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Civic History Reading Project: A Review of Four Young Adult Books

The middle school teacher is challenged with teaching not just the subject area but also academic skills while struggling to capture the interest of easily-distracted adolescents. A reading project within the American Revolution unit of Plymouth's eight grade civic history curriculum can serve each of these needs. A novel or biography may well capture the reading interest of students who are less than excited about the textbook. The project is a useful tool for differentiation as well, as all students can access the curriculum by choosing a book that is appropriate for their reading level. This paper will review four potential books for this project chosen from the NEH American History Bee bibliography: Howard Fast's *April Morning*, Esther Forbes' *Johnny Tremain*, Natalie S. Bober's *Abigail Adams: Witness to a Revolution*, and Gary Blackwood's *The Year of the Hangman*. While all four books are accessible to eighth grade students and should capture the interest of many of them, *April Morning*, *Johnny Tremain*, and *Abigail Adams: Witness to a Revolution* support the curriculum in a way that *Year of the Hangman* does not.

The Lexile text measure is a useful tool in assessing the appropriateness of various books for different grade levels. This tool embraces the idea that there is no book that is entirely appropriate for an entire grade level, as students within one grade read at many different levels. Books are assigned a number between zero and two thousand based on difficulty level. Students can be tested to determine their reading level and then assigned books appropriate for their current reading ability. While I do not have access to

student Lexile measures, the text measures can be still be useful in assessing books' appropriateness. The middle fifty percent of eighth grade readers have a Lexile measure between 805 and 1100(www.lexile.com). Texts, then, to be accessible to the most possible readers, should fall in or near this Lexile measure.

Fast's *April Morning* has much to offer the middle school reader. The coming-of-age story describes the events of April 19th 1775 through the eyes of Adam Cooper, a fifteen-year-old boy from Lexington. The love story between Adam and his neighbor Ruth Simmons and his adventures during the battle should draw the interest of a variety of students. Readers will also likely identify with Adam's conflicted feelings towards his father (who is killed during the battle) and his sense of being trapped between childhood and adulthood. One flaw with the book is that it starts slowly. During the early, less-than-exciting pages, many young readers may give up on the book or come to view it as a chore. That would be unfortunate, as those who persevere will likely enjoy the book in total. The book's Lexile level is 1050 putting it within the middle fifty percent and allowing it to be accessible to many eighth-grade students but too challenging for some readers.

April Morning, along with being accessible and a good read, supports the curriculum quite nicely. The civic history curriculum focuses on the ideas and events that led to war more than the war itself. While *April Morning* tells the tale of the beginning of the fighting, it makes regular mention of the reasons for this day. Samuel Adams and John Hancock are referenced regularly and the reasons for the fighting are discussed at length by the characters. A strength of the book is its willingness to show the conflicted feelings of many at the outbreak of war. Adam is bothered by the killing more than he

seems to understand the reasons for it. A relative weakness of the book is the characters' ability to "see" events that happen in the future. After the battle in Lexington but before the battle in Concord, Solomon Chandler, an older patriot who befriends Adam, says about the British march "it will easier going than coming," and adds that there will be "good boys at the old North Bridge"(121). This kind of prior knowledge is unlikely in real life, but it will be hardly noticed by most students who will enjoy the story while learning much about the events leading to independence.

Much like *April Morning*, *Johnny Tremain* will have wide appeal for middle school readers. Forbes' classic is also a coming-of-age story following the adventures of a boy who loses his silversmith career to an injury only to become a delivery boy for the Sons of Liberty. Johnny's growing love for his former master's granddaughter Cilla, his many adventures before and while working for the Sons of Liberty, and his feeling towards his best friend Rab (including his jealousy at Rab's attention to Cilla) will capture the attention of a broad range of students. While the book starts quickly and generally has the kind of action that will keep the interest of middle school readers, it is longer than *April Morning* and slows down in spots. The book's Lexile measure is 840 – toward the lower end of the middle fifty percent – meaning that many, if not most, readers will find the book accessible.

Many students will get caught up in the adventures of *Johnny Tremain* and may fail to recognize just much history they are learning. The book fits nearly perfectly with the eighth-grade curriculum, which may explain how it has become such a classic. From the beginning, where Johnny burns his hand making a tea set for John Hancock, to his deliveries and discussions with revolutionary leaders like Samuel Adams, to his

attendance at Sons of Liberty meetings, to his participation in the Boston Tea Party, to his adventures on the April morning when the war begins, Johnny lives through a plethora of the events that led to revolution. This strength of the book – that it covers so many of the important events – is also a bit of a weakness. More mature readers might find it hard to believe how conveniently events present themselves to Johnny. Most students, however, will be blissfully unaware of these amazing coincidences as they follow Johnny and learn a great deal in the process.

Abigail Adams: Witness to a Revolution, as a biography, lacks some of the appealing adventure of the other books, but it has a unique feature that is its biggest strength. Abigail is a woman. All three of the novels (and most of the other books I looked into both from the NEH bibliography and other sources) feature the adventures of a boy. Girls looking for a revolutionary story that features one of their own will find a hero in this biography. Bober quotes liberally from Adams' letters in telling her entire life story. While her whole life will be of interest to some students, her young life should be especially interesting to students who can compare her lack of formal education, her young love with John and her early (compared to modern standards) marriage and motherhood to the world they live in today. Many students will be drawn to her enlightened positions on slavery and women's rights. The book has a Lexile measure of 1130 putting it just above the middle fifty percent of readers. This book, then, will appeal to certain readers - quite likely girls who read at a high level – but may be outside the ability level of many eighth-grade readers.

The history in Bober's book is, quite naturally, stronger than the novels, and students who read it will benefit from a broad overview of the events that made America

free. Abigail witnessed firsthand, and Borber describes, many of the events studied in our class including the evacuation of Boston when “as minutemen ran past her door, she walked to the same spot where she had witnessed the Battle of Bunker Hill less than a year before. From there she could hear the roar of the cannon and see every shell being thrown”(69). Unfortunately, the biography traces Abigail’s entire life, meaning much of the content stretches well beyond the scope of this teaching unit. The book will give students a solid base of information about the American Revolution, and the rest of Abigail’s life traces much of the rest of the curriculum so the knowledge will be useful to students in the future. The book’s solid history, along with its focus on a strong woman, will make it a useful addition to the project.

Blackwood’s alternate history *The Year of the Hangman* should find a largely-pleased audience among middle school readers. The novel tells of the adventures of fifteen-year-old Creighton Brown, an Englishman who comes to the American colonies during the revolutionary period. The story moves along more easily and enjoyably than any of the other books. Middle school readers should enjoy the adventures from Creighton’s early kidnapping, to his encounter with pirates, to his befriending of Ben Franklin and Benedict Arnold. Besides the breezy appeal of the story, the book is very accessible with a Lexile measure of 820. This puts the at the lower end of the middle fifty percent of readers meaning it should be readable for a large percentage of the eighth-grade population.

Despite its broad appeal, Blackwood’s novel does not support the curriculum in a way that makes it useful for inclusion in the project. Blackwood’s author’s note says that “The whole point of an alternate history novel is to play with the facts a bit, to explore

what might have happened if certain events in history had turned out differently”(261). Thus, we find the colonists defeated in 1777 and a rogue group of bandit rebels continuing an independent war from New Orleans led by Benedict Arnold and Ben Franklin. While this playing with the facts could lead to some higher level thinking by students, it could also cause some confusion or simple mistaken ideas. Ultimately, the book is a fun adventure that doesn't focus enough on the real lives of the historical figures or the real events of the revolution to be useful in learning the traditional curriculum.

April Morning, Johnny Tremain, Abigail Adams: Witness to a Revolution and The Year of the Hangman are all books that would appeal to many middle school readers. April Morning and Johnny Tremain are fairly accessible books that support the curriculum well and will appeal to a broad base of middle school students. Abigail Adams: Witness to a Revolution will not have the quite as much appeal to all readers, but higher level readers may be drawn to Abigail's amazing life. The Year of the Hangman, while a wonderful choice as independent reading for middle school students, lacks the factual base needed for inclusion in a history reading project.