

Teacher Institute

At the Crossroads of Revolution: Lexington and Concord in 1775

Creative Writing Workshop: Shaping the Past

Day Four: Thursdays, July 22 and August 5, 2010

Content: Ordinary People/Extraordinary Times

Framing Questions from Crossroads Theme:

- What role(s) do ordinary people play in shaping extraordinary events? What power to effect change – or agency – lies in the hands of everyday people?
 - How might things have taken a different “route” if the people of Lexington and Concord had made different choices in the months leading up to the battle, and in fact, on the day of the battle itself?
- What were the dilemmas faced by the townspeople of Lexington and Concord as the King’s troops marched through their towns?
 - What roles did women play during the events being investigated? How were their lives impacted and what impact did they have on events with worldwide repercussions? African-Americans? Other traditionally overlooked actors?
- Is there evidence to show that people hoped for or expected changes in their lives as a result of the forcible resistance to British troops? Did they see their own lives or circumstances being at some kind of crossroads? How is this idea articulated?

Creative Writing Workshop: Shaping the Past

Goals:

To distinguish historical fiction from historical narrative.

To demonstrate, through a series of writing exercises, how to craft a creative, but historically-accurate, interpretation of the past, drawing on primary and secondary sources . Exercises are designed to demonstrate that writing is a craft by breaking the process into small manageable steps, leading to a final product.

For the purpose of this workshop, the product is a **Letter from Lexington** written by one of the individuals who was “at the crossroads” on April 19, 1775 to a friend or relative in Boston. What role did he play? What was her experience? What sights, sounds, smells surrounded him? What choices did she face? What feelings does he express as he reflects on the events of the day? Has her life changed? In what way(s)?

Introduction

Creative writing gives us the freedom to take the facts and weave a story, embellishing it with vivid description of time and place, imagining the thoughts and emotions of the characters, standing as an eyewitness to the events, interpreting the significance, and analyzing the consequences of actions

taken. In comparing historians to historical novelists, James Alexander Thom, author of *Follow the River*, writes, "The two are much alike; both tell stories of the past. But the historian's viewpoint faces backward only. He is limited to looking back in time; the historical novelist is not. ... a historical novelist, can make any time now by taking your reader into that time."

- An historian writes about the past:
Reading:

Sometime, somewhere, one of these confrontations between men with muskets was likely to escalate beyond the puffing of chests. An hour before dawn on April 19, Sylvanus Wood of Woburn, heard the bell ringing from the Lexington meeting house:

[F]earing there was difficulty there, I immediately arose, took my gun and...went in haste to Lexington, which was about three miles distant. When I arrived there, I inquired of Captain Parker, the commander of the Lexington company, what was the news...[W]hile we were talking, a messenger came up and told the captain that the British troops were within half a mile. Parker immediately turned to his drummer, William Diamond, and ordered him to beat to arms, which was done. Captain Parker then asked me if I would parade with his company. I told him I would.

A People's History of the American Revolution, Ray Raphael, p. 62

- An historical novelist writes about the past:
Reading:

The captain started to leave. But he stopped.

"I wonder if you could do me a favor, Jack?" he asked.

"Sure," said Jack.

The captain pulled out his letter.

"This is my letter to my children," he said. "It's a farewell letter. Would you please take it back with you to Frog Creek?"

"Yes, sir," said Jack.

"You must only send it if you hear that we have failed in our mission and many patriots were lost," said the captain.

"Yes, sir," said Jack.

The captain handed his letter to Jack.

"I copied the general's speech for my children," the captain said. "If anything bad happens to me, I hope these words will give them courage."

Revolutionary War on Wednesday, Mary Pope Osborne, pp. 35-37

Narrator

- Who is telling the story?
- What do you know about him?

- In what way is her story similar to that of those around her? In what way is it unique?
- Is there bias in his telling of the story?

Exercise: Still working in your group from the previous workshop in which you examined primary sources related to an individual, collectively write a short (3-5 sentences) summary of your character. In turn, share your “character sketch” with the larger group.

Audience

- Who are you writing for or to?
- How much prior knowledge does he have about the subject?
- How well is she able to read?

Reading:



On the morning of April 19, Billy answered the alarm with the rest of the militia.

When he arrived on the common, he noticed two men hauling a trunk out of Buckman Tavern as shots flew around them. Struggling, they made their way to the woods. Curious, Billy followed them. He heard them mention John Hancock.

Was it his trunk? When the men left, he opened the trunk and climbed inside.

What do you think he found?

Exercise: Decide who your audience is. In this case, who are you writing your letter to? Quickly write down brief notes that capture the most important characteristics of your audience.

The Cast of Characters

- Who is narrating the story?
- Who are supporting characters?
- Brainstorm list for creating characters: personality; defining traits, origin, home, shelter, family constellation, best friends, interests, dislikes, favorites, hobbies, clothes, names, body language

- Tips for creating memorable characters: state what the character wants; honor the struggle; add conflict; portray vivid personalities; create convincing motivation; reflect unspoken feelings in someone or something else; create empathetic situations

Reading:

He curled up inside himself. Evenings when he wasn't at North End Caucus or the Masons, he was with Dr. Warren, who was himself a widower with four young children in the care of the grandmother in the country. Warren oft-times came to our house on the way home from a sick call at night. The two men were as unlike as night and day. But they belonged to the same political clubs and were friends since the Stamp Act days. They'd worked together in Benjamin Ede's *Gazette* office at the time of the Boston Massacre. All the leading Whigs in Boston were married. Both widowers now, Father and Doctor Warren shared many a mug of flip at the Salutation after meetings were over.

The Secret of Sarah Revere, Ann Rinaldi, pp. 34-35

Exercise: Write a list of the characters you want to include in your letter.

Setting the scene – How it's structured and what makes it work

- The basic purpose of a scene is to use action and character development to move the reader from one plot point to the next.
- Think of scenes as stepping stones that steer you down the path of your story. Each stone is separate from the other, yet each is critical to reaching the end of the journey. The stones not only form a larger whole, they lead the reader from the beginning, through the middle, and to the end of the fictional journey.
- Some guidelines to keep in mind: point toward future action in the opening scenes; remember that you don't have to begin a scene at the beginning of the action; construct your scenes with action and reaction; create obstacles; avoid dead ends; eliminate gimmicks; raise the stakes; surprise the reader with plausible actions that don't conform to expectations.

Reading:

It was one by the village clock,
When he galloped into Lexington.
He saw the gilded weathercock
Swim in the moonlight as he passed,
And the meeting-house windows, black and bare,
Gaze at him with a spectral glare,
As if they already stood aghast
At the bloody work they would look upon.

The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Writing Activity: Captain Parker's Lexington militia began to gather on Lexington Green between midnight and 1 AM on April 19, 1775. Write a list of some adjectives that describe the scene.

Inner and Outer Dialogue – Authenticity and Credibility

- Just as speech reveals character, so does thought
- The goal of writing dialogue is not to mimic how people speak
- The goal of writing dialogue is to create the illusion of authenticity
- Each of your main characters should have a different way of using words
- Strategies for dialogue: create dialogue that reveals character and mood; invent an authentic voice for each character; avoid trendy slang; establish distinct voices; give the speaker something to do; speak dialogue out loud
- Things to avoid in writing dialogue: beware of repetition; avoid fancy tag lines; ditch inaccurate tag line verbs; don't use proper names to distinguish speakers; resist preaching through dialogue
- Dialogue checklist:
 1. Does this dialogue feel authentic?
 2. Does the dialogue belong to this specific character?
 3. Have I struck the right mood?
 4. Have I conveyed what I want to say in the best way possible?
 5. Is there anything I can do to tighten the dialogue?
 6. Do I believe what the characters are saying?

Reading:

Pitcairn wanted to argue, but Smith turned his horse, the discussion over. Pitcairn nudged the horse gently, followed Smith, moved alongside him now, said quietly, "Colonel, if we engage the rebels, it could well start a war. It is not in our orders..."

"Major, the war was started by the Sons of Liberty the first time they violated the king's edicts. It does not take blood to make a war. I am surprised at you, Major. A man with your experience—a marine, no less—should not even be questioning this. We are operating under instructions to seize and destroy rebel arms. Anyone who stands in our way is subject to immediate imprisonment. Capturing armed men must certainly involve sing arms ourselves. What does war have to do with any of this? General Gage would quite agree with me, I'm certain."

Rise to Rebellion, Jeff Shaara, p. 275

Writing Exercise: Begin the body of your letter, writing one or two sentences of "dialogue" that place you (the character you have researched) at the "crossroads" on April 19, 1775.

Continuing the Story

- In historical fiction, you have the liberty to take license with the their thoughts and actions that you do not have in writing historical narrative
- However, with that license comes the responsibility to ground the story in solid historical research
- Be aware of anachronisms—something placed or occurring out of its proper time—this includes ideas, events, objects, places, thoughts, people, etc.
- Avoid moralizing—moralizing storytelling is all about the author’s agenda, and as a writer, your primary responsibility is constructing an authentic experience for your reader.
- On the other hand, if you look at the “moral” of the story as a quality exemplified in the behavior and attitudes of a character, then you can include this in a story
- Communicate these ideas through the thoughts, actions and reactions of characters, and not through the author preaching to the reader...or through one character preaching to another.

Reading: *April Morning*, Howard Fast, pp. 149-150

A man’s land is his own, Adam. A man’s place is his own. All we wished when we stood out on the common was to tell them that this was our place. We had no riches or gold or silver. Your father would have said to them, Go home and leave us be. This is our place, our common, our meeting house, and our houses. We are a Committee to defend what is ours. There will b e trouble if you march into our land and work your will on us. That’s all he wanted to say to them, but they chose to have it differently, and now it’s too late. The war is all over us.

April Morning, Howard Fast, pp. 149-150

Exercise: Continue writing your letter. Don’t be concerned if we don’t finish during this workshop. Writing is a process and by breaking the writing project into manageable steps, we (and our students) won’t be overwhelmed by the challenge of the blank page.

When you have completed your **Letter from Lexington**, post it on the Institute website to share with you colleagues.

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Historical Fiction

James Lincoln Collier & Christopher Collier, *My Brother Sam Is Dead*. New York: Scholastic, 2005.

Howard Fast, *April Morning*. New York: Bantam Books, 1961.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow; Christopher Bing, Illustrator, *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*.

Joanne Myers, Anne Starr and Hilary Anderson Stelling; Sheli Petersen, Illustrator. *Billy the Patriot Mouse*. Lexington, MA: National Heritage Museum, 2006.

Mary Pope Osborne, *Revolutionary War on Wednesday*. New York: Random House, 2000.

Ann Rinaldi, *The Secret of Sarah Revere*. New York: Gulliver Books/Harcourt, Inc., 1995.

Jeff Shaara, *Rise to Rebellion*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2001.

Nonfiction

Roy Peter Clark, *Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006.

Mark Kramer and Wendy Call, Editors, *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide*. New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 2007.

Margot Fortunato Galt, *The Story in History: Writing Your Way into the American Experience*. New York: The Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1992.

Nancy Lamb, *The Art and Craft of Storytelling: A Comprehensive Guide to Classic Writing Techniques*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2008.

Ray Raphael, *A People's History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence*. New York: Harper Collins, 2001.

James Alexander Thom, *The Art and Craft of Writing Historical Fiction*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2010.

Joanne Myers; July 22 and August 5, 2010

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Some Helpful Websites

General

National History Standards

<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs/standards/era3-5-12.html>

“How & Why I Teach with Historical Fiction”

<http://tacher.scholastic.com/lessonrepro/lessonplans/instructor/social1.htm>

Historical Fiction

<http://www.amazon.com/Historical-fiction-school-world-history/lm/R14MISY6OPSNQ>

<http://www.usd320.k12.ks.us/whs/lmc/historical.html>

<http://nancykeane.com/rl/14.htm>

<http://www.socialstudies.org/notable>