

## **Word for Word: Don't throw the stories of our past away**

If young people aren't encouraged to read about the human stories behind conflict, how will they learn to engage in the search for long-term peace? That's why historical fiction, and the place of history in the Junior Cert syllabus, matter so much

I never liked history at school. Its formal presentation in the classroom was dull and unimaginative, as were the textbooks. What little historical knowledge I gleaned in my teenage years – and I've spent an adult lifetime catching up – came mainly from historical fiction.

The value of historical fiction written for a young readership is enormous. I was dismayed to discover recently that sales of this kind of fiction for children have been declining in Ireland. Given that we've had some excellent historical novelists in recent years, many of them award-winning, and publishers that have nurtured their work, I wondered why. And I discovered that it's not unconnected with what history teachers would argue is the threatened downgrading of history in secondary schools. It is proposed that history no longer be a compulsory subject for Junior Cert – the core, and therefore compulsory, subjects being English, Irish and maths.

Schools will be given the flexibility to shape their own junior-cycle programme by including a selection of other subjects, short courses and other learning experiences.

Who buys historical fiction for young readers? Parents who can afford to, generous friends and relatives, schools and libraries, the latter two representing the bulk of the purchasing power. If history becomes optional, and is in competition with subjects deemed to be more relevant, shrinking funds are unlikely to be spent on buying historical novels for the classroom.

The effect of this is worrying. I recently met one successful writer of the genre who has decided to abandon history for the moment. He pointed out that the chief problem for the writer of historical material is that his or her main market – school libraries, teachers purchasing class sets and reading for background – has dried up.

If, as has been suggested, short courses are to be offered, there is unlikely to be time to tackle full-length texts, so schools will be reluctant to spend dwindling funds on books for which there may not be a demand.

There are other problems at primary level, one of which is the lack of money for the purchase of books of any kind for school libraries. That fact alone is shocking. Ebooks will change all this in the future, but for now the hard-copy book is the thing.

At Merriman Summer School this month I heard two young politicians from Dublin declare that neither they nor their constituents cared about the North any more. They're just not interested.

If young people are not encouraged to read about the human stories behind the conflicts in Northern Ireland or elsewhere in the world, how will they learn to humanise the politics, empathise with their peers and engage in the search for long-term peace?

And in this decade of commemorations, isn't it an irony that fewer students will have acquired at school the tools with which to examine the past so that they might better manage the future?

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