Spear Uses Historical Landmark Series in First Year Seminar

Briefly, for those readers who don’t know, what is the Landmark Series?

It was a series of history books and biographies for young readers published by Random House between 1950 and around 1965. It began with a focus on U.S. history, but pretty quickly expanded to include world history topics as well.

How many books are there in the series?

There were about 175 titles.

How many do you have?

I have one run of the whole collection, and about two-thirds of a backup set.

How did you become interested in the series?

I read these books as a kid. Not just read them, but really enjoyed them. I’d check them out from the public library. And I even bought a few of them for my own budding library. During high school and college and graduate school I didn’t pay much attention to them. They sat on my bookshelf in my parents’ house minding their own business. Fortunately I didn’t chuck them like I did with my baseball card collection. Aargh. Anyway, when my son Sam turned five, this would have been around 1991, we developed a sort of ritual where I read to him every night. We plowed through about twenty-five of these books over the years, until high school distracted him with other concerns. Discovering these books anew I decided to build up a collection of my own, which at first meant checking the kids’ section at every used book store I visited, but eventually meant resorting to eBay and bookfinder.com. You can still find the books today because they were sturdy, because they sold a lot of copies, and because they are still popular with home schoolers.

Do you have a favorite one, and if so why that one?

My favorite is probably Quentin Reynolds’ s The Wright Brothers. It’s so well written—most of the books in the series are—and the story is deftly told. Oddly, I think one of the worst books in the series is by the same author. It’s his The F.B.I. which, as you can imagine, is incredibly dated. Most of the titles have held up well over the years, but The F.B.I. is laughable today.

Are there any other history series like this in existence, as far as you know? If so, what sets the Landmark Series apart?

There were other series for young readers. I can’t remember the particulars, but they just didn’t seem to have the same drawing power. The Landmark Series was highly respected by schools, librarians, and book store owners so it simply had better visibility. The whole series had a nice look to it, which helped as well.

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Landmark Series continued....

**What compelled you to design a freshman seminar around the Landmark Series?**

At first I thought I would go with something medieval, that being my area of expertise. But then I figured most freshmen would be interested in something a bit more general, which this seminar is, once you get past the title. It also seemed to me that this was a quality series of books that have held up well, would be enjoyable to read, and that at the very least students would learn about various episodes and personalities in history.

**Briefly what will the students be doing with the series in the seminar; for example, how many of the books will each of them be expected to read?**

So the format is that they read a Landmark Book of their choosing, and then couple that with a modern treatment of the same topic. They do an oral presentation and write a comparative book review. They'll end up reading about six Landmark Books and six modern studies. In the second half of the course the students will be doing a research paper on the topic that interested them most.

**What are your hopes and expectations for student learning by their participation in the seminar?**

As I mentioned, at worst they'll just learn some cool things about history. But the comparative approach leads to a broader, on-going discussion about how the doing of history changes over time. Why do we have a new approach to studying the F.B.I.? Or another good example is MacKinlay Kantor’s excellent account of Gettysburg set alongside Margaret S. Creighton’s *The Colors of Courage: Gettysburg’s Forgotten History* (2006) which introduces the students to the whole realm of social history, which of course was virtually non-existent in the 1950s. And a second theme for the course is what actually was going on in New York City in the 1950s such that a series like this could be conceived of and successfully carried out? So we spend some of our discussions on the culture of N.Y.C. at that time. A final theme, the one I hope to end the course with, is what were the values that were espoused in the series as a whole, by such a wide array of artists? What did it mean to be an American in the 1950s and what did it mean to be a citizen of the world? I think one reason the series has held up so well, at least from my point of view, is that most of the authors didn’t shy away from the tough questions about life and about history, they didn’t talk down to their young readers, and therefore the books transcend some of the cliché aspects of the 1950s.

**This series was being produced at about the time that Furman was moving out to its new “suburban” campus. I wonder if any of Furman’s history faculty at the time was aware of the series as it was being produced?**

Probably not. But their kids probably were. I know a lot of historians of my generation who were first engaged by history because of this series.

**Anything else you would like to add about the series or your seminar?**

If any of the alumni have any reminiscences or observations about the series, I'd be glad to hear from them.