
From Manteo to Murphy: Young Adult Historic Fiction Set in North Carolina

by Pat McGee

North Carolina with its status as one of the original thirteen colonies, not to mention its role in secession and the Civil War, possesses a fascinating history. With its three distinctive geographic and climatic regions, the state has even been marketed as the “Variety Vacation Land.” Why then do social studies students complain so bitterly about the dullness of its history? Perhaps the answer to that question lies in the materials used to teach the state’s past. Textbooks by their very nature are filled with facts yet lack narrative unity, excitement, and personal connections for young readers. While textbooks provide an important framework for structuring the teaching of history, young adult literature is a valuable classroom supplement.

We need to heed Christopher Collier’s exuberant charge that there is “no better way to teach history than to embrace potential learners and fling them into a living past.”¹ Historical fiction allows young people to “appreciate important historical events on human terms, from the eyes of individuals of adolescent age who experienced history.”² Certainly my own interest in history was fostered by my reading of Alice Turner Curtis’s Little Maid historical series. The fact that I lived in Rhode Island and could read the adventures of *A Little Maid of Narragansett Bay* and *A Little Maid of Newport* made my connection with my state’s past all the more real to me.

Few would argue with Ly Lee’s assertion that, “Young Adult Literature is an important and valuable tool for helping students learn and for motivating them to read.”³ Classroom teachers have long recognized that reading is indeed a gateway skill to other learning and that reading skills apply across the curriculum. From my own experience as a classroom teacher, I have found that well-written young adult fiction is indeed an

effective way to engage middle-school students and capture their imaginations. I have used both Ester Forbes’s *Johnny Tremain* and Mildred Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder* in middle-school social studies classrooms, and while these are excellent works, they lack North Carolina connections.

The question that I propose to examine is whether North Carolina classroom teachers can draw upon a strong body of young adult historic fiction that will bring the social studies curriculum to life for middle-grades students. Are there stories with clearly recognizable North Carolina settings and a connection to the history of our state that meet the criteria of

While textbooks provide an important framework for structuring the teaching of history, young adult literature is a valuable classroom supplement.

literary excellence, relevant themes, realistic plots, and appealing characters? Does young adult literature possess examples that would give young readers a realistic understanding of life's and history's "ambiguities, unanswered questions and loose ends" and at the same time encourage our young people to read?⁴ In searching for appropriate titles I sought out works that were set in a clearly defined historical period from the colonial times to the 1950s. I looked for titles, which could be directly connected to the North Carolina social studies curriculum, that are historically accurate and that have lively, interesting characters. I also looked for characters with whom young adults could identify and who face issues and themes of universal relevance.

Colonial Origins and the American Revolution:

North Carolina's beginnings are revealed in protagonist Jessabel Archarde's lively and colorful narrative of the voyage of the Red Lyon from England to the shores of Roanoke Island. Author M.L. Stainer has clearly done considerable historical research and vividly recounts the miseries of the transatlantic voyage, the conflict between John White, leader of the Lost Colony, and Simon Fernandez, the ship's captain, and the perils of life in the New World. Jessabel comes of age witnessing birth and death, threats from the Spanish and hostile Indians, illness, and privation. Four succeeding volumes carry on the story of the settlers, but I found the later volumes disappointing crossovers into the genre of historical romance. Jessabel falls in love with Akaiyan, a member of the Croatan Indian tribe, in the second volume, and, in the third volume, they are wed.

In Albert Leeds Stillman's *Drums Beat in Old Carolina*, Jamie Hill is transported in irons to the New World for poaching one of the king's deer. Jamie survives mutiny and storms that toss him up upon the shores of Hatteras, only to have his indenture purchased by a disguised French aristocrat who is illegally manufacturing saltpeter. Jamie gets caught up in the backcountry Regulator movement and through a series of rollicking adventures gains his freedom. Through his skills as gunpowder maker, Jamie fulfills his desire to tweak King George's nose. Stillman's story is one that challenges the young reader; the dialogue is filled with period language and the vocabulary is complex. Readers will have to seek out dictionaries in order to discover that collops and manchets are bread and bacon. Nevertheless, this action-filled story rewards the persevering.

David B. Weems's melodramatically titled, *Son of an Earl ... Sold for a Slave*, describes the hardships of life as an indentured servant. The protagonist, John Gour, a young Scottish earl who is tricked into indentured servitude by his evil uncle, crosses paths with legendary Scottish heroine Flora MacDonald and is a participant in the Revolutionary War Battle of Moore's Creek. Weems's tale raises important questions about loyalty, a perennial issue with young adults, and social class. Gour ultimately decides to keep his new identity as "John Scott" and to reject his heritage of class distinction. John chooses to support the Patriot cause in America and not return to Scotland to "be the one who looked down on other people."⁵

Slavery and the Civil War:

Slavery comes alive in all its brutality and cruelty in Belinda Hurmence's finely crafted *A Girl Called Boy*. Boy is Blanche Overtha Yancy, a pettish and rather spoiled youngster, who finds that "something strange and awful had happened to her, and she didn't know what it was."⁶ She has traveled back in time to 1853 and, in the company of two other escapees, Ike and his son Isaac, is on the run from slave catchers. Boy is captured by an overseer and loaded on a wagon to be returned to the Yancy plantation. Hurmence has done an excellent job of capturing the details of the lives of

slaves and the differences between house and field hands.

A gifted and eloquent writer who uses vivid and colorful details, Hurmence creates realistic, balanced, and sympathetic characters. Boy becomes entrapped in the subtle psychological snares of slavery. "She knew she had gotten mentally lazy; she had quit thinking for herself." She flees the plantation and, as she crosses into her own world, she learns the powerful lesson that it is not magic that makes things happen. "Boy possessed her own powers. She was free to choose, and she understood that now."⁷

Mary E. Lyons's *Letters from a Slave Girl* is a fictionalized autobiographical account of the life of a real person, Harriet Jacobs. Jacobs, a literate slave from Edenton, North Carolina, spent seven years living in a storeroom hiding from the relentless searching of her vindictive masters. She was smuggled on board a ship that sailed to Philadelphia and freedom in 1842. Lyons has recreated the language of the period while at the same time crafting a book that young adult readers will find very readable. The work has the added plus of excellent period illustrations and an account of Harriet's life as a free person.

Two exceptionally well-written Civil War titles are Sandra Forrester's *Sound the Jubilee* and Belinda Hurmence's *Tancy*. The former is the story of Maddie, an eleven-year-old house slave, who lives with her family on River Bend Plantation. As the Yankee soldiers come increasingly close, the mistress seeks refuge with her house servants, Maddie's family, at the family's summer home on Nags Head, Roanoke Island. Maddie is pulled between her mother's desire for safety and security at the expense of freedom and her father's spirit of rebellion and resistance. But even Roanoke Island is not safe, and when the Yankees invade the island Maddie's family chooses to cast their lot with the northerner invaders.

Forrester realistically portrays the difficulties of the ex-slaves in coping with freedom and the adjustments faced by both races. She unflinchingly illustrates the racial prejudices of the Yankee troops who vandalize the colored school and terrorize the colored church congregation. While life on Roanoke Island provides a measure of safety from the war, in the end the white landowners receive pardons and regain title to their property. Maddie's papa dies on a Tennessee battlefield, and his family is left without even the comfort of burying his body. The family moves to the mainland with the hope of buying land. Maddie takes her dreams with her. "She wanted to go to the North ... to see the cities and the people She wanted to learn everything about everything."⁸ For those students who become especially caught up in the story of Maddie and her family, Forrester has written a sequel, *My Home is Over Jordan*, that carries on the story of Maddie, who wants to become a teacher.

Tancy, the central character in Belinda Hurmence's book of the same name, is a house slave living at Gaither's Mill about twenty-five miles from Statesville. Because she has had an indulgent master, she has learned to read and discovered that she was born on June 17, 1848, to Lulu. Now that she knows her real birthday, she wants to find out about her mother. In this story of growth and self-discovery, Tancy thwarts an attempted rape by her half-brother, finds out her mother had been sold off from a neighboring plantation, and after emancipation and the end of the war, sets off with Jemmy, an abandoned boy, to find her mother. She obtains a clerical job with the Freedman's Bureau in Knoxville, Tennessee, and later becomes a teacher for the same organization.

The novel illuminates not only the good intentions but also the shortcomings of the Freedman's Bureau and the difficulties of postwar adjustment. Tancy reunites Jemmy with his natural mother, although she disap-

proves of the way his family lives. She discovers her mother, but like many of life's discoveries, the knowledge carries a measure of pain. Tancy's birth mother, Lucinda, called Sin, is the landlord for the black shantytown and regarded as a "stingy old crook" by the inhabitants. When her Freedman's Bureau job vanishes with the closing of the Bureau itself, Tancy returns in despair to Gaither's Mill. She finds that the people of her former home try to manipulate the course of her life. She rejects their interference and returns to Knoxville, but this time she returns "healed and whole." In this powerful story with its vivid setting, young adults will find Tancy a character with whom they can readily empathize. Tancy faces reality without flinching, makes difficult decisions, and, in the process of discovering her mother, discovers herself as well.

The 1890s:

North Carolina's coastal region and the Outer Banks at the turn of the century are vividly depicted in Theodore Taylor's Hatteras trilogy—*Teetoncey*, *Teetoncey and Ben O'Neal*, and *The Odyssey of Ben O'Neal*. Vivid settings, strongly drawn characters, and eloquent language characterize all of Taylor's stories.

Ben O'Neal, the son of a Hatteras lifesaving captain, who was lost in a powerful storm, and his widowed mother give refuge to Wendy Lynn Appleton, the sole survivor of the wreck of the Malta Empress. The people of the Outer Banks regard Wendy, who is mute from the shock of her experience, with suspicion. Ben and his mother hope to care for the girl, whom they name Teetoncey "Tee," until she recovers from her ordeal. At the end of the first volume she recovers the power of speech and reveals that the Malta Empress was carrying bullion from the sale of Appleton property in the Caribbean.

In the second volume, Ben, Tee, and friends become involved in a search to recover the two chests of silver that went down with the Malta Empress. When word leaks out of the treasure, the chief of the lifesaving station, accompanied by the British consul, the federal taxman, and others, launches a salvage operation witnessed by the entire community. The silver is rescued, only to be cut loose and dropped into deep water by Ben's mother, who fears the destructive impact the money will have on the community. After Ben's mother dies from pneumonia, the British consul makes arrangements for Teetoncey to return to her home in England and the guardianship of a hated uncle.

In the final volume, Ben, now an orphan, ships out to Barbados as steward's boy on a square-rigger. Tee manages to escape from the consul and books passage on the same ship as Ben. On the run from the authorities, she sails to Barbados, returns to Norfolk, and then moves on to London, Ben accompanying her along the way. Told by Ben in 1914, after he and Tee have married and settled on the Outer Banks, the stories have the added bonus of youngsters who outwit and outflank adults, a sure-fire draw for young readers.

The Conspiracy of the Secret Nine, set at the time of the Wilmington Riot of 1898, deals with perhaps the most horrific racial event of the post-Civil War period in North Carolina. Troy Worth, African American, and Randy Hollis, his white next-door neighbor, are friends, despite Randy's father's bitter prejudice. The two boys stumble onto the conspiracy of whites to wrest political control from the hands of the African American/white Republican coalition. Bland has peopled her work with loosely disguised real characters — Lawyer Upton for Armand Scott and Alex Strong for the newspaper publisher Alex Manly. The friendship between the two boys is shattered by the events of the riots, and Troy plays an important role in Strong's last-minute escape from the raging mob. In the final scene of the

story Troy and his family also flee Wilmington. The story accurately depicts both the setting and the events. However, Bland's characters are flat and lack development. For example, she provides no plausible explanation why the friendship between Troy and Randy is so easily destroyed. It is disappointing that a significant event in the state's history is recounted in such a skimpy fashion.

The Beginnings of the Twentieth Century:

Piedmont life is revealed in William H. Hook's *A Flight of Dazzle Angels*. Annie Earle Roland, the fifteen-year-old protagonist copes with a very special brother, Brodie Lacewell, who frequently lapses into a fugue state, her mother, who spends her days reclining on a chaise lounge beset by "illness," and Annie Earle's own clubfoot. Buoyed by the support of Queen Esther, the granddaughter of the family's housekeeper, and strengthened by a short-lived romance with the handsome Achilles McPherson, Annie Earle thwarts the predatory machinations of her Aunt Kat and learns that she can and will live her life as she chooses. Annie Earle's grand plans for her future include commercial development of the town, certainly a nontraditional role for a woman in the early part of the twentieth century.

In *Thirteen Miles from Suncrest*, Donald Davis has attempted to weave together the strands of family life and national events in the journal entries of protagonist Medford McGee. Medford's journal records life on a small farm in the Appalachian Mountains from 1910 to 1913. However, by having his protagonist recount the headlines of the day, Davis has crammed in chunks of historical fact that sometimes intrude upon the even flow of the story. The didactic quality of the prose is a trifle overwhelming to the young reader and at times interferes with the flow of the story.

The Depression:

Circle of Fire by William Hooks and *With Wings as Eagles* by Patsy Leary are set in the difficult times of the 1930s and deal with issues of race relations. In Hooks's *Circle of Fire*, Harrison Hawkins, the eleven-year-old white protagonist and his two African American friends, Scrap and Kitty Fisher, stumble onto an encampment of Irish tinkers who are fleeing from the Ku Klux Klan. Harrison's world is torn apart by fear—fear that his father might be involved with the Klan and fear for his friends. "Kitty and Scrap were my best friends in the whole world, and I knew it and they knew it. And something awful was running in on us, shoving us apart, dividing us up in a way none of us wanted." In a violent confrontation between the Klan and the gypsies, Harrison, Kitty, and Little Hattie set fire to the broom sage around the camp to drive off the nightriders. Harrison's father had meanwhile alerted the sheriff and made arrangements for a safe campsite for the tinkers in Latta, South Carolina. Harrison learns that "human decency doesn't seem to be a God-given gift. It's a precious thing you have to learn early and keep working at."⁹

In Patsy Leary's coming-of-age story, *With Wings as Eagles*, Bubba Hawkins discovers that when his father returns from prison, "it seemed a stranger had come; this wasn't the daddy he remembered."¹⁰ The Hawkins family has survived with the aid and comfort of a neighboring African American family, but Bubba in exploring the circumstances behind his father's arrest and conviction comes to question this friendship. Leary has crafted a complex story that weaves together themes of interracial friendship, the Ku Klux Klan, and the hard times of the Depression.

World War II:

Leonard Todd's *The Best Kept Secret of the War* portrays the North Carolina home front in the western mountains. Cam Reed is worried about his

father, who has landed with the Normandy invasion forces, and his mother, who is going for rides with Henry Cawley, the town's nursing home operator and black-marketeer. Cam rescues Jeddah Whitmire, an escapee from Cawley's institution. Whitmire, who recovers his powers of speech in the midst of the Sunday church service, blurts out an explanation of reproduction. He interrupts the preacher's hellfire and brimstone sermon in one of the funniest scenes dealing with sex education that I have ever read. In this complex picture of the impact of the war on the lives of families, the pieces of Cam's "life had been scattered as the ships and flags on Charlie's map of the war. Now one by one, I was finding them."¹¹

The 1950s:

Jerrie Oughton's *Music from a Place Called Half Moon* is a powerful story of prejudice and human relations set in 1956. Edie Jo Houpp's father stirs up a hornet's nest when he declares that "the mission of a church is to nurture a whole community" thus opening the door to potential hordes of half-breeds attending Vacation Bible School. As Edie Jo said, "I thought April evenings were chilly, but they weren't anything compared to days when your daddy wants to integrate a town that's digging its hind feet into the dirt the whole nine yards." Edie Jo forms a fragile bond with Cherokee Fish, an Indian boy, who is accidentally killed by his older brother. In this powerful coming-of-age story, Edie Jo learned where she stood. "One at a time, I could accept people for who they were."¹²

Donal Harding's *The Leaving Summer*, while lacking a strongly defined historical theme such as race relations, nevertheless gives a lively account of subsistence farm life in western North Carolina. Eleven-year-old Austin

Carroll's world has shifted, or at least that was the explanation offered by Miss Dixie, the family's housekeeper, due to the events of the summer of 1958. His mother has left home, for unexplained reasons, to stay in Winston-Salem. His father has brought home two convicts to help with the farm work, but they seize the first opportunity to escape into the surrounding western North Carolina mountains evading the sheriff and his search party. While Harding's tale has excessive plot strands and a central character with whom young adult males may have difficulty identifying, the story raises issues about justice and loyalty which young readers will easily understand.

Sadly, there is not an extensive body of historic fiction with North Carolina settings that is appropriate for classroom use.

Conclusion:

As I read through these young adult novels certain trends began to appear. A majority of the titles have either a strong female protagonist or a strong male protagonist. Few authors have managed, as Theodore Taylor and Jerrie Oughton do so skillfully in their books, to write stories that have appealing characters of both genders in leading roles. While having stories with powerful female heroines is not a bad thing, it is a reality that young adult males will for the most part resist reading "girl books."

Moreover, while both the mountains and the coastal plain have been readily used as settings, far fewer stories have a piedmont setting. It is unfortunate, given the importance of industrial development and the rise of mill villages in the history of North Carolina, that young adult authors have neglected to write about life in the mill village or early town life.

I was also disappointed that, in spite of the present day emphasis on multicultural education, the range of ethnicity of the characters is quite

limited. While there are wonderful stories with African American characters, Belinda Hurmence's marvelous stories immediately come to mind, other ethnic groups are not well represented. Jerrie Oughton in *Music from a Place Called Half Moon* has written a powerful account of race relations between whites and Native Americans, but this is an exception.

Of the historic periods surveyed, only the Civil War era comes close to having the number of quality titles that would enable a teacher to assign different works to small groups. The advantage of the small group approach is that it allows students to share their reading experiences with their peers by means of projects, presentations, and discussions. Moreover, while some schools might be reluctant to spend the dollars required for a classroom set of novels, the small-group approach sidesteps this issue.

Sadly, there is not an extensive body of historic fiction with North Carolina settings that is appropriate for classroom use. Overall I found the results of my examination to be disappointing. Many of the recent works turned out to be mediocre or uninspiring, while older stories contained racial and linguistic stereotypes, cliches, and a tolerance for behavior which modern readers find horrific.

I can wholeheartedly recommend only a few select titles by authors whose works shine above the rest. William Hooks, Theodore Taylor, Jerrie Oughton, and Belinda Hurmence have written excellent stories that work both as literature and as an introduction to history. If the twofold purpose of using historical fiction in the middle grades classroom is to encourage reading and stimulate an interest in North Carolina's past, then we need look no further than the titles from these exemplars.

References

¹ Christopher Collier, "Fact, Fiction and History: The Role of Historian, Writer, Teacher, and Reader," *ALAN Review* 26 (Winter 1987): 7.

² William G. Brozo, and Michele L. Simpson, *Readers, Teachers, Learners: Expanding Literacy in Secondary Schools*, Second ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 241.

³ Ly Lee, *The Glory of Young Adult Literature*, ED 406 686 (New York: ERIC, 1997), 3.

⁴ Collier, 10.

⁵ David B. Weems, *Son of an Earl ... Sold for a Slave* (Gretna: Pelican, 1993), 138.

⁶ Belinda Hurmence, *A Girl Called Boy* (New York: Clarion, 1982), 30.

⁷ Hurmence, 129, 163.

⁸ Sandra Forrester, *Sound the Jubilee* (New York: Dutton, 1995), 153.

⁹ William Hooks, *Circle of Fire* (New York: Atheneum, 1982), 105, 140.

¹⁰ Patsy Baker O'Leary, *With Wings as Eagles* (Boston: Houghton, 1997), 8.

¹¹ Leonard Todd, *Best Kept Secret of the War* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 164.

¹² Jerrie Oughton, *Music from a Place Called Half Moon* (Boston: Houghton, 1995), 27, 155.