

THE USE OF FICTION IN TEACHING  
MODERN ASIAN AND AFRICAN HISTORY

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The use of fictional works as supplementary reading in history courses has become very common as interest in how ordinary people lived has increased. A carefully chosen novel can give students a more vivid sense of "how it really was" than most of the works of VonRanke's disciples.

The novel is particularly useful in teaching the history of modern Asia and Africa. Students raised in an American city or suburb often flounder when introduced to Asian and African cultures. All seem forbiddingly foreign. Colonial periods are considered from the European perspective or from the vantage point of local elites. Underdevelopment, poverty, and modernization are abstractions. Most foreign of all to young Americans is the very pace and feel of life in a traditional agricultural society.

To bridge this gap I began to look for suitable works of Asian and African writers for classroom use. I wanted local writers to provide students with direct evidence of the vivid and powerful literature being produced in Africa and Asia. There was no shortage of titles. But I needed fiction of appropriate length--not much more than 250 pages. The style had to be accessible--too much surrealism would make Asia more inscrutable and Africa darker. Finally, I needed titles available in inexpensive paperback editions.

This annotated list of titles I have found most useful precedes a description of the manner in which I have used such novels in class.

I. Sub-Saharan Africa

A. Nigeria

Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart, 1959. (ISBN 0-435-9001-3). Heinemann Ed. (188 pp.; \$3.00).

Set in an Ibo village in Nigeria at the onset of colonialism near the turn of the century. Achebe is one of Nigeria's leading writers. The novel charts the destruction of the main character, Okonkwo, as well as the values he embodies. The strength of the book lies in the vivid way it recreates the manner and tempo of the stateless societies common in West Africa. Uncomprehending Europeans quickly destroyed these informal yet highly complex societies. Achebe helps us understand how it feels when things fall apart.

Chinua Achebe, No Longer At Ease, 1981. (ISBN 0-435-9003-X). Heinemann Ed. (195 pp.; \$3.50).

The grandson of Okonkwo finds himself out of sorts in independent Nigeria. Obi is torn between the village culture of his childhood memories and the Westernized values of his foreign education. Like Obi, Achebe feels strong sympathy for both worlds. Yet sometimes it is necessary to choose.

Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart, 1959. (ISBN 0-435-9001-3). Heinemann Ed. (188 pp.; \$3.00).

Here Achebe looks at the realities behind the charismatic leader in a newly independent nation. A promising young man from the leader's village is at first attracted and then repelled by the leader. Later he learns first hand the dangers of opposing the great man.

B. Somalia

Nuruddin Farah, From a Crooked Rib, 1970. (ISBN 0-435-90080-3). Heinemann Ed. (182 pp.; \$3.50).

This vivid novel follows an independent-minded young woman from her home in a remote pastoral community to a small provincial town and finally on to Mogadiscio, the capital. We share her curiosity as she moves through the various societies. The woman, Ebla, is strongly drawn as is the sense of place and tempo in each community. Other interesting themes include the varying roles of women in each society and Ebla's pragmatic and flexible version of Islam.

C. Zaire

V.S. Naipaul, A Bend in the River, 1980. (ISBN 0-394-74314-8). Vin.-Random (278 pp.; \$3.95).

V.S. Naipaul is of course no Zairian. Naipaul's Indian heritage comes into play, for the story is told from the point of view of the son of an Asian merchant family of Africa's east coast. The narrator attempts to make his fortune by running a store in the interior. The river town (presumably Kisangani, formerly Stanleyville) is struggling through the change from European to African rule. The colonial town slowly disintegrates as the "Big Man" (clearly General Mobutu) takes control.

The sense of place and time is most compelling; Naipaul offers a chilling view of life under men like Mobutu. The emphasis on the Asian community reminds us of a neglected element in East and Central African history.

D. South Africa

Andre Brink, A Dry White Season, 1983. (ISBN 0-14-006890-2). Penquin (320 pp.; \$6.95).

Brink's main character, Ben, decides he must resist the evils of apartheid. His resistance destroys both Ben and his family. This novel superbly shows the difficult choices thoughtful white South Africans have to make every day. Brink gives readers a feel for the oppression that quickly envelops any white who resists the system. Many students feel this book gives them a better handle on what is happening in South Africa than anything else they have read.

II. The Islamic World

## A. Turkey

Yashar Kemal, Memed, My Hawk, 1982. (ISBN 0-394-71016-9). Pantheon (371 pp.; \$6.95).

A look at life in a remote Turkish village in the Taurus Mountains early in the Republican period. Memed defies an oppressive lord and turns to an outlaw's existence. He becomes a Robin Hood, opposing both the grasping local lords as well as the bandits the lords secretly hire to intimidate local peasants. The brutality and barrenness of the landscape is reflected in the lives of the people. Ankara is far away. Islam is an important aspect of society but is far from being a preoccupation with these struggling people.

## B. Egypt

Naguib Mahfouz, Midaq Alley, 1981. (ISBN 89410-281-8). Three Continents (246 pp.; \$6.95).

Midaq Alley, a neighborhood in one of the oldest sections of Cairo, houses a rich cast of characters from a matchmaker to a cafe owner to a man who trains beggars by enhancing their deformities. The time is the Second World War. The impact of British troops stationed in Egypt is a theme of the story, but not a preoccupation. Midaq Alley sees all. Neighborhood life in an Islamic city comes to life.

## C. Iran

Nahid Rachlin, Foreigner, 1978. (ISBN 0-393-00961-0). Norton (192 pp.; \$3.95).

A young Iranian woman returns home late in the Shah's reign after years in the United States. She had gone off to graduate school, then began a career and married. Uncertain about the marriage and career, she needs a visit home to recover her balance. She visits her father and step-mother in Tehran and then, against advice, seeks out her mother who had deserted the family for a lover during her childhood. Her journey to the hinterlands to find her mother takes her back to her own origins.

Seemingly insubstantial on first reading, this book keeps returning to one's mind. Highly evocative not only of the sights, sounds, and smells of Iran but also of an atmosphere of fatalism and ennui.

III. South Asia

## A. Pakistan (and India)

Khushwant Singh, Train to Pakistan, 1981. (ISBN 0-394-17887-4). Grove (192 pp.; \$3.25).

The experience of a village in the Punjab during the Indian partition crisis of 1947. Above all, the novel gives a sense of how neighbors who have lived in harmony can be transformed into mortal enemies by sectarian politics.

#### B. India

Kamala Markandaya, Nectar in a Sieve. (ISBN 0-451-13460-5). NAL (185 pp.; \$2.50).

A family goes through modernization. Rukmani is an educated girl who marries a peasant share-cropper because the family's money was spent on dowries for older sisters. Nature provides troubles enough, but when a modern tannery is built in their village the traditional society begins to break down.

R.K. Narayan, The Vendor of Sweets, 1983. (ISBN 0-14-006258-0). Penguin (144 pp.; \$4.95).

One of a series of novels by Narayan set in Malgudi, his imaginary South Indian town. Jagan, a careful and miserly man in his fifties, operates a sweet shop. He participated in Gandhi's local actions in his youth but now he is concerned about his son's youthful escapades. The son goes off to America to school, flunks out, marries a Korean girl, returns home with her and tries to raise capital in Malgudi to purchase a novel writing machine he had seen advertised in a magazine. Jagan is caught between suspicion and fear of these new developments and love for his son.

A rich cast of characters visits the sweet shop and offers Jagan advice. This is another book that beautifully captures the sights, sounds, and smells of its setting.

R.K. Narayan, Waiting for the Mahatma, 1981. (ISBN 0-226-56828-8). University of Chicago Press (250 pp.; \$4.50).

Many of Mahatma Gandhi's followers were quite ordinary young people whose youth occurred at an extraordinary time. Here Narayan presents a young pair who are activists in Gandhi's movement. While waiting with them for the Mahatma (for Godot?), we learn much about Indian society and the relations between the sexes among the "modern" set.

#### IV. East Asia

##### A. China

Robert VanGulik, The Chinese Gold Murders, 1979. (ISBN 0-226-84864-7). University of Chicago Press (224 pp.; \$3.95).

VanGulik, a Dutch diplomat who recorded numerous episodes involving popular folk character Judge Dee, arranged some of the stories in the format of Western-style mystery novels. Four titles are available in paperback from the University of Chicago. I have found Gold Murders most useful in classes. It gives a picture of a Chinese town during the T'ang dynasty

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and the role of the magistrate in day to day workings of the community. It provides insights on the place of women in traditional China, on the Confucian scholar-official's low opinion of Buddhists, and on other subjects.

Pa Chin, Family, 1972. (ISBN 0-385-05787-3). Anchor Doubleday (310 pp.; \$5.50).

A traditional Confucian extended family is shaken by its younger son's infatuation with the New Culture (May 4th) Movement just after the First World War. Interestingly one of the most sympathetically drawn characters is the eldest son who is torn between his sense of duty to his relatives and the new opportunities opening up beyond the family compound. Rather a long book for a general requirement but an excellent outside reading choice for enthusiastic students. The introduction by Olga Lang is very useful on the author and his relationships to the New Culture Movement.

Lao She, Camel Xiangzi, 1981. (ISBN 0-253-31296-5). Indiana University Press (240 pp.; \$6.95).

The story of a rickshaw boy in Beijing (Peking) during the interwar period told with Dickens-like realism, humor, and pathos. "Down and out in Beijing" seems like an apt title before the novel is finished. A powerful book.

Yuan-Tsung Chen, The Dragon's Village, 1981. (ISBN 0-14-0058-7). Penguin (285 pp.; \$5.95).

The daughter of a wealthy Shanghai family stays on when her family flees the communist takeover. She volunteers to help with the economic and political reform at the village level and is sent to one of China's poorest provinces in the extreme northwest. Good on village politics at the turning point and on the contradictions felt by the young elites who both favor and fear the new revolution.

Jo-hsi Chen, Execution of Mayor Yin and Other Stories from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, 1978. (ISBN 0-253-20231-0). Indiana University Press (248 pp.; \$6.95).

These stories offer alarming views of conformism and other terrors of the cultural revolution. Chen and her husband, both Chinese-Americans, return to China enthusiastic about the revolution. Later they have second thoughts.

#### B. Japan

Lady Murasaki, The Tale of Genji, 1953. (ISBN 0-385-09275-X). Anchor (252 pp.; \$4.95).

An excerpt from the Heian court (c. 1000 AD) where sensitivity to nature's beauty and human emotions was a constant preoccupation. Often called the world's first psychological novel, The Tale of Genji brings to life the court society that provided the basis for Japan's aristocratic and aesthetic values.

Yukio Mishima, Spring Snow, 1975. (ISBN 0-671-43425-X). WSP (384 pp.; \$2.95).

Yukio Mishima, Runaway Horses, 1975. (ISBN 0-671-43686-4). WSP (432 pp.; \$3.50).

These titles are volumes I and II of Mishima's "Sea of Fertility" Tetralogy. Spring Snow pictures aristocratic Japan during the transition to modern society just before World War I. The main character, Kiyooki, is self-absorbed and preoccupied with a Heian sense of form and beauty. The world is passing him by. Runaway Horses explores another aspect of Japanese society, the samurai obsession with duty and sacrifice. The setting is interwar Japan as the military makes its move to push civilian government aside. Both novels are gorgeously written with an eye for visual details and psychological insights. Spring Snow has the additional advantage of being a very powerful love story.

Junichiro Tanizaki, Makioka Sisters, 1981. (ISBN 0-399-50520-2). Perigree-Putnam (538 pp.; \$8.95).

Four sisters, each with different tastes and temperaments, try to accommodate themselves to changing Japanese society on the eve of World War Two. Considered by many Japanese their finest twentieth-century novel. Rather long for required reading but a good choice for avid readers looking for additional material.

Kobo Abe, The Woman of the Dunes, 1972. (ISBN 0-394-71814-3). Niv.-Random (235 pp.; \$3.95).

Abe is the Japanese writer most often compared to Camus or Kafka. While much of his writing is too bizarre or surreal for this list, The Woman of the Dunes is an exception. It is a powerful allegory of contemporary Japanese life. The insights are existentialist yet accessible to all readers. A personal favorite.

While I am always eager to share books and titles with colleagues, I am less inclined to suggest teaching methods. Bearing in mind that each teacher's situation is different, I will limit myself to describing my own situation and the ways I have used novels in my classes.

I teach in a four-year public commuter college. About half of our survey students major in a business field. The second largest group choose teacher education. We teach a world civilizations survey course with substantial non-western content. Our students have the usual complaints about the non-western chapters in the text. "The names are impossible." "It's too foreign." In the survey novels help to reduce these feelings of distance. I distribute an annotated list of Asian and African novels. (The list bears a strong resemblance to that given above.) Students are required to report on at least one of these books on a pass/fail basis. Whenever possible, the report is done orally in my office. I ask students to come to their appointment able to summarize the book and to discuss several ways it touches on themes we have developed in the course. The annotations on the book list suggest things to bear in mind while reading. The student is also referred to the textbook for background. I emphasize that since it is a

pass/fail requirement our discussion should not be threatening. Once I am assured the student has read the book, we enjoy an informal talk.

Very often the student begins by saying "I couldn't believe it; I really enjoyed this book." Besides giving students a bit of vicarious experience in Asian and African societies, the books provide a good way to get students into my office. After we have had a pleasant and successful (they have "passed") discussion about an Asian novel, it is easier to turn to other areas of the course where perhaps the student has been less successful. Finally, freshmen are reminded, in reading the novels, that there are other forms of literature besides textbooks, a fact that many of our business students seem to lose sight of. Unfortunately because of other material that must be covered and the numbers of students in surveys, I am limited to require one or at most two novels.

The novels play a more central role in upper-level classes on modern Asia or Africa. The upper-level courses begin with the assumption that students have little background information. We push quickly through a survey of basic information. The emphasis is on geography and social traditions as well as a brief narrative history. This crash course takes about three and a half weeks out of a ten-week quarter.

After the crash course and an examination has brought everyone to a minimum level of understanding, the "real" course begins. Assignments intersperse three to five of the novels with scholarly articles placed on reserve in the library. The novels and articles are chosen to complement one another. An article on the impact of colonialism in West Africa can be followed by Achebe's Things Fall Apart. To encourage students to read each novel by the assigned date, I give a short quiz on the day scheduled for discussion. The simple straightforward questions are on the plot or characters of the novel. Students read the novel expecting to score well on the quizzes. Weaker students see the quizzes as a chance to recover from a disappointing hourly. Scores on the quizzes are added together and become the equivalent of a major test.

With the quiz over, the stage is set for a discussion of the novel. I grade students for class participation, but once they have read the book preparing for the quizzes, they need little encouragement to discuss. I encourage them to express personal likes and dislikes as well as to consider themes relevant to a history class. Comparing novels with one another and with the articles provides an excellent opportunity to bring home to the students how important it is to be aware of the perspective and prejudices of writers. Altogether, the novels, used in concert with the crash course for background and with non-fiction articles for scholarly interpretation, lead to excellent discussions. It is clearly the novels that grab students' interest and lead them to participate, often with a certain emotional intensity, in class discussions.

For the final exam in these upper-level courses I generally give the students "take-home" questions that require them to synthesize the different kinds of materials we have read and discussed. Constructing the questions is difficult, as the students discover when they are asked to submit possible ones to use. I give ten points on the final to the student who submits the best question. We go over the questions submitted in class, discussing their advantages and weaknesses. This encourages students to see the linkages between the general background material, scholarly interpretations, and novels. In addition, with a little editing, the students' questions often make very good final exams.

Having shared my experiences in the use of fiction in teaching history, I feel the best approach is for the instructor to read a variety of African and Asian novels. Titles useful for assignment and methods of using them will soon suggest themselves. If your reaction is like mine, once you have experienced some of these books your greatest problem will be deciding which novels not to assign.