

When Historical Went Global: The Revolutionary 1960s

The historical novel is by its nature a genre that cultivates empathy. Whatever their gender, ethnicity, or nationality, its protagonist is necessarily an “other” whose culture differs from one's own. This empathic aspect of the genre became especially, even revolutionarily prominent in American children's historical novels of 1960-1965.

Although the genre enjoyed a “golden age” of quality and popularity from the early 1940s, it remained for the most part culturally parochial. With few exceptions, American writers preferred American settings—especially Revolutionary times and “frontier days”— and, of course, pale-skinned protagonists. (Similarly, British writers liked Roman Britain, medieval Britain, and the Royalist side of the Civil War.) Around 1960, however, these constricted horizons opened wide. Cultures rarely or never explored before burst into view—nineteenth-century California Indian in *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (1960), ancient Egyptian in *The Golden Goblet* (1961), Roman-occupied Israeli in *The Bronze Bow* (1961), ancient Ethiopian in *The Princess and the Lion* (1963), eighth-century Moslem in *The Prince of Omeya* (1964), seventeenth-century Spanish in *Juan de Pareja* (1965). In all of the above, authors imagined protagonists who were neither pale-skinned nor Protestant Christian. And dealing with the “other” became itself a theme in several of these novels.

After a more detailed look at two of those listed above, the essay will consider what cultural factors may have helped produce this particular development at this very specific time—a development, moreover, clearly encouraged by the children's literature “establishment,” which awarded Newberys to three out of the six and a “Runner-up” to a fourth.