

# **U.S. HISTORY**

## **Literary Analysis: A Rendezvous with IDAHO History**

A Textbook by  
Dorothy Dutton and Caryl Humphries

Dave Johnson

## Literary Analysis: A Rendezvous with Idaho History

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"Don't ask me what state Idaho is in—news flash—Idaho IS a state."

Michael Vey  
Quoted in Richard Paul Evan's *The Prisoner of Cell 25*

"... the mountains of Idaho, poems of geology stretching beyond any boundaries and seemingly even beyond the world."

Norman MacLean  
*TA River Runs Through It and Other Stories*

### Introduction

Anyone who lives in Idaho who has spoken to someone outside the state may be asked, "Where is that again?" Similar to the statement of the fictional character in Richard Paul Evan's book mentioned above, there are many who may not know of Idaho or her beauty. In 1994, Dorothy Dutton and her daughter, Caryl Humphries, took the challenge of writing a 4th grade history textbook of the state, *A Rendezvous with Idaho History*. Their approach was a literary dialogue between students and their teacher; a dramatic oration as opposed to a mundane, dry analysis of the state's history.

The purpose of this analysis will not only provide a brief overview of the book format, but also a dissection of the historical approach of the authors, and the didactic method of the authors.

### I. Book Format Overview

The general format of the book has merits and weaknesses. When critiquing the book from a graphic approach, it has considerable deficiencies. However, the genre of the written text is interesting and informative, yet lacking citation support.

The **graphic format** of the book, itself, is unimpressive. The cover design produced by Murie Design Group, a premiere Boise graphic design firm. Artistically, it is mainly the only color in the book, with the exception of a few spreads with small, badly printed images. There are numerous black and white photographs as well as small Idaho icons with general geographic location indicators corresponding to the adjacent text. Some map illustrations are inconsistent in their design. Chapter seven highlights a journal of a fictitious girl named Aunika on the Oregon Trail. This section has a special set of illustrations by Cody, Wyoming, fine artist, Hauns Schnackenberg. There is one full page, line-drawn map of the state indicating major landforms. Otherwise, the main element of the book is text filling each page. While the text is between 14-16 point, and has considerable leading to make it easier to read, fourth grade students may find the format a bit boring.

In contrast, another Idaho historical textbook, *The Idaho Adventure* by Nancy Wilper Tacke and Todd Shallat is highly visual with a much more graphic emphasis. Tacke and Shallat, both Boise University faculty members, took the more traditional approach to their text. The content is presented in a standardized history textbook approach (broad overview paragraphs with multitudes of full color visuals). But the graphic elements are far more appealing and will definitely hold the attention of most students and possibly prompt more questions and observation.

While the graphic elements are only one portion of the equation for a successful textbook, the cautionary warning of James W. Loewen should be presented: "Bland, boring textbooks don't tell the truth about American history, nor do they prepare students for their important work as citizens" (Richardson, p. 17). Not to overstate the issue, but a bored class could lose interest in history. David McCullough stated, "If we raise one generation after another with very little interest in history and even less knowledge, we're accepting a creeping form of amnesia. We're forgetting the story of who we are, and how we came to be the way we are" (Bloch, p. 2). A visually boring textbook could lose the interest of the student.

There are other history and geography books on Idaho that are also more visually appealing, such as Kathy Pelta's *Hello America:Idaho*, or Charles and Linda George's *Idaho - America the Beautiful*, but the content is lacking.

And it is that content that Dutton and Humphries place their focus. The **literary genre** makes up where the visuals are lacking. The textbook is presented not as a series of facts divided by subtitles and large visual pages, rather as a story; a play between a class of fourth grade students and their teacher, Mr. Brown.

The story is essentially a lecture with various students interjecting their thoughts and/or questions into the oration. The textbook is written in a format that could actually be read with various actors appointed. The language is not stilted or incomprehensible to a fourth grade audience and provides a vast amount of details of the history of the state.

The outline of the book begins with Mr. Brown describing and introducing his students to the various symbols of Idaho, some very remote, such as the state dance, the Square Dance, or the state fossil, the Hagerman Horse. While introducing many of the symbols, Mr. Brown also begins describing certain geographic features of the state. Then, chronologically, the history of the state is revealed from original Native American inhabitants, to Lewis and Clark's journeys, then onto trappers, traders and missionaries. The chapter on the Oregon Trail takes a different approach. The anomaly is presented in the middle of the classroom oration while the class reads a fictitious diary of a girl writing of her exploits on the Trail. The book then finishes up with the history of gold discoveries leading up to statehood. Then the book concludes with some demographic information including resources and industries of the state and famous Idahoans.

Overall, the approach is unique for a typical textbook, however this authors wonders how the concept of telling the story of a series of classroom lectures in drama format will continue to remain unique after the fifth or sixth chapter. This author discovered that the storytelling of the classroom became almost a distraction in time and he was tempted to just leap over the students' interjections to just get to the historical content. Will the fourth grade student do the same just to finish the assignment?

## II. Historical Approach

Dutton and Humphries have done considerable research. However, they do not cite their sources and, therefore, do their young reader a disservice.

The information and details the authors provide are incredibly comprehensive and exhaustive. This is not to neglect that they occasionally still slow down to the fourth grade knowledge level to provide a foundation to certain terms and/or concepts. For example, when describing Native American past-times, the book explains "myths" and "legends" as "stories about people and animals." In another chapter on Lewis and Clark, the book introduces the reader to Pierre Dorion, a fur trapper the explorers used as an "interpreter". Mr. Brown, in the book, explains that an interpreter is "someone who can help people, who speak different languages, talk to each other." Key words are in bold and underlined. Each of these terms are also located in the glossary at the back of the book. Important geographic terms and proper names are both in bold and italicized.

There are great details provided, such as Charles Ostner's statue of Washington on horseback, carved from a ponderosa pine "so it would not melt in the summer." Or the fact that Jim Stevens near Weiser, Idaho was the first man to publish the Paul Bunyan legends. There is considerable information provided on the general history of the state, but also such precise, details as these examples show, yet without one single citation! Perhaps the authors felt it unnecessary to bother fourth graders with footnotes, endnotes or in-text citations, but this author believes that is an error. A simple notation, even in parentheses, would establish to the readers that the authors are not being creative, rather have completed their research. As a Junior High teacher, I find it appalling to learn that my students entering my classes have not been taught how to avoid plagiarism or at least the basic concept. Any qualified teacher knows plagiarism can simply be avoided if the author "quotes...paraphrases...sumarizes someone's ideas" (Pierce). Text books that do not cite their sources may have extraordinary information, but are worthless for real research and providing confidence for the reader. Dutton and Humphries assume to be the authority, and in turn teach their readers they do not have to back up their research. This is simply bad precedence.

## III. Didactic Method

The pedagogical approach of Dutton and Humphries should be critiqued. While their attempt to use a unique approach of a drama instead of just conveying boring facts is commendable, there are a few deficiencies that should be exposed.

The textbook occasionally employs a Socratic method. Like Plato's *Republic*, the dialogue between Mr. Brown and his students is intermittently pauses for Mr. Brown to ask questions, just like a typical school room. One of the fictitious students then responds before Mr. Brown proceeds. Unlike Plato's work of Socrates asking deep questions after discussing certain civic philosophies, the questions Mr. Brown asks are usually very shallow, subjective questions. For example, after discussing early attempts to force Native Americans to worship the Christian God, Mr. Brown asks "Can you imagine how the Indians felt about someone trying to change them...?" The child "actor" then responded, "I don't think many of them would have liked it." The book is riddled with numerous similar examples of superficial questions and answers.

Roger Peace reminds the educator that "Critical thinking is defined more by what it is not than what it is. It is not rote memorization of dates, facts, and events. Instead, it involves delving into the meaning of historical developments - interpreting, comparing, theorizing and evaluating - often with the aid of primary sources and multiple secondary sources. Students learn to ask questions about historical information, including how historians have framed their information." (Peace, p. 265). Again, Dutton and Humphries probably believed the fourth grade reader is not capable of deeper learning questions. This author disagrees and would have liked to have seen more cognitive pedagogical dialogue.

Another area of weakness in the chapters is the Application sections at the end of each chapters. The reader is provided a question and answer area consisting of basic cognitive knowledge - simply emoting information from the text. There is also a more comprehension area entitled "What do you think?" which asks more "why/why not" questions. But the question and answer section lacks a synthesis or more creative application opportunity. Only in a few chapters, such as the first chapter asking students to write letters to their state representatives for a new state symbol the student themselves deem worthy, are there any deeper, generative skills demanded of the reader.

According to David Bruce Lavere's research, this is typical. He suggested after analyzing American History textbooks that within the books "A disproportionate number of pedagogical exercises were recall-type questions" (Lavere, p.3). And again "many pedagogical exercises did little more than perpetuate the belief by many that history is nothing more than a series of facts to be memorized. " (Lavere, p. 5). He further noted that many questions in textbooks do not reflect solid historical reasoning skills or processes. What are lacking are processes that "include identifying, collecting, and analyzing materials in an effort to reconstruct and make accurate generalizations about how, what, where, when, and why something might have happened" (Lavere, p. 4).

The publisher, Sterling Ties Publications, provides a "Teacher's Resource Guide" binder which "...includes over 300 pages of ready to copy activities and answer keys for each chapter, craft ideas, tests, challenge activities, recipes, coloring pages, and many other items" (Sterling). This author only had the student reader edition so this analysis is only speculative. But from the publisher's description, it still appears the sources are not provided. To reiterate, without that vital citation for each declared fact the book assumes authority it can not assume and teaches the student that unsupported details are sufficient. Never the less, the creative teacher could still use the textbook and assign the students the task of confirming the unsubstantiated claims of the authors. It may be unfortunate that the textbook did not complete this task, but this could be a genuine opportunity for the students to learn how to convey research.

The didactic approach of the textbook is one of simply conveying information without deeper cognitive reflection. This could be sufficient, as a textbook a teacher could use with other remedial assignments and projects, but without citation of sources, the reader, both teacher and student, is left with a great deal of information that is unsubstantiated and therefore inadequate.

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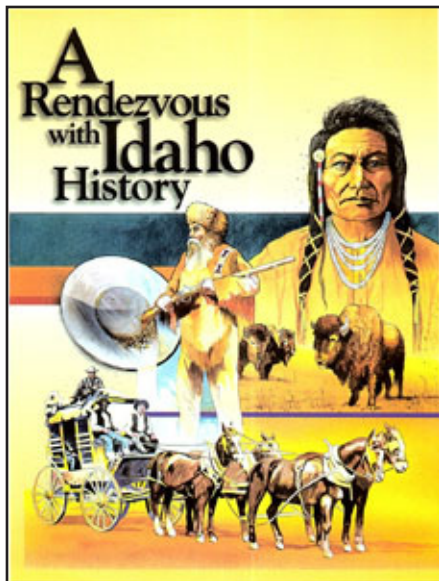
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## Conclusion

*A Rendezvous with Idaho History* concludes on the last day of the school year in Mr. Brown's class. One student says, "I wish we didn't have to stop learning about Idaho history." Mr. Brown responds, "You never have to stop....Every year I learn something new. Every night on the news, things are happening that will become a part of our history..." That last statement is the nudge, the enticement to encourage further learning.

As a history teacher, my overwhelming desire is not only to convey information but to instill in the hearts of my students a desire to learn more. I truly feel Dutton and Humphries' textbook lays down a general, and often at times very detailed, albeit unsubstantiated, historical analysis of the state of Idaho. But the exercises and questions are uncreative and uninteresting to promote higher learning applications.

The book can and is being used as a formative analysis of the state's history in class rooms, including one of my colleagues. But after further review, I can only hope those teachers are using it as a foundation for the basic level of Bloom's Taxonomy and incorporating other higher cognitive exercises for fulfillment of deeper learning of the history of the state of Idaho.



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