Reading History from A Different Perspective: Making Students Care for History by Creating a Historical Fiction Short Story an Anthropomorphic Narrator

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ABSTRACT

Despite a disinterest in history class amongst high school students, young adult historical fiction is an immensely popular genre of novels. Teenagers interest in historical fiction gives authors the unique opportunity to present perspectives of historical events that differ from the predominant narrative using an anthropomorphic narrator. This study investigated whether a historical fiction short story with an anthropomorphic narrator could be used to emotionally invest and interest students more in history than a history class. Participants read a short story about the Battle of Messines, a battle that occurred during World War I, through the perspective of the wind. They then read an article called "This Explosion Was the Biggest Blast Before Atomic Bombs" and a diary from a World War I memoir entitled *At Messines Ridge in 1917* to simulate reading material typically found in a history class. They then answered two questionnaires gauging their emotional investment and interest in the subject matter. This study found that short story emotional invested and interested them more in history than the material typically used in a history class.

Introduction

According to the American Historical Association, the number of college students choosing to pursue history as their major is the lowest it has ever been, with a mere 1.2 percent of bachelor's degrees in 2021 being history-related (Townsend 2021). Furthermore, a survey done by the Fordham Institute on high school students' favorite subjects found that out of the four core subjects (Math, History, English, and Science), history ranked the lowest with only 9% of students calling it their favorite (Geraci, 2017). Although these statistics seem to suggest that students are experiencing a decreasing interest in history, the popularity of historical fiction literature suggests otherwise. Young adult fiction, commonly referred to as "YA", is an immensely popular genre of literature targeted towards teenagers, with nearly 8 million units being sold in the 2nd quarter of 2021 (White 2021) (Anderson 2021). Historical fiction YA, a sub-genre of YA, has also seen immense success. Historical fiction YA books continue to be critically acclaimed, with a recent example being the 2019 novel *Lovely War,* which received a variety of awards in 2020 including the Audie Award for Young Adult Fiction, the Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award, and the Golden Kite Award for Young Adult Fiction (Golden Kite Award, 2020) (Walden Award 2020) (Audie Award 2020). Other examples of award-winning YA historical fiction include the 2017 novel *The Gentleman's Guide to Vice and Virtue*, which won the Best Fiction for Young Adults Award in 2018; and the 2019 novel *Like a Love Story* which won the Best Fiction for Young Adults Award in 2020 (YALSA, 2021). The most popular book in the YA historical fiction scene, however, continues to be *The Book Thief*, a story about the Holocaust featuring an anthropomorphized Death as its narrator. The novel has sold over 16 million copies in addition to being translated into 42 languages since its publication in 2005 (Penguin Random House 2018). Not only this, but it continues to sit atop of Amazon's "Best

Sellers in Teen and Young Adult Fiction" page – over fifteen years after its release (Amazon Best Sellers in Teen & Young Adult Historical Fiction 2021).

Despite the success of YA historical fiction and the dislike of the traditional history curriculum, historical fiction has not been widely adopted as teaching material in the classroom. Although most states support the use of a, "variety of resources," to teach history, using historical fiction is not the standard (Rodwell 2013). This paper aims to discuss the reasoning behind this trend and how it can be used to make history class more effective and interesting.

It also, however, aims to prove that the microgenre of historical fiction with an anthropomorphic narrator is viable as teaching material in a history classroom. To do this, a historical fiction short story with an anthropomorphic narrator will be created and tested to see whether it will make high school students interested and emotionally invested in history more than a history textbook. The question, however, arises as to why historical fiction using an anthropomorphic narrator is important or useful.

Beyond just making people care for history, historical fiction gives the unique opportunity to present differing perspectives on historical events (Sliwka 2008). It is often said that "history is written by the victors", meaning that the prevailing historical narrative of an event is often based off the perspective of a single party or faction that are perceived as the 'victors' of the event. Although the definition of the 'victor' is heavily debated, there is no doubt that there is often one acceptable perspective of an event, and any perspective that deviates from it is seen as taboo. For example, a level of discomfort can be found in trying to understand slavery from the perspective of a slave owner. It is important that we understand different perspectives, however, because relying on a single group's narrative of an event will create a skewed perception of said event and will do a disservice to the actual history. A historical fiction story with anthropomorphic narrator can help address this. In the case of the previously mentioned *The Book Thief*, the book presents the Holocaust from the perspective of Death. By doing so, it prompts high school students to ponder what the Holocaust looked like from other perspectives, while sidestepping the natural Axis versus Allied understanding, and ultimately helps them understand that exploring historical events from other perspectives is not only possible but not taboo.

Literature Review

To fully comprehend how historical fiction can be used to emotionally invest and interests' readers more in history than a history textbook, we must first define why history is taught as a core subject.

Why History is Taught in School?

History is taught for a plethora of reasons, but the main justification is that it gives students, "awareness" and critical thinking skills, the two of which will make them "informed citizens," (Joel, 2021). Awareness, in this context, is an understanding of one's society and government, which can be defined more narrowly as an understanding of national institutions, social problems, and national values. History acts as the exclusive storehouse of this information, which means teaching it is crucial to creating students with awareness who understand the trends and systems that affect their lives daily. History is also used to teach three different types of critical thinking (Stearns 1998). The first can be defined as moral understanding, which involves using past events to help discern and evaluate moral lapses in the past or present that still affect society today. The second is the ability to assess evidence and data to make coherent arguments. The third is the ability to assess conflicting interpretations of evidence (Joel, 2021). This is especially useful in everyday life and the workplace because it helps us discern who we should listen to, and what parts of those people's opinions are useful (Stearns 1998). Both awareness and critical thinking combine to create what many call an "informed citizen" or a person who can be trusted to make informed decisions to help guide society (Lamb et. al. 2020).

Why Historical Fiction is Useful in Teaching History?

The current history curriculum is lacking when it comes to making students interested in history. Education historian Diane Radvitch argues that instead of deeper, contextual learning students are forced to take multiple-choice tests that encourage, "teaching to the test," instead of history. This causes students to not understand why history can be important to them personally, or useful in their future. And so, justifiably, they decide to focus their efforts on subjects they feel are more important (NPR Staff 2011). This isn't to suggest that students find history boring, just that history class is boring. Combating this boredom is where historical fiction shines as a useful teaching tool. Historical fiction can take advantage of emotional arcs, a story element presents in all narratives, to make historical concepts and information stick in the minds of students (O'Hara, 2014). Although difficult to precisely define, emotional arcs are the emotional ups and downs the protagonist of the story faces (Raegan et. al., 2016). The most simplistic example of this would be the common "Man-in-hole" emotional arc, in which the stories protagonist gets into trouble, then has to work to get out of it. It is because of emotional arcs that narratives are more effective at persuading an audience than statistics are. Emotional arcs can be used to illicit a powerful response to facts or opinions that could otherwise be seen as dull or abstract by having the audience relate strong emotions to them (Morgan N., 2014). This same idea applies to historical fiction, with students caring more for historical events when relating it to the emotional arc than traditional lessons (Sliwka, 2008). This unique ability is critical in getting students to care about history, so much so that the National Center for History Education included, "reading historical fiction," as one of the 12 elements in their Historical Literacy Test, a set of guidelines made to gauge whether students truly understand and care for history (Rodwell 2013).

Gap Analysis

Although it is well established that historical fiction can make students care for history, it is unknown whether historical fiction with an anthropomorphic narrator can do the same. The genre of historical fiction with anthropomorphic narrators is almost non-existent outside of the novels *The Book Thief* and *War Horse*. However, there have been young adult novels, historical or not, that have adopted aspects of anthropomorphism in their plots. An example of this would be George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, a satirical allegorical novella that uses a story involving anthropomorphic animals to critique communism and the Soviet Union (BBC, 2019). Another example *is Watership Down* by Richard Adams, an adventure novel about anthropomorphic rabbits in Southern England. Both novels are for young adults, with mature themes and events occurring throughout. Although these books are set in the Cold War, at the time of their publication they were contemporary literature, meaning they cannot be defined as a historical fiction. There has, however, been historical narratives that have incorporated anthropomorphic characters. An example of this would be the graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, which depicts Spiegelman's father's experience as a Polish Jew in the holocaust. Characters are drawn as different anthropomorphic animals depending on their ethnicity: Jews are mice, Germans are cats, and Americans are dogs (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2021). Despite the use of anthropomorphic characters, the events and people presented in the novel are real, making the story a memoir. The only examples of historical fiction novels with anthropomorphic characters would be the 1982 novel *War Horse* by Michael Morpurgo, which follows the life of a horse in a British Cavalry Unit during World War One and the 2005 novel *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. Both novels are unique in that the anthropomorphic characters featured are the narrators of the story. Not only this, but *The Book Thief* specifically stands out as being the only historical fiction novel with an anthropomorphic character that isn't an animal, with Zusak choosing to anthropomorphize death instead.

The short story I wrote features the wind as an anthropomorphic narrator and is centered around the Battle of Messines during World War One. Similar to Death in *The Book Thief*, I chose to anthropomorphize a concept rather than an animal. This is partially due to immense destructive force of the explosion that occurred during the battle lending itself to the story being narrated by the wind. But beyond this, it can be argued that anthropomor-

phized animals in media are normalized enough that readers may not experience the same sense of novelty at viewing a historical event through an animal's eyes then they would while experiencing it through the eyes of an anthropomorphized concept. A plethora of media, from Disney movies such as *Zootopia* to children's books such as *Wind in the Willow,* have effectively made anthropomorphic animals' part of the 'acceptable' forms of telling stories. The sense of novelty created in the short story from viewing the Battle of Messines through an anthropomorphized nature is critical in getting students to think about history from other perspectives. Having an anthropomorphic animal narrator would have ruined this sense of novelty, thereby making students less likely to ponder other perspectives. I also chose to set the story in World War One, a choice made due to the war not being as notorious as other wars in American history. This is perfectly exemplified by *War Horses* relative obscurity, with the author stating in a 2010 BBC interview that "It was published in America and didn't succeed… It simply was not a book that anyone really knew about or cared about" (Masters 2012). The reader's lack of knowledge about World War One better simulates the conditions in a history classroom, where many students will be learning about historical events, they have no prior knowledge of.

Methods

This study focuses on the creation of a historical fiction short story with an anthropomorphic narrator set in World War I. Through this story, the study aims to find a connection between historical fiction and engagement in history. The goal is to see whether a short story with an anthropomorphic narrator can emotionally invest, and interest students more than material from a traditional history class could. This is important because historical fiction with an anthropomorphic narrator can help normalize viewing history from a perspective different from the prevailing historical narrative.

Method Design

A mixed method study was conducted in which a text was created based on a gap in the history curricula and historical fiction literature. A wide variety of reading was done on World War I, during which the setting of the short story was decided as the Battle of Messines due to the obscurity of the event, and the events of the battle lending itself to the story being narrated by an anthropomorphic concept. Then, specific literature was curated in order to mirror the mixture of primary and secondary that would be typically used in a history class. This 'classroom material' was comprised of the National Geographic Article "This Explosion Was the Biggest Blast Before Atomic Bombs" written in 2014 and a primary source diary excerpt from the memoir entitled *At Messines Ridge in 1917* (Appendix B). A short story with an anthropomorphic narrator was then created using the Battle of Messines as its setting. High school students were then asked to read both the 'classroom material' and the short story then take questionnaires to gauge their emotional investment and interest in history after reading each.
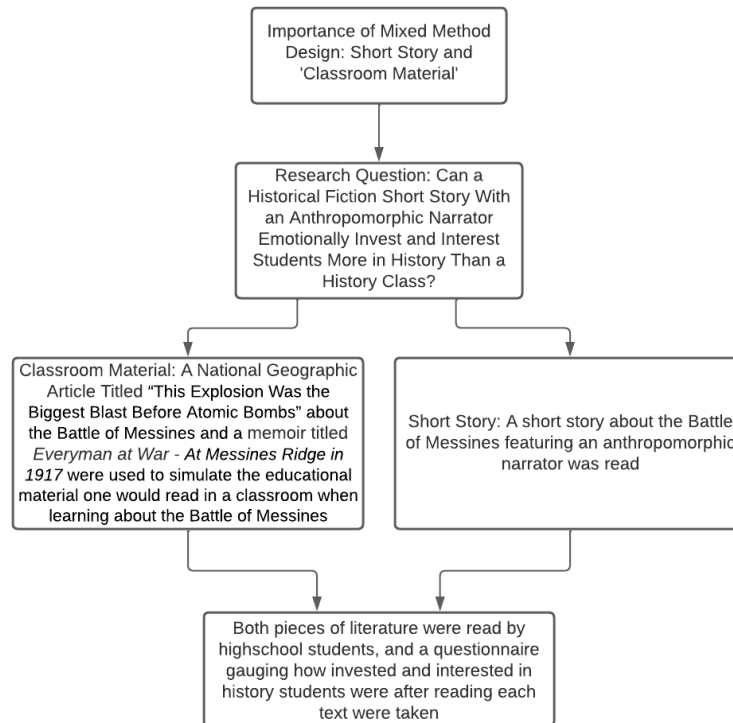
Figure 1: Importance of Mixed Method Design

Short Story Rationale

The short story features the Wind as an anthropomorphic narrator and is centered around the Battle of Messines during World War I (Appendix A). Similar to Death in *The Book Thief*, a concept was anthropomorphized rather than an animal. This is partially due to the immense destructive force of the explosion that occurred during the battle lending itself to the story being narrated by the wind. Not only this, but the wind was also chosen as the narrator because it allows for easy contrasts to be made between it and the claustrophobic conditions of the trenches in Belgium. This, in turn, was used to further delve into historically significant details about life in the trenches, mainly the poor conditions the average soldier faced. The inclusion of historical details is critical in ensuring the story is an educational experience that is set to the same standard as the National Geographic article, *This Explosion Was the Biggest Blast Before Atomic Bombs*. Not only this, but it was critical that the short story included the same exact same historical information as *This Explosion Was the Biggest Blast Before Atomic Bombs*. This way, both pieces of text have the same educational value, which in turn, will lead to less deviation between the short story and the article.

Beyond this, the wind was chosen to be the narrator because it can be argued that anthropomorphized animals in media are normalized enough that readers may not experience the same sense of novelty at viewing a historical event through an animal's eyes then they would while experiencing it through the eyes of an anthropomorphized concept. This is shown by the abundance of anthropomorphized animals in the current literary canon of books. This has effectively led to anthropomorphic animals' becoming part of the "acceptable" forms of telling stories. The sense of novelty created in the short story from viewing the Battle of Messines through an anthropomorphized wind is critical in getting students to think about history from other perspectives.

The story was written to take place in World War I due to the war not being as well-known as other wars in American history. This is exemplified by Richard Ruben, the author of *The Last of the Doughboys: The Forgotten*

Generation and Their Forgotten World War, who stated that existing World War I novels in America are, "languishing unread" and that, "few Americans are writing new ones." Readers' lack of knowledge about World War I better simulates the conditions in a history classroom, where many students will be learning about historical events of which they have no prior knowledge.

The protagonist was named Alan Mathers and was inspired by the 35-year-old farmer and winemaker of the same name from South Wales, Australia. The reasoning for this is to draw an additional connection between the short story and *This Explosion Was the Biggest Blast Before Atomic Bombs,* since the article discusses researchers uncovering Mathers body.

Subjects

Seniors and Juniors from the same high school that have taken U.S. History and World History were the subjects of this study. This was done to ensure that every student had learned the exact same information about World War I in the same classrooms before taking the questionnaire. Fifteen males and fifteen females participated in order to keep a balance amongst the sexes, which is important in order to understand whether there was a gendered difference in appreciation for the classroom material versus the short story.

Research Instruments

This questionnaire was, in-part, adapted from the *Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ)* by David S. Miall and Don Kuiken from the University of Alberta. The LRQ was made to determine different aspects of a reader's orientation toward literary texts. Its use of a Likert scale was kept, but the questions were changed from pertaining to multiple pieces of literature to being tailored for two specific pieces of literature. The LRQ did not include questions specifically addressing emotional investment and interest, so those components were added to the questionnaire used in this study. The use of a 5-point Likert scale in the questionnaire allows for respondent's attitudes towards both texts to be easily quantified and analyzed.

Procedure

The fifteen female students and fifteen male students were sent the short story, classroom material, and two questionnaires through an email. The classroom material was read, then the first questionnaire was completed. Then the short story was read, and the second questionnaire was completed. The answers were tallied digitally by the Microsoft Forms program, wherefrom each question on the survey was given an average score based on the responses of all thirty participants.

Delimitations

Only students who were currently enrolled in or had completed both U.S History and World History at the same high school were allowed to participate in the study due to the fear that other participants might have more knowledge about World War I going into the study. Only students in grades 11-12 were used due to the nature of the content featured in the short story. Due to the subject matter of the short story being World War I, extreme violence is depicted and talked about by different characters. Furthermore, in line with the young adult genre that the short story is under, the short story features the use of profane language that would be inappropriate for a younger audience.

Results

Table 1 depicts the average response of all thirty participants to all paired questions on both the short story and classroom material surveys according to the 5-point Likert scale. Paired Questions, such as Question 16 on the Short Story Survey and Question 13 on the Classroom Material Survey, are questions whose content is identical. This was done to determine whether the short story or the classroom material was more positively received for the given component being tested. For example, Question 7 asks "How enjoyable was the article?" on the classroom material survey, while Question 7 on the short story survey asks, "How enjoyable was the short story?" Both questions are being used to gauge how enjoyable a piece of text is, with the only difference between them being which text they are referring to.

Table 1: *Average Response to Paired Questions on Short Story Survey and Classroom Material Survey Based on 5-point Likert Scale* (n=30)

Question Pairs	Classroom Material Score	Short Story Score
Question 4 *How likely are you to talk with family or friends about this story/article?*	2.3	3.7
Question 5 *After reading this story/article, how likely do you think you are to pursue learning more about World War I? (Any form of media)*	2.6	3.6
Question 7 *How enjoyable was the story/article?*	2.8	4.4
Question 8 *How engaging was the story/article?*	2.5	4.6
Question 9 *Do you feel that the World War I is an important historical event to learn about?*	3.7	4.6
Question 10 *To what degree can you relate with the characters/people mentioned in the story/article?*	1.5	3.1
Question 13a[1] & Question 16 *If possible, would you be interested in incorporating any idea, concept, or piece of history presented in this short story/article into your own work?*	1.7	2.3

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[1] 13a refers to Question 13 on the Classroom Material Survey

This data shows that, for every question, the short story was more positively received than the classroom material (P=0.000486). Table 2 depicts the average response to Question 12, Question 13, and Question 14 on the 5-point Likert Scale, which could not be paired due to them specifically asking about the anthropomorphic narrator in the short story, which was not present in the classroom material.

Table 2: *Average Response to Question 12, Question 13, and Question 14 on the Short Story Based on 5-point Likert Scale* (n=30)

Questions on Short Story Survey	Short Story Score
Question 11 *Did you enjoy the Wind as the narrator?*	4.7
Question 12 *How engaging was the Wind as the narrator?*	4.6
Question 13b[2] *Did having the Wind as the narrator ever make the story difficult understand? If so, how frequently?*	3.8
Question 14 *If the Wind was removed as the narrator, do you feel the story would be more or less enjoyable?*	3.4

In Question 11 on the short story survey, when asked "Did you enjoy the Wind as the narrator?" students responded positively, with 77% of participants listing "very enjoyable", 17% listing "enjoyable", and 7% listing "neutral". Similarly, Question 12 on the short story survey "How engaging was the story?" also received a positive response, with 70% of participants listing "very engaging", 23% listing "engaging", and 7% listing neutral. Neither of these questions received a single negative response, or a response below "neutral". In Question 13, when asked, "Did having the Wind as the narrator ever make the story difficult understand? If so, how frequently?", 27% of participants responded "never", half of participants responded with "Rarely", 13% responded "neutral", 3% responded "frequently", and 7% responded "very frequently". When asked the question, "If the Wind was removed as the narrator, do you feel the story would be more or less enjoyable?", 3% of participants responded, "very unenjoyable", 57% responded "unenjoyable", 23% responded "neutral", 7% responded "enjoyable", and 10% responded "very enjoyable". This data shows that Wind as the anthropomorphic narrator of the short story was positively received by participants.

When comparing male and female participants, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups (P=0.394394). Table 3 depicts the average response of the fifteen male participants to all questions on both the classroom material and short story survey.

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[2] 13b refers to Question 13 on the Short Story Survey

Table 3: *Average Responses of the 15 Male Participants to Paired Questions on Short Story Survey and Classroom Material Survey Based on 5-point Likert Scale (n=15)*

Question Pairs	Classroom Material Score	Short Story Score
Question 4 *How likely are you to talk with family or friends about this story/article?*	2.4	3.7
Question 5 *After reading this story/article, how likely do you think you are to pursue learning more about World War I? (Any form of media)*	2.7	3.8
Question 7 *How enjoyable was the story/article?*	3.1	4.5
Question 8 *How engaging was the story/article?*	2.6	4.7
Question 9 *Do you feel that the World War I is an important historical event to learn about?*	1.9	4.7
Question 10 *To what degree can you relate with the characters mentioned in the story?*	3.7	3.2
Question 13a & Question 16 *If possible, would you be interested in incorporating any idea, concept, or piece of history presented in this short story/article into your own work?*	3.2	3.7

Table 4 depicts the average response of the fifteen male participants to Question 12, Question 13, and Question 14.

Table 4: *Average Male Participant Response to Question 12, Question 13, and Question 14 on the Short Story Based on 5-point Likert Scale (n=15)*

Questions on Short Story Survey	Short Story Score
Question 11 *Did you enjoy the Wind as the narrator?*	4.7
Question 12 *How engaging was the Wind as the narrator?*	4.7
Question 13b *Did having the Wind as the narrator ever make the story difficult understand? If so, how frequently?*	3.8
Question 14 *If the Wind was removed as the narrator, do you feel the story would be more or less enjoyable?*	3.4

Table 5 depicts the average response of the fifteen female participants to all questions on both the classroom materi-al and short story survey.

Table 5: *Average Responses of the 15 Female Participants to Paired Questions on Short Story Survey and Class-room Material Survey Based on 5-point Likert Scale (n=15)*

Question Pairs	Classroom Material Score	Short Story Score
Question 4 *How likely are you to talk with family or friends about this story/article?*	3.7	1.03
Question 5 *After reading this story/article, how likely do you think you are to pursue learning more about World War I? (Any form of media)*	4.1	2.6
Question 7 *How enjoyable was the story/article?*	4.3	2.3
Question 8 *How engaging was the story/article?*	4.5	3
Question 9 *Do you feel that the World War I is an important historical event to learn about?*	4.4	1.2
Question 10 *To what degree can you relate with the characters mentioned in the story?*	4.7	3
Question 13a & Question 16 *If possible, would you be interest-ed in incorporating any idea, con-cept, or piece of history presented in this short story/article into your own work?*	3.8	2.8

Table 6 depicts the average response of the fifteen female participants to Question 12, Question 13, and Question 14.

Table 6: *Average Responses of the 15 Female Participants to Question 12, Question 13, and Question 14 on the Short Story Based on 5-point Likert Scale (n=15)*

Questions on Short Story Survey	Short Story Score
Question 11 *Did you enjoy the Wind as the narrator?*	4.7
Question 12 *How engaging was the Wind as the narrator?*	4.6
Question 13 *Did having the Wind as the narrator ever make the story difficult understand? If so, how frequently?*	3.9
Question 14 *If the Wind was removed as the narrator, do you feel the story would be more or less enjoyable?*	3.3

Discussion

The data suggests that students were more emotionally invested and interested in a short story with an anthropomorphic narrator than a traditional historical reading seen in high school history classrooms. When comparing male and female participants, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups (P=0.394394), which suggests that that the effects of a historical fiction short story with an anthropomorphic narrator applies to both genders. This means that, moving forward, all further implications can be safely applied to both genders.

The data also points to students holding positive opinions about the anthropomorphic narrator as an effective story device. Answers to Question 7 on the short story survey, "Did you enjoy the Wind as the narrator?" were positive, with 77% of participants listing "very enjoyable", 17% listing "enjoyable", and 7% listing "neutral". These results show that the story never received a negative response in relation to its potential for enjoyment. Similarly, Question 8 on the short story survey "How engaging was the story?" also received a positive response, with 70% of participants listing "very engaging", 23% listing "engaging", and 7% listing neutral. This suggests that historical fiction with an anthropomorphic narrator is an effective choice in getting students to read historical fiction literature, a finding that has implications in fields such as education and entertainment.

When asked, "After reading this story, how likely do you think you are to pursue learning more about World War I? (Any form of media)" in Question 5 on the short story survey, the average score given was 3.6. When asked the same question on the classroom material survey, the question received an average of 2.6. This suggests that reading a historical fiction short story with an anthropomorphic narrator may lead to students being more interested in learning about World War I. The implications of this are far reaching, since for many, once they leave college or even high school, they will no longer be forced to take history class. This means that all learning done about history has to be done by an individual's own volition.

Conclusion

The study had a few limitations. One limitation was the very specific story elements that the short story featured. The short story written for this research project featured a unique set of story elements. It took place during World War One, was a war story, featured all male characters, violence, profanity, a first-person point of view, and among many other things. By their nature, these story elements limit the new understanding, which means that the results and implications can only be safely applied to a story that fits all the story elements of the one featured in the study. Another limitation is the smaller sample size of thirty participants. This could have led to results not representative of the entire world. Another limitation was that the short story and classroom material was read while unsupervised,

although when in a history class, one would typically be held accountable for reading, and asked to discuss the text. This was done in order to preserve the independent reading that one would also typically do when assigned a novel for school, which was deemed a critical aspect of this study.

Future studies should be conducted on the effect reading historical fiction with an anthropomorphic narrator has on one's tolerance to taboo historical topics. This is a critical gap presented by the research project, and one that must be filled in order to fully understand the effect historical fiction with an anthropomorphic narrator has on its audience. Similar research should be done featuring a full-length historical fiction novel with an anthropomorphic narrator. The story featured in this research was a short story of 3138 words long. Although short stories are read in history classes, a majority of historical fiction texts read in history class are full-length novels, which makes it an important future study to explore.

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