

Historical Fictions with Theresa Breslin & Caroline Leech

Authors Theresa Breslin & Caroline Leech share their top tips for creating historical fiction



This resource is great for:
Creating your own historical fiction.

Summary:

An interview with authors Theresa Breslin and Caroline Leech - find out about their latest books and how they use historical sources for inspiration. Then, use their comments as a catalyst for discussion and creative writing in the classroom.

Introduction:

“Historical fiction gives you all the facts as they happened but from a completely different point of view than if you were to read a history book, a non-fiction book, written about that period of time.” Caroline Leech

CILIP Carnegie Medal-winning author Theresa Breslin’s *The Rasputin Dagger* follows a risky romance during the Russian Revolution, while Caroline Leech’s debut *Wait for Me* explores a forbidden love during the Second World War.

During the 2017 Edinburgh International Book Festival, our two young reporters Nathan and Beth caught up with the authors to find out how they get inspiration from historical sources and objects to make their readers feel like they're stepping into a different time period. They also picked up some top tips on how to create fictional stories and realistic characters set during real historical events.

Read the interview and then use the discussion points and activities below.

Activities – Discussion Points and Writing Activities

Part One

“It seemed perfect to have two young people during the [Russian] Revolution because it was a revolution about young people.” Theresa Breslin

Use Theresa's remark above as the basis of a discussion about young people in war time, and the impact conflict has on young lives. You could focus on the Russian Revolution, World War II, or another conflict you might be studying in class, or compare conflicts in different areas or time periods.

- If you've read *The Rasputin Dagger* or *Wait for Me*, why not introduce the topic by discussing the way in which the young characters' lives are affected in these works of historical fiction?
- Give your class a variety of relevant sources (or get them to find their own) and ask them to pick out and present to the class examples of young lives being affected by war.
- Are any of the changes positive for the young people involved? For example, during WW2 many women took on men's roles in the workplace, as so many men were away fighting. This gave young women many opportunities which they would not otherwise have had.
- Introduce the idea of class. Can you find examples of how war has affected upper and lower class young people in different ways?
- Broaden the discussion to current conflicts. What sources can you find which contain descriptions of how young people's lives are currently being affected by war? Think about how your life, education and future prospects might be affected if you lived in a war zone, became a refugee, or even a child soldier.

- Introduce the concept of empathy. In what way do you think historical fiction could play a part in helping us to understand how people around the world are affected by conflict or other events or situations?

Part Two

“What we write is not what happened but what could have happened.” Caroline Leech

Theresa and Caroline both talk about how their books were based on real stories and objects. Ask your class to find a historical source or object which interests them (you could take a trip to a museum or archive to get inspiration flowing) and then use it as the stimulus for planning a piece of historical fiction.

- If an object inspires your imagine, think about: what kind of person might have used it? When and where do they live? What is their life like? Does the discovery of the object set off an exciting series of events in their life?
- If a source inspires you, think about: whether you want to use the person mentioned, or who wrote the source, as your character, or whether you want to imagine someone else affected by the conditions or events? How much does the source tell you, and how much are you left to imagine?

Remember to follow Theresa and Caroline’s advice - do your research, add emotion and then get writing - you can go back and check or perfect things later!

Part Three

“...the skill of a historical writer is that you can start with a sentence like, ‘The girl sat in the classroom staring out the window’, and that sentence could be in any classroom, in any country, in any time period. What comes after should get your reader into the time period you’re talking about, and into the country and the culture by the end of the first page, as quickly as you can, without beating them on the head with a stick. If you’re reading historical fiction, it’s worth just re-reading the first chapter over again. Just to see how skilfully good writers will do that, so you’re never in doubt where you are or when you are.” Caroline Leech

Using Caroline’s advice above either:

Write the first page of the story you planned in part two. Start with a generic description (as with ‘The girl sat in the classroom starting out the window’). Then, making sure that you don’t do it too obviously, introduce the time period so that

the reader is aware where and when your story is set without you directly telling them.

Or

Use Caroline's opening line, 'The girl sat in the classroom staring out the window'. Decide before you begin writing where and when your story is set and, as above, introduce elements of that time period as you write. When you've finished, compare your opening page with your neighbour's - and see how you have both introduced your different settings.

Further Information:

Young reporters Beth and Nathan are taking part in What's Your Story?, Scottish Book Trust's development programme for teenage writers and illustrators. Find out more about the programme at www.thestoryis.co.uk