

Vr293SU20 Chinese American Literature

Prof. Andrew Yang
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Today

1. content to inspire critical analysis for your presentations
2. practice deconstructing an argument
3. practice asking critical questions on a presentation

As a historical novel, Laurence Yep's *Dragonwings* does not exist just to teach readers historical fact; it also pushes readers to consider history from the points of view of many characters, both major and supporting.

Richard Slotkin

- historian as well as writer of historical novels:
“historians often understand more about the stories they tell than can be proved according to the rules of the discipline” (223).
- History an act of interpretation more than collecting and stating facts
- Similarly, history less determined, not “a railroad riding us on iron tracks to a determined end”; when writing his own novels, he recognizes the need to artificially establish myth, tradition, and heroes (231)
- He embraces a “heroic” theory of the historical novel, “which emphasizes the agency of more or less powerful persons as shapers of events” (231).

Jessica Hower

- The purpose of Historical Fiction:
 1. Demonstrate and engage readers in “myriad ways of representing the past” (81)
 2. To see history as “a metaphysical borderland – a fertile, permeable, shifting space” (81)
 3. To inspire students (readers) to perform “new, original research” and discover different ways to see and explore the past (81)
- The deliberate creation of feelings through causation: “nostalgic for the sanitized simplicity of the past, confirm our confidence in the superiority of the present, or chart a brave new course for the future” (91)

Stephen Ambrose

- One tax collector in 1865: “Had a China fight. Knocked down some and drew out our pistols on the rest. ... Had a great time. Chinamen’s tails cut off. Down at the Yuba river shot a Chinaman. Had a hell of a time.” (Ambrose 150)
- For CP railroad: usually worked and paid in gangs, with white (“usually Irish”) manager, who did skilled work (measurements, etc.) while Chinese did labor. (Ambrose 153)
- CP Railroad bosses: “The Chinese were ideal workers. Cheap. Did as they were told. Made a quick study and after something was shown or explained to them did it skillfully. Few if any strikes. The same for complaints. They did what no one else was willing or able to do.” (Ambrose 163)

Sources

- Richard Slotkin (2005) “Fiction for the Purposes of History,” *Rethinking History*, 9:2-3, 221-236
- Jessica S. Hower (2019) “‘All good stories’: historical fiction in pedagogy, theory, and scholarship,” *Rethinking History*, 23:1, 78-125
- Ambrose, Stephen. *Nothing Like It in the World: The Men Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad 1863-1869*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.

As an adventure novel, Laurence Yep's *Dragonwings* does not exist just to teach readers historical fact; it also inspires readers to show a child's growth through temperance and learning amongst foreign terrain and people.

The “Cozy Catastrophe”

- About creating “alternative worlds” (Carwelti) into which readers may escape – sometimes it is
- As with fantasy, “the escape of the prisoner, not the escape of the deserter” (Tolkien). An escape *from* a common perception or situation that may feel oppressive
- Several aspects of formula for “cozy catastrophe” (Sutherland 235):
 - “close-knit groups ... all brought into even closer intimacy by the catastrophic events that overtake them”
 - “community is affirmed, and the complexities of social life dissolved” with “a new social solidarity between previously antagonistic groups”
 - “practical, simple, good men take command”

Children Heroes

- Protagonist is heroic, larger than life; plot and hero transition from the childlike into the mature, “youthful as well as mature” (Fisher) into what Brian Aldiss calls a “cozy catastrophe” (in Fisher 19)
- Fisher comments on children in particular: “only to a literary arrangement of danger calculated to produce the necessary suspense and tension” along with “an over-generous allowance of brain and brawn; an improbable self-confidence, a certain rigidity in their attitude to other people” (154)
- Fisher: Romantic view of hero as “combative and to prove his courage in combat against one or other of the enemies,” yet also plagued by self-doubt, as “a subtle flattery for the reader who engages actively in the dialogue with the author, in that he is helped to take a liberal and an informed view of a man who suffers from a mistaken idea of himself” (188)

Children Heroes

- Bruzelius on the modern hero: “Instead of winning, the hero either escapes, or shifts the ground of combat so that he can be freed from a conflict with a force he cannot dominate” (75), citing Frodo in *LOTR* and the Skywalkers in *Star Wars* ordinariness, dullness, middle-ness.
- Bruzelius: Hero often timid, fearful, aimless and does not act with dignity or will – perhaps demonstrating the need for the Other to provide for him. He is also “literary,” in that he is “uniformly well-educated in the tales of his genre, if not precisely well-read”; “The hero always measures himself against an imagined heroic past” (78, 79).

Exotic Travel

- Examples *Robinson Crusoe* (island story), Western or frontier story, where the frontier is “a frontier land of freedom and creativity.” (Green 55), *Treasure Island* and the Wanderer who links between “two seemingly opposite social frontiers, especially the property of empires: the huge central city and peripheral untraveled lands” (Green 158).
- “The exotic landscape, an ‘elsewhere’ that is different from, but close to, the public world” (Bruzelius 24)
- The genre is both continually changing yet “immensely conservative, ruthlessly ensuring the hero’s integration and ultimate conformity to the real as represented by the public world”; his survival but also his reintegration and the abandonment of “elsewhere” are imperative (Bruzelius 33). The exotic world becomes imagined but ultimately excluded.

The Social Function of Adventure

- Fisher: “The author has a dual role: to entertain, that is to uphold tradition and “record events and celebrate people in such a way as to confirm and perpetuate codes of conduct which will benefit that society”; or to instruct, and “prepare the way for change by criticizing, deriding or contradicting currently established views” (345).
- Nineteenth-century adventure “was and is the *rite de passage* from white boyhood into white manhood” (Green 41).
- Martin Green, a racial dimension: “Adventure tales are an important part of any culture, and a very important part of modern white culture. They contain the experience (and even more the dreams) of the white culture’s adventurers and heroes – its engineers, explorers, soldiers, governors. What we study (or should study) in adventure fiction is that experience reflected, refined, rehearsed, and reordered.” (23)

Sources

- Fisher, Margery. *The Bright Face of Danger*. London: Hodder and Stoughton. 1986.
- Bruzelius, Margaret. *Romancing the Novel: Adventure from Scott to Sebald*. Bucknell University Press, 2007.
- Carwelti, John. *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press. 1976.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. "On Fairy-Stories," *Tree and Leaf*, 2nd ed. (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988)
- Sutherland, John. *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction of the 1970s*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1981.

Other Theses to Consider

Dragonwings (the machine) is a metaphor for an ideal Chinese American identity during 1975, in contrast to the values of the Company of the Peach Garden Vow or Moonshadow's original perspectives.

The San Francisco Earthquake of 1905 acts as a catalyst in *Dragonwings* to push the Company of the Peach Garden Vow, into new perspectives toward Chinese and other Americans.

Moonshadow tells the story of his childhood and immigration through *Dragonwings* to connect Chinese American's history of the 1900s to their present in 1975.

Windrider has an attitude and behavior similar to Asian American activists during the late Civil Rights era; as the hero of *Dragonwings*, he argues for a Chinese American identity that is more active and transforming than stable and traditional.