

2014

Popularising History: Re-igniting pre-service teacher and student interest in history via historical fiction

Jennifer Howell
Jennifer.Howell@curtin.edu.au

Recommended Citation

Howell, J. (2014). Popularising History: Re-igniting pre-service teacher and student interest in history via historical fiction. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 39(12).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2014v39n12.1>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.
<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol39/iss12/1>

Popularising History: the Use of Historical Fiction with Pre-service Teachers

Dr Jennifer Howell

Curtin University

Email: Jennifer.howell@curtin.edu.au

Abstract: This paper will explore the recent trend in the popularising of history and its impact on teaching and learning. There has been a steady increase in the amount of fiction, films, television shows, documentaries and children's programs situated in or concerned with historical events, eras or historical figures. The evident popularity among the wider public for these popularised forms requires teachers of history to re-evaluate their use in the classroom. They might also be tools in which we can re-engage pre-service teachers and students into the subject area. This paper will present the findings of a pilot study concerned with exploring the use of historical fiction in pre-service teacher education programs. What emerged from the findings suggests that the inclusion of historical fiction in pre-service teacher education programs, and within history classrooms, may potentially have a positive impact on learning and result in higher levels of engagement with the subject.

Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the recent trend of the 'popularising' of history and its potential contribution to teaching and learning. History, as a subject area, has been the object of renewed focus from the media. In recent years there has been a steady increase in the amount of fiction, films, television shows, documentaries and children's programs situated in or concerned with historical events, eras or historical figures. At the same time, there has been a decline in the number of students enrolling in history in post-compulsory stages of schooling. Compounding this decline is an increase in the number of teachers who either cite history as their least favourite subject to teach within the curriculum (Crawdord & Zygouris-Coe, 2008) or who select it as a teaching area (Rodwell, 2010). A curious situation has arisen, as a subject area it appears to be very popular outside of formal schooling, yet within schools both teachers and students do not perceive it positively. This paper sought to examine if popularised forms of history, specifically historical fiction, could be used to reinvigorate the subject and provide an accessible entry point into the subject with pre-service teachers.

The use of historical fiction in the history classroom has been well debated and has polarised practitioners of the subject. Regardless of the profession being divided on its use, the number of historical novels published each year has increased. There is a popular groundswell of support amongst the public for historical novels, films and television programs and this should prompt teachers of history to re-evaluate their use in the classroom.

In Australia, due the implementation of *The Australian Curriculum*, there is a renewed focus on historical literacy. It is here that the historical novel may make a contribution to the history discipline. This paper will present the findings of a small pilot study that sought to explore the potential use of historical fiction in secondary history with pre-service teachers. Hence the discrete areas of the literature review that inform the conceptual framework underpinning this project examines the following areas; the popularisation of history; the tradition of historical narratives; an examination of historical fiction and the current Australian context pertaining to history and the teaching of it in schools.

History as popular culture

The spread of history or historical content in popular culture is an interesting phenomenon. Whilst the majority of history teachers would welcome this development it also brings with it challenges. This section of the literature review seeks to explore the important issue of historical inaccuracy that concerns many scholars and teachers. It is a concern that requires unpacking in order to fully understand and this involves an examination of the roots of discipline itself.

The rise in popularity of history-based television shows, movies and historical novels has resulted in a growing awareness of history and some of its more controversial figures. Some eras and figures have been covered to a point of saturation, such as the Tudor era, Henry VIII, Elizabeth I and Thomas Cromwell to name a few. These have attracted television series, high-budget Hollywood movie versions and the attention of historical novelists. This genre also appears to be crossing boundaries into the realm of traditional literature; for example, the 2009 Man Booker prize was awarded to Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, an historical novel based on the early political life of Thomas Cromwell. Television series have ranged from attempts to popularise historical interpretations of eras (e.g., Simon Schama's *A History of Britain, 2000-2002*), dramatise particular eras (e.g., *Downton Abbey, The Tudors, 2007-2010*) and present children's versions of historical events (e.g., *Horrible Histories, 2009 - ongoing*). Thus we can conclude that there has been in recent times a rise of history-content in current culture via the popularising of some aspects and figures of history.

What has consumed recent debate amongst history scholars is the historical accuracy of the content being presented (e.g., Coles & Armstrong, 2007; Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2008; Pihlainen, 2011; Shaw, 2005). However should this be a concern? This labours under the assumption that it is an uncritical consumer who is engaging with the product being presented. If the consumer is aware of the product being a perspective, which it often is courtesy of a celebrity presenter or if the content has been transformed into something which Bell (2011) describes as *irreverent-reverence* (i.e., for entertainment or amusement) then these products could be viewed and embraced as entry points into the discipline itself. It is only of concern if these popularised forms of history represented the sum total of an individual's engagement with the subject. Regardless of these observations, it would appear that there are more detractors than supporters. History as popular culture has attracted much commentary and criticism, some of these have suggested that academic quality is reliant upon the presenter (Bell & Gray, 2007); that the facts have often been dumbed down to the lowest common denominator (Coles & Armstrong, 2007; Hoggart, 2002); facts have to be made palatable (Coles & Armstrong, 2007) and that the programs or novels themselves are often the triumph of enthusiasm over education (Gibson, 2005). What is apparent is that regardless

of the debate over historical accuracy, the prominence of history in popular culture continues.

However the underlying viewpoints of these criticisms view history in a rather narrow, exclusionary and inaccessible manner which overlooks the roots of the discipline itself. The traditional conceptualisation of history as being best presented in a written format, which is the mode most suited to the presentation of research, facts and historical analysis is out-dated. History as a discipline is grounded in narratives (Zhang, 2004). Historical records were largely narrative accounts of events, often not by eye witnesses, but by those from whom accounts were passed to or who collected them. These were then presented in a format current with their times. An argument could be made that the current popularising of historical content reflects these beginnings. Television shows, movies and historical fiction, which are largely concerned with presenting a more personalised, social version of history, rich with narratives are echoing these roots. This grounding in narratives need examining further, as this may be the link between traditional and popularised forms of historical content.

The tradition of historical narratives

Written history is based on narrative techniques (Slotkin, 2005). These can be formal collections such as the work of Herodotus, or informal records such as written artefacts. Written records offer a contemporaneous experience to the reader (Zhang, 2004), they can link the past to the present and allow for personal interpretation. This form of interaction with written history requires a critical and active participant, one who seeks out and selects historical records perhaps for research or personal interest. This is typically the scenario when imagining interactions with historical records; largely it was the domain of scholars, researchers and students. But was this the intended audience? It is unclear if the intended audience was exclusively scholars or the wider public. Narratives are typically presented in the language of its time, concerned with the real lived experiences of the people inhabiting that particular era and often includes records of speeches, conversations and anecdotes (Slotkin, 2005; Zhang, 2004). This sounds very similar to the types of historical narratives presented in television and historical fiction. It could be concluded that the tradition of history and narratives is continuing in its use of 'popular' formats.

The digital age we are contextualised within is rich with technologies that assist in the sharing of narratives, information and messages. Social tools such as Twitter, Facebook, and news apps on smartphones or mobile devices constantly generate digital narratives that are pushed out and shared. This has led to a blurring of lines between these new digital narratives and the recording of historical facts. The act of recording current historical events is no longer constrained by formal, traditional records and has been transformed; digital records remain accessible by all. The constant stream of digital narratives that surround us may have led or even caused the popularising of history into its different forms, this hypothesis needs examining further.

As stated previously, history is based on narrative techniques, an aspect it shares with fiction, television, movies and digital narratives. These different modes of presenting narratives are grounded in the same techniques, as Zhang (2004) states, "the historian uses the same kind of narrative techniques in writing history as the novelist does in fiction" (p. 390). This could be extrapolated to include TV, movies, documentaries and digital narratives. This commonality appears to have been overlooked by many critics and two dichotomies have arisen, narratives based on historical fact versus narratives based upon popularised

accounts of history. Both types of narratives are constructs of reality; they represent a particular viewpoint and perception of events, eras or figures. The author of historical narratives must decide what to record, how to express it and make editorial decisions in its recording that could be dismissed as being overly biased. Historians must sort through sources of information to make sense of what is being presented, but also present the story itself, this is not different from how popularised accounts of history are developed. Hence there appears to be some communality between traditional forms of history and the new popularised versions that have emerged.

Historical fiction

This review has mentioned many different forms that popularised history make adopt; TV, movies, documentaries and historical fiction. It will now focus upon historical fiction due to the project presented in this paper and its focus on historical literacy. Historical fiction is typically literary in format and style, the most common being the historical novel. Other formats include epic poems, fictional speeches, fictional diaries or other written literary forms. Historical novels provide a vehicle for learning about other people from the past. The ‘strangeness’ of others is often difficult to explore due to linguistic differences – historical eras or figures are often inaccessible due to the languages they spoke or their style of writing. Why do people read an historical novel set in Tudor England and not a well-researched academic non-fiction text? Perhaps because the novel is presented in language that is more accessible and understood, but also the story will be rich with figures, dialogue and feel more personal. As Reynolds (2006) stated an historical novel seeks not only authentic facts but also to faithfully recreate minds and motives (p. 31). Beyond the personal aspect, of particular importance within this statement is the understanding of ‘authentic facts’, these could be taken as known (i.e., published) historical facts, or the accepted understanding of an aspect of history and their presence is crucial as it distinguishes historical fiction as being separate and distinct from general fiction. Historical fiction can be characterised as being of two types; the first, follows historical events and historical figures from that era (e.g. *Wolf Hall* by Hillary Mantel) and the second, is set in an historically recreated era but has imaginary characters (e.g., *Dissolution* by C.J. Sansom).

A strength of historical fiction is that it requires a different way of presenting history. Novelising an event, era or figure requires seeing these elements from ‘within’, the perspective being presented is personal and participatory. The author needs not only to have researched exhaustively the events being presented, but also project themselves into that time and imagine the emotions and experiences of the participants. A tricky balance to achieve, and one probably suited to an historian absorbed in their speciality, as Slotkin (2007) suggested. It is a fine line to present a balanced and historically rich fictional narrative rather than an emotional and reactionary narrative. A weakness of historical fiction is this level of interpretation; however if well researched and grounded on facts, they are still rich sources of information about an era or individual. They have the ability to bring history alive and present a more personalised lived experience. Fiction is full of people and characters, people talk, they react, they are emotional and contextualise these elements against richly described historical contexts, the bringing alive of the past becomes highly engaging.

A much commented on criticism or weakness of historical fiction is its ability to interfere with the facts (Coles & Armstrong, 2007; Pinto, 2010; Shaw, 2005; Slotkin, 2005). Authors actively engage with historical facts or evidence, but alter them to fit the work of

fiction. This ‘fiddling with facts’ would rightly appear to be the point of contention between authors and historians. As Pinto (2010) surmises:

historical novels are bursting with an extraordinary amount of information about the past, much of which bears little or no resemblance to anything we might wish to call historical records (p. 192).

Clearly some historical novels achieve a balance between historical facts and the narrative of the story, but how as a reader do we distinguish these from the titles that are available? A blurring within the larger grouping of historical fiction exists, there are clearly some authors and works that satisfy the previously suggested definition of accurate, well researched historical facts combined with a narrative storyline. There are also works that are not focused on presenting historical facts but rather choose an era or aspect from history to create a fictional story around. The dichotomy of ‘types’ of works collectively described as historical fiction lies at the heart of the issue. But this begs the question, should it matter? Historical novels will not be used as historical records, but used for recreational pursuits. They will also develop a link between the reader and the broader field of history for whatever purpose they may be motivated by. The word of historians will continue to inform and shape how history is formally recorded and viewed by scholars. Hence careful consideration of historical novels should neutralise these concerns and they could play a role in the teaching of history within schools.

The current Australian context

In 2013 as part of *The Australian Curriculum*, a national history curriculum was implemented. This was largely the amalgamation of state curriculums, but it has also been an opportunity to re-examine topics, add new content areas and re-structure the subject. The new curriculum has been largely well supported by teachers and educational researchers working in the discipline area. The drafting of this document has positioned history as a key subject in *The Australian Curriculum*, as it was part of Phase 1 subjects that were selected to be implemented first. This re-positioning of history as one of the core subjects in education was welcomed by those working in the area, but has also alarmed many as enrolments in history in post-compulsory stages has been steadily declining (Coles & Armstrong, 2007; Rodwell, 2010). Student enrolments are not the only declining numbers, the number of teachers enrolling in history within pre-service programs (for secondary teaching) has dwindled (Rodwell, 2010), and those undertaking primary pre-service teaching qualifications cite history as their least favourite subject (alongside mathematics) (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2008). Not a wholly positive context for the new curriculum to be launched. It is this context within which popularised formats of history (i.e. television, film, historical fiction) may play a role and due to the opportunities they may offer to re-ignite interest in the subject and engage learners.

Within the new history curriculum are aspects that could be contributed to via the inclusion of visual (i.e. television) and fictional historical narratives. In the identified historical knowledge and understandings to be covered by the curriculum (ACARA, 2009, p. 12), are; *historical perspectives*, *historical empathy* and *moral judgement*. All of which potentially align with the identified characteristics of fictional historical narratives. The inclusion of fictional historical narratives also creates strong connections with English, an identified aim of the curriculum and supports the multidisciplinary approach to curriculum used by many primary schools. Within the listed general capabilities of the new curriculum is

literacy, which perhaps is not receiving the prominence it deserves, but literacy in history is quite a complex understanding and may be better described as 'historical literacy'. *Historical literacy* collectively refers to the language used, the sources of information, the act of critical inquiry and the analysis of historical documents. Fictional historical narratives, such as historical novels, could be used as effective teaching tools to develop learners' skills in historical literacy.

As has been mentioned above, history as a subject area has been suffering from declining enrolments. Students have dismissed the subject as being too dry, dusty and unrelated to their lives (Lindquist, 2002; Turk, Klein & Dickstein, 2007), whilst pre-service teachers dismissed it as been too factual and boring (Rodwell, 2010). Something was needed to re-ignite interest in the discipline and the current popularising of history has perhaps achieved some way to readdressing that issue. History-based television shows and films have high audience numbers; historical fiction has record-high sales figures (Coles & Armstrong, 2008). Society has started to engage in the subject area again. These are our entry points, what must now follow are pedagogical strategies that support this interest and inspire further study.

As mentioned previously, the declining numbers of pre-service teachers either selecting history as a discipline or stating that they enjoyed teaching it is of concern. Clearly within primary and secondary pre-service teacher programs a re-thinking of teaching strategies is required. If students can be engaged in history within these programs, they will engage the students in their classes. A possible solution is to look towards popular forms of history. Rodwell (2010) suggested the use of historical novels as a means to engage student teachers in the subject and it echoes research on their use by teachers in the classroom (Lindquist, 2002). This has the added benefit of modelling to student teachers in a practicable way a different teaching strategy, whilst at the same time, using the strategy to engage them in the discipline area.

The conceptual framework underpinning this literature review has been built on four areas. Firstly, it has explored the current popularisation of history which has re-ignited interest in the wider community in the subject. It has suggested that this renewed interest could be the entry point for learners back into a subject that has been suffering from declining numbers in enrolments and practitioners of the subject. Secondly it has been shown that traditional and popularised forms of history share a commonality in that they are narratives. The point of difference lies in their content and the purpose of the authors. Thirdly, it has been shown that historical fiction has the potential to contribute to many aspects of the history curriculum; historical perspectives, historical empathy, moral judgement and most importantly *historical literacy*. Finally, it has examined the current Australian context pertaining to history and the teaching of it in schools. Clearly there is a need to consider new ways of teaching the subject and engaging both students and teachers. This conceptual framework has provided a context within which the pilot study was situated. The following section will detail this study, and present the findings and analysis.

The project

The pilot project presented in this paper involved 36 pre-service teacher education students enrolled in a history curriculum unit in semester two of the 2013 academic year. The participants are training to be secondary school teachers, with either history or SOSE as their major or minor teaching area. They were a combined cohort of students, enrolled in either the undergraduate program Bachelor of Teaching/Bachelor of Arts (Humanities) or the

postgraduate program Graduate Diploma in Education (Secondary). The undergraduate students were in year three, of a four year program. The guiding aims of the project were:

1. to examine the teaching experiences of a group of pre-service history teachers;
2. to explore the teaching of historical literacy whilst on teaching practicum;
3. to consider the use of historical novels in secondary history classes.

The methodology utilised was a qualitative case study design which allowed for closer examination of one specific culture-sharing group, in this case pre-service secondary history teachers. The students were from the two secondary teaching programs described above and represented a similar level in disciplinary background and teaching experience. This was purposeful, as one of the project aims was focused on the teaching experiences of the participants. Data was collected via an electronic survey, during semester two of the academic year, after they had completed their five-week practicum placement.

The students were approached via email and were, as stated above, a mixture of third year undergraduate students, and Graduate Diploma students enrolled in their last semester. The potential pool was 45 students, (i.e., the total number of students enrolled in the unit) and the total number of responses collected was 36 ($N=36$), representing a response rate of 80%. The survey was hosted via an online survey tool available on the university intranet and had a consent mechanism built into the first page where respondents recorded their consent to participate in the research by selecting the 'Start Survey' button. All responses were anonymous and no personal details such as email or IP addresses were collected thereby ensuring anonymity. The survey was conducted after all assessment tasks for the unit had been completed and submitted. The survey comprised of a combination of three open and three closed questions. The collected data was coded and sorted into themes per each question.

Findings

The first question was an open question and sought to determine the gap between the unit content and the 'real experience' of teaching history. The respondents were asked to identify any aspects that needed to be included or covered in greater detail. All responses identified technology as being very important as many had practicum placements in technology-rich schools. Whilst it was acknowledged it had been covered during the semester, they felt it needed greater attention and focus. The next most cited answer were strategies to engage or motivate students. The respondents identified the need to find different ways to engage their students with the subject, they wanted more ideas regarding how to start units of work, introduce new topics and sustain student interest. This was interesting to note as the idea of using popularised forms of history had yet to be raised within the survey yet the participants had self-identified the need for ideas or strategies to achieve this. The other answers focused on the need for more 'hands on' activities, how to plan and build them into the history classroom, more strategies for teaching historical literacy and finally more time spent on inquiry learning. These topics were part of the content covered in the unit, so represented nothing new in the way of content areas, but what was interesting to discover was the perceived need to 'do more' in these areas. These were the lived experiences of the students on practicum and it would appear to be the topics of most concern to practising teachers. Regarding historical fiction, one respondent glanced ahead at what was covered by

the survey and stated “*From what is written below, I am excited to think that you may be incorporating some historical novels/literature in to the course*”.

The second question was a ranking question and sought to discover what the respondents felt were important elements in the preparation to teach history, the results can be seen in the table below.

Element	Result
The use of technology	Very important or Important (n=100%)
The planning and preparation of field trips	Important (52%)
Hands-on creative lessons (i.e. the construction of artefacts)	No strong opinion (52%)
The use of secondary school textbooks and workbooks as the ‘set text’ for the unit	Very important or Important (n=100%)
The assessment task (which required the preparation of a series of lesson and a field trip package)	Important (36%)
Adding Geography to the History/SOSE content to make it a multidisciplinary approach	Important (52%)
Adding historical novels as a tool for teaching historical literacy	Very important or Important (n=100%)

Table 1: Important elements in the preparation to teach history

It is of significance that of the items identified as being very important, the use of historical novels was one of them. It would appear that the idea of using them appeals strongly to pre-service teachers and as they had all completed three teaching placements; they were answering this question with some experience of what would work in a classroom setting with students.

The final four questions were concerned with historical novels and the teaching of historical literacy. The respondents were asked if they read historical novels, an example was provided (*Wolf Hall*). It was interesting, considering that the respondents were all history majors that only 40% stated that they had read an historical novel. This needs further exploration in order to understand this result, as what they consider to be historical fiction may differ from the researcher. The wording of this question should have included a definition, however as it was presented with only an example of an historical novel, there might be some confusion reflected in this answer.

The students were asked if they thought historical novels could be a useful strategy for the teaching of historical literacy. Historical literacy was defined so that they understood the different components that this collectively included. The historical novel was clarified as being an additional resource to supplement the set textbooks or content in a program of work. An example was provided, the use of a historical novel used as an introduction to a new program of work that could perhaps be set over a school holiday as a preparation for the following semester. It was stipulated that it was a supplementary resource or teaching tool.

All of the respondents responded in the affirmative (100%) and their explanations ranged from historical novels being in a more interesting and accessible format to improving reading comprehension and literacy. A sample of the range of responses is presented below:

- *I think a [sic] historical novel would benefit students' knowledge and understanding as well as improve their reading comprehension and literacy.*
- *If you look at things like A.B Paterson and Henry Lawson and their very famous poetic debate in the bulletin [sic], you have at least one great example of how literature can be used to support the teaching of history.*
- *It would easily help to improve their literacy skills, and also their historical literacy.*
- *Students can see how history has further historical contexts and uses. It might help us to teach it better if we ourselves can see how these connections are made.*
- *Makes history more personal, fiction is all about people so they can connect with it more.*
- *It could be more interesting than the actual history.*

Clearly the respondents could see the potential benefits of using historical fiction regardless of them personally not having had any prior experience with such resources. It was interesting to see them make links to elements and skills such as literacy, historical literacy and reading comprehension. Importantly interest and enjoyment were also observations of potential positive impact, which would support their concern or desire for more strategies aimed at increasing student motivation and engagement with the subject. It should be noted, that the concept of using historical novels in the teaching of history was not a topic covered or discussed in anyway during the semester, before or after their practicum placement. The idea of using historical fiction was a new idea first encountered by the students in the survey itself.

The next question sought to develop this further and asked for the strengths and weaknesses of the use of historical fiction to be identified. This was aimed at understanding their critical analysis of historical fiction and its use as a teaching strategy. It was reinforcing to see that the responses identified similar strengths and weaknesses that have been previously identified by the literature review. Identified strengths were; fiction being in a more accessible format, novels were perceived by students as being easier to read than textbooks, their content is often more personal, they bring eras or historical figures alive and make historical events more interesting. Concerns such as author bias were raised, but they were also described as being worthy secondary sources of information. A common concern raised was the challenge of selecting a suitable historical novel and how to actually get the students to read it. As you can see below, one of the students did experience the use of historical fiction in a history program, but the issues of poor choice of novel and the struggle to ensure the students read it were challenging. These comments can be seen below:

- *A real strength is that the stories are personal and about people – famous or otherwise – they come alive better than the factual lists of information about them we read in textbooks*
- *They bring alive the interesting bits, the social bits the students like to know – what people ate, how they slept, how they went to the toilet! Personal stuff, and also how people spoke back then.*
- *A weakness could be the bias shown. Students would have to know or pick up on the bias to get as much information out as possible*

- *I think that all history is interpretive and as such, the views of historical novelists are as valid as any secondary source. I believe that it is essential to balance the use of historical literature with other resources and not rely on it alone.*
- *Most importantly, students (especially in the younger grades) are not motivated to read novels of any sort. And perhaps if we were reading a [sic] historical novel in class, students could possibly confuse the fiction with what really happened in history. But this would be something to discuss in class.*
- *The only issue that I see with this is finding a novel that is of some interest to the students. I witnessed Yr 9 reading "The Captains Apprentice" and the students did not enjoy the novel although it related to Captain Cook, they were not interested in actually reading it.*

The final question asked, apart from the use of historical fiction, what other strategies they were intending to use to teach historical literacy. A common response was 'reading out passages from the textbook'. One respondent thought comparing visual and written sources of information would be an effective strategy, and another stated they intended to use poetry. This might indicate that there was a lack of understanding between the terms literacy and historical literacy. From these responses it appears that these pre-service teachers did not really have an understanding of the concept and viewed it as having a focus upon language, grammar and semantics. It was also apparent from the very limited range of strategies listed that their repertoire in this area was quite limited.

Discussion

The results of this small pilot supported the strengths identified by the literature review of using historical fiction in the teaching of history. Historical novels are presented in a format that is more accessible and is thus more appealing. The personal nature of the content, that they are largely historical narratives either based on famous historical figures or designed to bring alive particular eras are entry points that engage readers. The participants in the project also felt that historical novels were more interesting than the historical facts presented in textbooks. These are all aspects supported by the literature. They also managed to identify a key criticism of using historical novels in teaching; bias. However this was 'unpacked' as being akin to other secondary sources, and thus should be treated in a similar way. The pre-service teachers appeared view historical novels as a secondary source, they saw it as a stepping off point to engage their students and support the other sources of information examined in class. This could be problematical as secondary sources need careful analysis, and for the students to determine this requires in-depth knowledge of the historical facts being presented. All of these strengths were encouraging to see however one student reported on observing the use of historical fiction first-hand whilst on practicum and it was not a wholly positive experience. The novel was poorly chosen, the students did not enjoy the topic or content and the teacher had a difficult time trying to get the students to read it at all. This is a concern; it warns us that the mere act of including a 'popularised' form of history, such as an historical novel will not ensure higher levels of engagement. Clearly there needs to be careful consideration of which novel, how it will be used and the interests or strengths of the particular class it will be used with.

It was interesting to discover, that as a cohort of history teachers, less than half had read an historical novel. Yet all felt that it was either very important or important to include them in their pre-service training. Hence we could conclude that the concept of using historical fiction appeals to the pre-service teachers. Other aspects they identified as having importance in their training were not unexpected (e.g. technology, hands-on learning activities, inquiry learning and historical literacy). It was encouraging to see that as a cohort, they were open to new ways of approaching the teaching of history and that they considered more popularised forms to have a place in the subject. However, their answers to the questions concerning historical literacy demonstrated that their understanding of this term was mixed. There appeared to be the logical conclusion that it was concerned with literacy and reading comprehension, but no clear idea of the disciplinary aspects that make it *historical* literacy. It would have been insightful to clarify this further, as their wholehearted support for historical fiction might be grounded on a very literal understanding of literacy and what it is concerned with.

Overall the pilot project did achieve its aims. It sought to examine the teaching experiences of a group of pre-service history teachers. It was shown that they shared common areas of concern, as identified above, and that the experience of teaching history in the current context was similar amongst the cohort. They all identified the need to find more engaging strategies to use in order to maintain the interest and motivation of their students. The project also sought to explore the teaching of historical literacy whilst on teaching practicum. This was less clear as it would appear that students confuse this term with 'literacy' and do not understand the particular nuances of difference that historical literacy has compared to the more traditional understanding of this term. Finally, the project wished to consider the use of historical novels in secondary history classes. It was clear from the findings, that pre-service teachers supported the use of historical fiction and enthusiastically responded to the suggestion of including it within the unit content, but it was also clear from the experiences of one of the students that its use should be carefully considered.

Conclusion

This paper sought to investigate the recent trends in the popularising of history and its impact on teaching and learning. There has been a steady increase in the amount of fiction, films, television shows, documentaries and children's programs situated in or concerned with historical events, eras or historical figures. The use of historical fiction in the history classroom has been well discussed. The evident popularity among the wider public for historical novels, films and television programs requires teachers of history to re-evaluate their use in the classroom. They are tools in which we can re-engage pre-service teachers and students into the subject area. This paper sought to explore these recent trends and situate them within the current climate of curriculum reform occurring in Australia. It also presented the findings of a small pilot study concerned with exploring the use of historical fiction in pre-service teacher education programs. What emerged from the findings was that pre-service teachers found the idea of using historical fiction appealing and saw the potential benefits it could enable in the areas of literacy, historical literacy, engagement and reading comprehension. This small project suggests that the inclusion of historical fiction in pre-education programs, and within history classrooms, may potentially have a positive impact on learning and result in higher levels of engagement with the subject. In an era of declining student enrolments in the subject, this is a teaching strategy worthy of including both in a unit of work or within a pre-service education program.

References

- ACARA. (2009). *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: History*. Electronic document http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/resources/Australian_Curriculum_-_History.pdf
- Bell, A. R. (2011). Science as 'Horrible': Irreverent deference in science communication. *Science as Culture*, 20(4), 491-512. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2011.605921>
- Bell, E. & Gray, A. (2007). History on television: charisma, narrative and knowledge. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10, 113-133. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1367549407072973>
- Coles, J., & Armstrong, P. (2007). *Dumbing down history through popular culture: communities of interest or learning as consumption?* 37th Annual SCUTREA Conference. Queen's University, Belfast, Northern Ireland.
- Crawford, P.A., & Zygouris-Coe, V. (2008). Those were the days. Learning about history through literature. *Childhood Education*, Summer 2008, 197-203. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2008.10523007>
- Gibson, O. (2005). Tusa attacks 'Blue Peter' BBC arts programmes. *The Guardian*, Monday April 18, 2005.
- Hoggart, R. (2002). Dumb and dumber. *The Guardian*, 14 March 2006.
- Lindquist, T. (2002). Why and how I teach with historical fiction. Electronic document <http://teacher.scholastic.com/lessonrepro/lessonplans/instructor/social1.htm>
- Pihlainen, K. (2011). Narrative objectivity versus fiction: on the ontology of historical narratives. *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 2(1), 7-22. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13642529809408759>
- Pinto, S. (2010). Emotional histories and historical emotions: Looking at the past in historical novels. *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 14(2), 189-207. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13642521003710748>
- Reynolds, R. (2006). The values in historical fiction: Avenues to global citizenship. *The Social Educator*, November 2006, 28-33.
- Rodwell, G. (2010). Historical novels: Engaging student teachers in K-10 pre-service units. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 35(7), 15-29. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2010v35n7.2>
- Schama, S. (2004). Television and the Trouble with History. In D. Cannadine. (Ed.). *History and the Media*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. Pp.20-33.
- Shaw, H. E. (2005). Is there a problem with historical fiction (or with Scott's Redgauntlet)? *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 9(2/3), 173-195.
- Slotkin, R. (2005). Fiction for purposes of history. *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 9(2/3), 221-236. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13642520500149152>
- Turk, D., Klein, E. & Dickstein, S. (2007). Mingling "fact" with "fiction": Strategies for integrating literature into history and social studies classrooms. *History Teacher*, 40(3), 397-406.
- Zhang, L. (2004). History and Fictionality: Insights and limitations of a literary perspective. *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 8(3), 387-402. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1364252042000247837>