

CHAPTER 6

# Teaching Historical Thinking

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To clarify the goals of teaching history in the schools, we begin by presenting three scenarios involving young people's encounters with history outside of school.

For entertainment, two teenaged friends go to a film dealing with a historical topic, perhaps Pearl Harbor. They are swept into the cinematic portrayal and emerge at the end, one saying to the other, "How could people have thought that way back then?"

A family from eastern Canada visits Victoria's Royal British Columbia Museum. Walking through the "school" in a reconstruction of a turn-of-the-twentieth century mining town, the parents encourage the ten- and twelve-year-olds to imagine what it must have been like for settlers in early British Columbia. "I'm glad I didn't have to go to that school," says one.

A thirteen-year-old girl, reading Karen Cushman's *Catherine, Called Birdy*,<sup>1</sup> a fictional novel about a girl in thirteenth-century England, exclaims to herself, with a shock of recognition, "She feels exactly the way I do about being cooped up by my parents!"

Historical film, historical reconstructions, and historical fiction are all designed to sweep their audiences into an apparent past. When successful, the audiences imagine, as do the people mentioned above, that they are experiencing history as histori-

cal actors experienced it, that they have a direct window into what the past looked like, felt like, and what it meant. How can school history possibly compete with these media?

In this chapter, we will argue that school history has a different objective, and that it should come at history from an entirely different angle. While these genres aim to sweep students in, school history should provide students with the ability to approach historical narratives critically—precisely not to be "swept in." That is, a good history curriculum would prompt students to ask of cinematic and fictional accounts of the past, as well as their textbooks' and teachers' accounts, who constructed this account and why? What sources did they use? What other accounts are there of the same events or lives? How and why do they differ? Which should we believe?

The ability to confront historical accounts critically, however, is not all that should be aimed for in the school history curriculum. On the positive side, students need also to begin to be able to offer accounts of the past that they have good reason to believe. This is an enormously complex process, of course, and some readers will stop right here and say, "Leave that to the historians! We're lucky if students even learn a few historical facts." We would argue, however, that young people do have images of the past in their minds, and that in their more thoughtful moments they do sporadically, incompletely, and often inaccurately, attempt to figure out what the past might mean for them and for their futures. The job of history education is to work with

<sup>‡</sup> Carla Peck revised the original version of this chapter, written by Peter Seixas for *Trends and Issues in Canadian Social Studies*.















