, recreation, and school experiences of Ponyboy Curtis and other characters with those of late-1990s teens. What devices that are now commonplace were unknown in the mid-sixties? What did high school students do for entertainment? How did they spend Saturday night, and how does this compare with the experiences of today's teenagers?

A similar inquiry might focus on Maureen Daly's classic *Seventeenth Summer*, written in 1942. How has dating changed in the past fifty years? How do today's adolescent girls—their goals, their values, their feelings about boys—differ from their grandmothers at a similar age?

Let's take a quick look at twentieth-century decades and the young adult literature skillful teachers will offer to middle- and high-school students as they Do the Decades.

1900-1909: National Expansion and the New Americans

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the United States was a very different place from what it is today. For one thing, there were forty-five states, with Utah, Idaho and Wyoming having been admitted in the 1890s. Oklahoma would join the union in 1907.

Though somewhat few in number, examples of literature for young adults set between 1900-1909 reflect at least some of the experiences and issues of the times. Joan Dash's non-fiction account *We Shall Not Be Moved*, for example, shows how young immigrant women brought the shirtwaist industry to a halt when they protested labor conditions in 1909. Laurence Yep's *Dragon Wings* captures the Chinese-American's immigrant experience against the backdrop of the San Francisco earthquake and fire. Another recent work, Kristiana Gregory's *Earthquake at Dawn*, is told from the perspective of Daisy Valentine, a fifteen year old maid working for Edith Irvine, a young woman whose photographs, even today, are a primary record of the disaster.

A less well-known book among those listed below is Thomas Fall's powerful *The Ordeal of Running Standing*. Recently reissued, the novel traces the experiences of Running Standing, a Kiowa Indian living in a hostile white world. The novel's action shifts from such settings as the Oklahoma Territory to Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania and back again.

Literature for Young Readers Set in 1900-1909

- Dash, J. *We Shall Not Be Moved: The Women's Factory Strike of 1909*. Scholastic Trade. 1996.
 Fall, T. *The Ordeal of Running Standing*. University of Oklahoma Press. 1970.
 Glaser, D. *The Diary of Trilby Frost*. Holiday House. 1976.
 Gregory, K. *Earthquake at Dawn*. Gary Dean Gullickson. 1994.
 Yep, L. *Dragon Wings*. Harper Collins. 1977

1910-1919: Immigration and the Struggle for Human Rights

In the years immediately preceding World War I (1914-1919), the United States was the destination for millions of immigrants, most from Ireland, eastern Europe, and Russia. Entering through such sites as Ellis Island, these new Americans endured hardships in order to build better lives. Karen Hesse's *Letters from Rifka* recounts these hardships vividly through the eyes of a Russian girl who, due to illness, is kept out of the United States.

As the United States opened its doors to immigrants, it continued to impose harsh laws on those whose parents had been slaves freed by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. William Armstrong's *Sounder* and Ouida Sebestyen's *Words by Heart* portray families and young people working to achieve dignity and to acquire schooling against great odds. A tale of native Americans set at the same time is Hal Borland's *When the Legends Die*, which tells the story of Thomas Black Bull, an Indian boy who goes from the reservation to the cruel realities of the rodeo world. Only when he returns home and to the old ways of his people does he, now in middle age, achieve peace.

The years closing the decade were a time of increasing ferment in American society. Women, in particular, after a half century or more of activism, achieved the right to vote when the 19th Amendment was enacted in 1920. Jean Thesman's *The Ornament Tree*, set in Seattle, captures a small slice of feminist activism in 1919.

A too-good-to-ignore adult novel set during the Teens is James Agee's *A Death in the Family*. The novel is not for average readers but does offer a memorable portrait of the times.

Literature for Young Readers Set in 1910-1919

Adolescent Literature

- Armstrong, W. *Sounder*. Harper & Row. 1969.
 Borland, H. *When the Legends Die*. Lippincott. 1963.
 Hesse, K. *Letters from Rifka*. Puffin. 1993.
 Sebestyen, O. *Words by Heart*. Little, Brown. 1979.
 Thesman, J. *The Ornament Tree*. Avon Books. 1998

Adult Novel Set in the Decade

- Agee, J. *A Death in the Family*. McDowell, Obolensky. 1957

1920-1929: The "Roaring Twenties" and the Jazz Age

This is the decade of W. E. B. Dubois, Charles Lindbergh, and Amelia Earhart. The twenties are regarded by many Americans as a time of relative innocence, a time of plenty before the Great Depression to come. Yet the twenties witnessed as well the rise of organized crime and the Scopes trial in Tennessee.

If "time of innocence" is what young readers want to experience, Ray Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine*, set in 1928, may be a young reader's ticket. Bradbury's nostalgic novel has been described as a love letter to his childhood. Despite a serious theme, Green's *Joy in the Morning* is similarly upbeat while conveying life in Brooklyn in the decade vividly.

A darker portrait of the times is Cynthia Voigt's *Tree by Leaf*, in which a young girl comes to terms with the physical and emotional disfigurement of her father, a World War I veteran. The novel is set in Maine in 1921.

The rise of African-American culture in the 1920s and the Harlem Renaissance have not been adequately addressed by young adult novelists, at least not in works in print in the late nineties. Gordon Parks' *The Learning Tree*, set in Kansas, is an engaging exception to this rule. Carolyn Meyer's *White Lilacs* recounts in powerful terms the removal of African Americans from their homes in Dillon, Texas (based on Denton).

A classic gritty portrayal of life among African Americans in the era is Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. Born in 1908, Wright's autobiography spans more than the twenties, to be sure, but the 1920s were Wright's formative adolescent years.

Laurence Yep makes yet another contribution to quality historical fiction for young readers with *Star Fisher*. It centers on a Chinese American family's efforts to open a laundry near Clarksburg, West Virginia during the decade.

Literature for Young Readers Set in 1920-1929

- Bradbury, R. *Dandelion Wine*. Knopf, Random House. 1957.
 Meyer, C. *White Lilacs*. Gulliver Books. 1993.
 Parks, G. *The Learning Tree*. Fawcett. 1963.
 Smith, B. *Joy in the Morning*. Harper Collins Juvenile Books. 1976.
 Voigt, C. *Tree by Leaf*. Fawcett. 1995.
 Yep, L. *Star Fisher*. Puffin. 1992.

Pulitzer Prize Winners from the Decade

- Lewis, S. *Arrowsmith*. P.F. Collier. 1925.
 Wilder, T. *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. Harper & Row. 1927.

Be Sure Not to Overlook

- Wright, R. *Black Boy*. Harper & Row. 1966.

A Newbery Award Novel from 1920-1929

James, W. *Smoky the Cowhorse*. Simon & Schuster, 1981.

Out-of-Print but Worth Locating

Brown, I. *Morning Glory Afternoon*. Blue Heron Publishing, 1991.

Corcoran, B. *The Sky is Falling*. Atheneum, 1998.

Drama Set in the Decade

Lawrence, J. and R. E. Lee. *Inherit the Wind*. Bantam, 1982.

1930-1939 The Great Depression, the New Deal, and the Rise of Hitler and Soviet Communism in Europe

By any measure, the 1930s were a time of extraordinary change in American life. Television was invented. Intercity travel by air became available. Millions of Americans, out of economic necessity, moved from the countryside to the industrial cities of the Midwest or to California.

The older rural America, the America rooted in the agricultural nineteenth century, is captured by many books for young readers set in this decade. Forrest Carter's *The Education of Little Tree*, though controversial due to Carter's political views, is a beautiful portrayal of a boy raised by his Cherokee grandparents. Earl Hamner's *The Homecoming* inspired television's "The Waltons." Mildred Taylor's Newbery honoree *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* and *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*, its sequel, tell of an African-American family's loyalty to one another and their sacrifices to maintain their farmland in Mississippi. Richard Peck's latest, *A Long Way from Chicago*, chosen as a 1998 Newbery Honor book, offers a vivid contrast between big-city and small town life during the times; the novel is structured as a series of short stories spanning twelve years of summer vacations spent on a family farm. Less well-known is Terry Kay's recently reissued *The Year the Lights Came On*, set in Georgia during rural electrification.

For a picture of family life in the 1930s, in contrast to contemporary times, Cynthia Voigt's *Building Blocks* is a fine choice. In this time travel novel, Brann, its twelve-year-old protagonist, comes to understand why his parents, especially his father, act as they do.

The Depression was the pivotal event of the decade. The Dust Bowl still symbolizes the plight of American farm workers and their families. What had been the richest farm land in the world was now blowing away. Two novels, Karen Hesse's recent Newbery medalist *Out of the Dust* and Irene Hunt's *No Promises in the Wind* capture the Depression in terms today's adolescents will find appealing as well as informative.

Literature for Young Readers Set in 1930-1939

Angelou, M. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Bantam, 1983.

Carter, F. *The Education of Little Tree*. University of New Mexico Press, 1979.

Hamner, E. *The Homecoming*. Dramatic Publishing, 1976.

Hesse, K. *Out of the Dust*. Scholastic Press, 1997.

Hunt, I. *No Promises in the Wind*. Follett Publishing Company, 1970.

Kay, T. *The Year the Lights Came On*. University of Georgia Press, 1989.

Peck, R. *A Long Way from Chicago*. Dial Books for Young Readers, 1998.

Taylor, M. *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*. Puffin Books, 1991.

Taylor, M. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. Dial Press, 1976.

Voigt, C. *Building Blocks*. Atheneum, 1984.

Pulitzer Prize Winners from the Decade

Buck, P. *The Good Earth*. Grosset & Dunlap, 1931.

Mitchell, M. *Gone with the Wind*. Macmillan, 1936.

Rawlings, M.K. *The Yearling*. C. Scribner & Sons, 1938.

Steinbeck, J. *The Grapes of Wrath*. Viking, 1939.

Adult Novels Set in the Decade

Wright, R. *Native Son*. Harper & Row, 1940.

Nonfiction Set in the Decade

Parks, Gordon, *A Choice of Weapons*. Harper and Row, 1966.

Drama Set in the Decade (Pulitzer Prize Honoree in 1990)

Wilson, August. *The Piano Lesson*. Plume Books, 1990.

1940-1949: World War II, the Holocaust, and its Aftermath

The generation that came to maturity in the 1940s—the generation Tom Brokaw, in his recent non-fiction bestseller of the same title, calls *The Greatest Generation*—witnessed and participated in the emergence of the United States as a world military and economic power. There is a wealth of YA literature for teachers to choose from as their students study the decade.

Fiction set in the 1940s captures the period in human terms. Judy Blume's *Starring Sally J. Friedman as Herself* is partially an amusing reminiscence based on her experiences living in Miami in 1946-47, but the specter of the Holocaust, the uncertain fate of family members still in Europe, gives it a sobering darker dimension. Betty Greene's *Summer of My German Soldier* gives a twist to the Holocaust as Patty Bergen, a Jewish girl living in the Deep South harbors Anton, an escaped German prisoner.

World War II provides a significant backdrop to other novels, among them John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*, Katherine Paterson's *Jacob Have I Loved*, and Gary Paulsen's *The Cook Camp*. In these, the primary issues young characters deal with are not the war itself, but each plot is linked to the war in some fashion. Carson McCullers' *A Member of the Wedding*, a short adult novel with a long history of school use, captures family life in Georgia in the 1940s. The plight of Asian Americans in the early 1940s, when anti-Asian fears were rampant, is captured skillfully in two novels: Salisbury's *Under the Blood Red Sun*, set in Hawaii, and Savin's *The Moon Bridge*, set in San Francisco. Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar* is an older novel addressing the same topic.

Two other novels published in the 1940s, neither written with young readers in mind, are popular choices among teachers. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* remains among the late-1990s best-selling one hundred titles (*USA Today*); in some respects, Holden Caulfield is the grand daddy of all adolescent protagonists of the 1960s and later. Salinger seems to have influenced YA writers from Hinton to Crutcher. Potok's *The Chosen* might have occurred in other times and places, yet its portrayal of urban America in the 1940s from

the perspective of orthodox Jews is both readable and memorable.

Literature for Young Readers Set in 1940-1949

- Blume, J. *Starring Sally J. Friedman as Herself*. Yearling Books. 1986.
Daly, J. *Seventeenth Summer*. Archway. 1986.
Greene, B. *Summer of My German Soldier*. Dial Books for Young Readers. 1973.
Knowles, J. *A Separate Peace*. Macmillan. 1959.
McCullers, C. *The Member of the Wedding*. Houghton Mifflin. 1946.
Paterson, K. *Jacob Have I Loved*. Crowell. 1980.
Paulsen, G. *The Cook Camp*. Orchard Books. 1991.
Potok, Chiam. *The Chosen*. Simon & Schuster. 1967.
Salisbury, G. *Under the BloodRed Sun*. Yearling Books. 1995.
Savin, M. *The Moon Bridge*. Demco Media. 1995.
Houston, J. W. and James Houston. *Farewell to Manzanar*. Bantam Starfire. 1983.

Pulitzer Prize Winners from the Decade

- Warren, R.P. *All the Kings Men*. Harcourt, Brace, & Company. 1946.
Michener, R. *Tales of the South Pacific*. Macmillan. 1947.
Guthrie, A.B. *The Way West*. Houghton Mifflin. 1949.

Nonfiction About in the Decade

- Brokaw, T. *The Greatest Generation*. Random House. 1998.

Late Nineties Bestseller Set in the Decade

- Salinger, J.D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. Bantam. 1945.

1950-1959: Prosperity, the Cold War, Sputnik, and the Civil Rights Movement

In our own era, the 1950s hold a special fascination. Popular films such as *Pleasantville* satirize the stereotypical father-knows-best family of the era, questioning the view that life was better during the decade when the grandparents of most of today's secondary students grew to maturity. During the 1950s, *Brown vs. the Board of Education* determined that school segregation was inherently unequal. The Cold War threatened nuclear annihilation, and the Russians were ahead of the United State in the space race. Families moved to the suburbs and bought consumer goods such as televisions and a second family car.

Cormier's *Tunes for Bears to Dance To* is not an historical novel *per se*, but it captures aspects of the post-war years vividly. In it Henry, its main character, learns that anti-Semitism has survived the defeat of Hitler in Europe.

Race and the quest for civil rights link several works. Ellen Levine's extraordinary *Freedom's Children* is a striking work of non-fiction oral history. Through interviews with adults who, as teenagers in the 1950s and 1960s, participated in bus boycotts and non-violent marches for freedom, Levine captures the times in language that contemporary adolescents respond to favorably. *A Raisin in the Sun* is a much-anthologized modern classic drama. Less well known and recently reissued, Elizabeth Kata's *A Patch of Blue* portrays the plight of an abused blind girl befriended by a young African-American man. *Black Like Me* remains a very readable account of what a white man posing as an African American experienced as he traveled through the South.

The Rocket Boys, a 1998 non-fiction title, captures the

excitement of the early days in the space race. Made into the film *October Morning*, *Rocket Boys* shows how an adolescent with a dream can, even in an impoverished mining community, become an achiever.

Literature for Young Readers Set in 1950-1959

- Cormier, R. *Tunes for Bears to Dance To*. Delacorte. 1992.
Griffin, J.H. *Black Like Me*. Penguin. 1976.
Hansberry, L. *A Raisin in the Sun*. New American Library. 1966.
Kata, E. *A Patch of Blue*. Warner Books. 1989.
Levine, E. *Freedom's Children*. Avon Books. 1993.

Pulitzer Prize Winners from the Decade

- Hemingway, E. *The Old Man and the Sea*. Scribner. 1952.
Kantor, M. *Andersonville*. World Publishing Co. 1955.
Agee, J. *A Death in the Family*. McDowell, Obolensky. 1957.

Late Nineties Bestseller Set in the Decade

- Guterson, D. *Snow Falling on Cedar*. Harcourt Brace. 1994.
Hickam, H. *Rocket Boys*. Delacorte. 1998.

1960-1969: Assassination, Race Conflict, Feminism, and New Lifestyles

The 1960s were as tumultuous as the 1950s were placid, at least by comparison. Leaders, John Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., were murdered; African Americans took to the street demanding Black Power; colleges and universities erupted in protests over the Vietnam War; and schools and public places desegregated, many times unwillingly. In life styles, Americans dealt with an emerging drug culture, free love, and Woodstock, and, with rare exception, they listened to the Supremes and the Beatles.

Literature set in the 1960s, both recent works and those written during the decade, capture the times. *Go Ask Alice*, one of the first books to deal frankly with teenage drug abuse, remains popular today. Frank Bonham's *Durango Street* still reads well as a tale of urban boys on the edge of gangs and violence. So does Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender*.

The Civil Rights Movement is the subject of three works of fiction we list: Moore's *Freedom's Songs* recounts a northern African-American girl's experiences visiting family members in North Carolina; Davis's *Just Like Martin* follows Isaac, a fourteen year old, as he participates in non-violent demonstrations; and Curtis's *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963*, a Newbery honor book, relates incidents that climax in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Church in Birmingham, where four young girls died.

John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charlie*, recounting a leisurely cross-country trip by the aging writer, tells of aspects of American that were passing from the scene at the time. The author's arresting description of racism in New Orleans cannot help but bring this aspect of the decade to life.

Literature for Young Readers Set in 1960-1969

- Anonymous. *Go Ask Alice*. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers. 1971.
Bonham, F. *Durango Street*. Dutton. 1965.
Curtis, C. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963*. Bantam. 1997.
Davis, O. *Just Like Martin*. Puffin Books. 1992.
Hamilton, V. *The House of Dies Drear*. Macmillan. 1968.
Hinton, S.E. *The Outsiders*. Viking Press. 1967.
Lipsyte, R. *The Contender*. Harper & Row. 1967.

Moore, Y. *Freedom Songs*. Puffin Books. 1992.
Zindel, P. *My Darling My Hamburger*. Harper Crest. 1969.

Pulitzer Prize Winners from the Decade

Lee, H. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Lippincott. 1960.
Styron, W. *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Random House. 1967.

Nineties Bestseller Set in the Decade

Waller, R.J. *The Bridges of Madison County*. Warner Books. 1997.

Be Sure Not to Overlook

Steinbeck, J. *Travels with Charlie: In Search of America*. Penguin USA. 1981.

1970-1979: Vietnam and After, Watergate, and Social Unrest

In the early 1970s, Americans were deeply divided as the country pulled out of Vietnam with more than 56,000 young men killed in combat. They experienced the resignation of President Richard Nixon as the climax of the Watergate scandal, and they uneasily witnessed a rise in urban violence, homelessness, and drug addiction. More often than not, they viewed these events on the evening news rather than learn about them from newspapers.

Walter Dean Myers' *Fallen Angels* is perhaps the best Vietnam era novel for teenage readers. Its realistic language has sparked censorship in some communities, but its honest portrayal of a squad of young soldiers, each with his own story, is memorable. Gary Soto's *Jesse* is set on the other side of the world, in California, yet the specter of the military draft—always a greater threat to the poor than it was to the affluent—is always just on the horizon. Jesse and his brother, Mexican Americans, join the protest movement led by Cesar Chavez, who represented migrant farm workers.

Mathis' *A Teacup Full of Roses*, set about 1970, follows three brothers attempting to rise above the worst of urban life, particularly drugs: The youngest is a talented basketball player. Despite its earlier publication date, the easy-to-read novel appeals to many contemporary teens. Cormier's *After the First Death* introduces the subject of terrorism in a nail-biting narrative. In it Kate, a heroic school bus driver, tries to save the children she is transporting.

Writers may be too close to the 1970s and 1980s to set historical fiction in these relatively recent times. Having said that, one may observe that other superior novels set in Nixon and Carter years, Judith Guest's *Ordinary People* among them, not only tell a good story but mirror the times in which they were written.

Literature for Young Readers Set in 1970-1979

Cormier, R. *After the First Death*. Pantheon Books. 1979.
Guest, J. *Ordinary People*. Penguin. 1993.
Mathis, S.B. *A Teacup Full of Roses*. Viking Press. 1972.
Myers, W.D. *Fallen Angels*. Scholastic Paperbacks. 1991.
Soto, G. *Jesse*. Harcourt Brace. 1994.

Pulitzer Prize Winners from the Decade

Welty, E. *The Optimist's Daughter*. Random House. 1972.
Shaara, M. *The Killer Angels*. Ballantine Books. 1974.

1980-1989 The Reagan Years, AIDS, Cultural Diversity, and Poverty amid Prosperity

How will the future regard the 1980s? Conservative political views gained widespread popularity during the decade, and homelessness became commonplace on city streets. Technology began to transform daily life through video tape players, FAXs, and personal computers. And AIDS, which virtually no one had heard of in 1981, was, by the end of the decade, a major killer of young men, especially gay young men.

Two books aptly convey an aspect of life in the post Vietnam era. Gary Paulsen's *The Monument* centers around a small town's plans to erect a monument in memory of its war dead and the controversy that ensues over its design. In Katherine Paterson's *Park's Quest*, twelve year old Park learns that he has a half sister, a girl fathered in Viet Nam by his father before his death.

Nat Hentoff's *The Day They Came to Arrest the Book*, set in a high school, addresses an issue that won't go away, censorship. Hentoff's novel offers a balanced treatment of the incident, in which African Americans object to the language in *Huckleberry Finn*.

Literature for Young Readers Set in 1980-1989

Hentoff, N. *The Day They Came to Arrest the Book*. Delacorte Press. 1982.
Paterson, K. *Park's Quest*. Lodestar Books. 1988.
Paulsen, G. *The Monument*. Yearling Books. 1993.

Pulitzer Prize Winners from the Decade

Walker, A. *The Color Purple*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1982.
McMurtry, L. *Lonesome Dove*. Simon & Schuster. 1985.
Morrison, T. *Beloved*. Knopf. 1987.

Nineties Bestsellers Set in the Decade

Grisham, J. *A Time to Kill*. Island Books. 1992.
Morrison, T. *Song of Solomon*. Knopf. 1977.

1990-1999: Urban Violence, Technology, and Uncertainty about a New Millennium

If we are too close to the 1980s to identify historical fiction for the decade, what of the 1990s? Perhaps it is a bit arrogant to seek out books that capture our own decade. Perhaps. Whatever else historians will say of these times, we know that ours is the era of Monicagate, the Gulf War, and Newt Gingrich—of cell phones

and PCs. Having admitted that we are on shaky ground, however, there are some books which, tentatively at least, appear to convey a good bit about what matters in the closing years of the twentieth century.

Avi's Newbery medalist, *Nothing But the Truth*, for example, underscores the rise of the media as a force in the lives

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of individuals. The sad story it tells, about a teacher destroyed by negative publicity when she disciplines one of her students, might have happened in a different time, but the way the incident is blown out of proportion by the press is symptomatic of the times we live in. Sharon Draper's *Tears of a Tiger* reflects the commonplace danger of alcohol abuse, the too-frequent indifference of parents, and the school's inability to adequately assist a depressed young student, who takes his own life as the novel concludes.

Two other 90s young-adult novels are worth noting, even when it is unlikely that teachers will have their students "do" this particular decade. Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, though set in an undefined but not-to-distant future, addresses significant issues of our own time, among them the ethical uses of technology, euthanasia, and the state's intrusive management of private affairs. In a different domain entirely, the final section of Walter Dean Myers' *The Glory Field* is set in 1994, when members of an African-America family gather on the South Carolina farm their forbears had once worked as slaves. The multi-generation tale conveys Myers' strong sense of family history.

Similarly, John Grisham's *The Street Lawyer*, in its portrayal of homelessness in a time of national affluence, captures an essential quality of our own times.

Literature for Young Readers Set in 1990-1999

Avi. *Nothing But the Truth*. Orchard Books. 1991.
Draper, S. *Tears of a Tiger*. Alladin Paperbacks. 1996.
Lowry, L. *The Giver*. Houghton Mifflin. 1993.
Myers, W.D. *The Glory Field*. Point. 1996.

Nineties Bestseller Set in the Decade

Grisham, J. *The Street Lawyer*. Dell Island Books. 1997.

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