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**HISTORICAL FICTION AND BOOK CLUBS AS CRITICAL PUBLIC PEDAGOGY:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ADULTS RE- LEARNING HISTORY**

A Dissertation in
Adult Education

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore how readers of critical historical fiction who participate in book groups or online reading forums perceive that the literature and the discussion of it has affected their learning and reshaped their historical understanding. In particular, the study focused on participants reading and discussing Ken Follett's *The Century Trilogy*. This study was grounded in two theoretical frameworks related to adult learning: critical public pedagogy and non-formal learning.

The methodology of this study included 16 interview participants, chosen through purposeful criteria, of having both read *The Century Trilogy* and discussed it in a face-to-face or online book groups. Documents from a sample of *goodreads.com* online discussion forums were also a source of data. Data was analyzed by using the constant comparative method.

The findings of the study were grouped into two main areas: findings in connection to the literature, and findings relating to new learning and further curiosity. Findings in connection to the literature centered on to the learning resulting from emotional reactions and new information about historical events, as well as emotional connections to characters. Findings relating to new learning and further curiosity center on the fact that readers: sought out further knowledge through fact checking and further references, made connections between historical events and current events, and engaged in further learning through critical dialogue in book groups, including recognizing the liberal perspective and some historical omission of the author. They did come to a new and more critical understanding of history from reading and discussing these books. This study concludes with a discussion of the findings in light of the theoretical frameworks; critical public pedagogy and non-formal learning. It also discusses the limitations and offers suggestions for further research and offers implications for adult education practice.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

They say those who read have lived a thousand lives before they die, but those who do not have only lived one. For me, there is nothing quite as satisfying as getting lost in a good book. A well-written historical fiction novel has the power to transport me through my imagination into times long gone; the words speaking to my soul and opening my eyes to see the architecture, feel the swish of the gowns, and understand the competing dynamics which make a story come to life. Literature has always had this effect on me. I've mourned with characters who've suffered great losses, such as the loss of Rebekkah Vaark's daughter in Toni Morrisons *A Mercy*, I've felt for my arm in sympathetic pain while reading about George Jakes, a freedom rider who is ripped from a bus and beaten, in Ken Follett's *Edge of Eternity*, and I've winced at the lashes of punishment being afforded to Solomon Northup in the edited memoir *Twelve Years a Slave*. Although these are only a few examples, through my interaction with these fictional characters, I was able to feel empathy for characters unlike myself, a middle class white woman in the 21st century, and to better understand the power dynamics which structured these historical eras. These are only a few examples, but they highlight the motivation behind my study; to understand how adult readers make meaning when presented with historical fictions stories told from a non-dominant point of view, or more precisely, the perspectives of those whose voices are underrepresented in the historical record.

This chapter will seek to frame the context of my study by providing a background on the issue, research questions, a statement of purpose, and an outline of the theoretical frameworks which informed the study. In addition, this chapter will provide an overview of the study methodology, discuss the gap in adult education research which warrants this study, provide an

overview of the definitions and terms used in the study, and finally, discuss the potential significance of this research.

Background to the Problem

“In every historical period, competing paradigms and forms of knowledge co-exist; some reinforce the status quo and others challenge it. The groups who exercise the most power within a society heavily influence what knowledge becomes legitimized and widely disseminated.”

(Banks, 2010, p. 22).

History is always written from a perspective; authors of a historical record cannot write without inserting context. As implied by the above quote by James Banks (2010), the majority of history was written by those who have power. This quote itself is a bit misleading, as written history and historical narrative is often written from multiple perspectives. However, the historical accounts which emerge as the accepted and official records are often those which align with the political, social, and economic narrative that those in power positions want to espouse (Seixas & Peck, 2004). While this implication does not necessarily mean that the dominant historical record is completely inaccurate, it does mean that the system for recording history is flawed (Sandwell, 2003; Stanton, 2015). Therefore, to make the study of history as comprehensive as possible, scholarly study ideally includes numerous accounts, narratives, and viewpoints (Stanton, 2015; Seixas & Peck, 2004). In order to make a case for this study of the role of historical fiction potentially as a critical historical narrative, and in creating background for this study, I first consider notions of history in the context of historiography, including the notion of fact vs fiction. Next I consider the need for more critical perspectives in understanding and educating about history in light of the fact that most Americans formal history education ended when they graduated from high school. Third I consider historical fiction as a form of

critical public pedagogy and the role of historical fiction in adults and learning through non-formal educational settings, such as online book groups. Finally, I include a section on the historical fiction novels which will be highlighted in this study.

Fact vs. Fiction: The Notion of History

Some historians argue that the study of history is, and should be, malleable (Barton, 2002; Bartol & Richardson, 1998; Immerwahr, 2008; Sandwell, 2003). Many historical scholars study and write to provide understanding to the varying contexts, power dynamics, and alternative viewpoints surrounding an historical person or event (Sandwell, 2003; Stanton, 2005). In fact, an entire area of historical study, historiography, is dedicated to the critical evaluation of historians and the factors that may have influenced their narratives (Seixas & Peck, 2004). Historiography is a branch of historical study which seeks to understand the motives and authenticity of written history. Cheng (2008) defines historiography as “the study and criticism of the sources and development of history as a branch of knowledge.” (p. 201). Essentially, the field of historiography is the notion of interpreting how others interpret history. The field of historiography rose in the United States in the late 1800’s by those who believed that the dominant narratives in history were created by those in power and that only they determined what was important and needed to remain in history (Cheng, 2008; Chirobocea, 2017). Historiography is taught in many college history programs and to pre-service teachers as a way of encouraging students to think critically about historical “facts;” questioning who wrote them, to who’s advantage they were written, and encouraging them to consider counter narratives (Fallace, 2009; Thompson & Austin, 2011; Chirobocea, 2017). Chirobocea (2017) argues that “history is never written for itself; it is always for someone” and thus, history has been written and re-written throughout time according to power relations.

Historiography, it is argued, is the branch of the study of history which brings credibility to the field (Erkkila, 2015; Chirobocea, 2017; Fallace, 2009). While the study of history is commonly thought of as a social science; the term science is used loosely. “History differs from the sciences precisely because historians disagree, not only over what are the laws of social causation that they might invoke to explain a given sequence of events, but also over the question of the form that a scientific explanation ought to take” (Chirobocea, 2017, p. 199). The field of historiography “possesses the means, or at least has a reputation for possessing the means, to mold historical representation into an epistemologically positive direction ... Its authority brings trust” (Erkkila, 2015, p. 608).

While many believe that the field of historiography places the study of history within the sciences, there are still great issues and debate over the concept of historical fact. This dissertation is founded on the argument that historical facts are contextual and influenced by many different factors. Perhaps, outside of formal dates, historical facts are non-existent. “History as construct exists because of its very epistemological fragility. If it were possible to know very clearly what happened in the past, there would be no point in the many rewritings and ever new versions of a single event or personality or epoch from the past and (the study of) history would stop” (Chirobocea, 2017, p. 193). Even a historian who does meticulous research, using only primary sources, and attempting to account for their own bias is subjugated to the credibility of those primary sources; the author of which had their own bias and influences. Thus, it can be said that no historical author is without context and no historical document is without bias and that all historical fact is inherently, to some degree, skewed. “History relies on the interpretative of representations and it is therefore victim of subjectivity and intentional or unintentional distortion. History is just a narrative, like fiction” (Chirobocea, 2017, p. 201).

While historiography certainly assists in lending credibility to the study of history as a science (Fallace, 2009; Chirobocea, 2017; Erkkila, 2015), an argument can be made that historical narrative is effective in exploring the complicated relationship between history and fact. Erkkila (2015) argues that historiographical research can be used to create a historical narrative which enhances historical study; assisting in making sense of a historical event, adding psychological elements to the story line, and making it more accessible to the masses. She conceptualizes teaching history using historiographical narrative as a “bridging tool” (p. 610). Despite its name, historical narrative is not simply a collection of elaborate stories, instead, historical narrative refers to the structure and organization of historical claims. Immerwahr (2008) explains:

It (narrative) is the spine of every historical work – the recipe that directs the combination of ingredients, the blueprint that regulates the placement of bricks. It is what tells us which facts ought to be included, which excluded, and how they ought to be related to one another. It tells us which facts are significant and which can be safely ignored or mentioned only as examples facts tell us about our past, narratives tell us what the past is about. (p.200).

In this sense, historical fiction literature can be described as a grand narrative, because it uses existing historical narratives to truly delve into a historical epoch in rich, elaborate detail.

Although the term *fiction* may connote *myth* or a story that is made-up, quality historical fiction is deeply researched and steeped in historical realities. Richard Slotkin (2005), who is both a formal academic historian at Wesleyan University (CT) and an award winning historical fiction novelist explains:

There is no reason why, in principle, a novel may not have a research basis as good or better than that of scholarly history ... the truth the novel seeks is poetic rather than historiographical: it sacrifices fidelity to non-essential facts in order to create in the reader a vivid sense of what it may have been like to live among such facts – and also a sense of what those facts mean in some larger sense.” (p. 222, 225)

Slotkin (2005) believes that fiction can be adjunct to academics, as it allows an academic to “tell the whole story as he or she has come to understand it” rather than “that which can only be proved with evidence” (p.223). For these reasons, historical narrative and historical fiction help display the “bigger picture” when it comes to historical understanding.

Narratives, including historical fiction, can teach us another aspect of history that might be ignored in mainstream historical curricula at the K-12 level due to both lack of time and political influences on curriculum development (Slotkin, 2005; Immerwahr, 2008). Furthermore, since many students end their formal historical education after graduating from high school, their historical understanding is often limited to the information they learned during those years. The propensity of K-12 education providing limited historical knowledge creates a space where narratives and historical fiction can truly help inform and expose adults to alternative viewpoints of the historical record. These alternative viewpoints of history, the telling of stories from underrepresented groups which are traditionally overlooked by mainstream history textbooks, represent a critical perspective of history which focuses on the *others* rather than the dominant. Before further explaining why historical fiction might play a role in educating about history from a critical perspective, it’s helpful to understand something about how the K-12 historical curriculum is typically developed. Hence, in what follows, I first discuss such curriculum, then the need for more critical perspectives in understanding and educating about history, and then the

role of historical fiction in adults and learning through non-formal educational settings, such as online book groups. Furthermore, I include a section on the historical fiction novels which will be highlighted in this study.

The Development of K-12 History Curriculum: “Stacking the texts”

In order to better understand the potential role historical fiction literature can play in presenting alternative and non-dominant history to the masses, it is important to first understand the cultural context which has created the need for historical literature written from a non-dominant perspective. This dissertation is grounded in the belief that most K-12 education in the United States is largely taught from the perspective of those in power, who in turn, determined what should be taught (Sandwell, 2003; Stanton, 2015). This has been especially true in the past few decades, as education in the United States has moved towards a common curriculum dictated by Federal and State law, and decided upon by politicians or committees chosen by politicians (Stanton, 2015; Immerwahr, 2008). Thus, the decisions on historical education in the United States are being made by those in power – our legislators and their appointees, and not the subject experts – historians and educators. In 2000, Congress adopted an education plan which mandated that students be taught history “so they may be prepared to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (Rothstein, 2004, p.1381). This, of course, is not in line with many historical educators who believe that the goal of history is to expose every facet of an event (Banks, 2012; Immerwahr, 2008; Rothstein, 2004). Noted historian Richard Rothstein (2004) referenced how curriculum decisions sometimes endorse a nationalistic narrative:

Federal law now endorses teaching “traditional American history,” but even critics acknowledge that older, conventional history texts glossed over events of which Americans are no longer proud – slavery, annihilation of Native Americans, racial

segregation, discrimination against immigrants, women, and minorities, colonialism in Asia and Latin America, and the conduct of the Vietnam War (p. 1381).

These educational policy changes of the last few decades have shifted historical education towards civics and citizenship education.

At the state level, these biases are even further combed out. In Texas, the framework for social studies education is reviewed every ten years by a panel of state politicians (Birnbaum, 2010). It is these representatives, not school teachers or administrators, who enact policy update. In 2010, these changes included adding Christian religion into lessons on the founding fathers (many of whom were agnostic) and openly questioning the need for separation of church and state (Birnbaum, Washington Post, 2010). In Florida, former Governor Jeb Bush introduced and passed legislation that would allow history to only be taught based on *facts* (Immerwahr, 2008), thus limiting the inclusion of multi-cultural and non-dominant narratives being included to simultaneously enhance the comprehensiveness of historical lessons. Perhaps the best example of the governments intrusion into the content our American students are taught can be illustrated by the fact that textbook publisher Houghton Mifflin Harcourt brags on their website that “we now have the ability to deliver completely customized content (to the states)” (Birnbaum, 2010). In the least, this proves that students across the country are being taught history differently depending on their geographical location and at most, it implies that state legislators have the power to insert their own agenda through K-12 history lessons and ensure that the textbooks are tailor-made to reinforce those agendas.

These deficiencies in historical education in the United States are what creates the space for critical historical fiction to potentially be an effective and powerful educative tool, depending on both how it is consumed and how it is used. If K-12 students are not being exposed to

counter-narratives and are simply taught the dominant culture's so called "facts" surrounding historical events, they could be missing not only multiple perspectives on historical events, but also the fact that historical "fact" is often contested. Thus, the introduction of varying contexts and viewpoints (through fiction) can not only introduce alternative viewpoints, but could perhaps foster critical reflection of previously held assumptions (Stanton, 2015; Seixas & Peck, 2004).

To be sure, it is important to note that not all textbooks are created equal. Taking into account the fact that textbooks are different not only in each state, but in many cases, in varying school districts, public, and private schools; it can be said that the level and quality of the historical textbooks being used is on a continuum, with some certainly being more accurate and less biased than others. With this in mind, this study will operate under the assumption that there is some varying level of hegemony and bias within the field of history as a whole, as detailed earlier in this chapter.

Critical Public Pedagogy and Non-Formal Learning as Adult Education

Reading fiction is most often a form of leisure for people, something people do for pleasure. Nevertheless, such pleasure reading is a form of non-formal learning for people, where they learn new things about people and places, and the interconnection of fiction and fact. This dissertation is rooted in the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of critical public pedagogy and non-formal learning. Critical public pedagogy assumes that learning takes place, not only in brick and mortar institutions, but more often in public spaces and popular culture and that through these interactions, the learner (or reader) will be able to unmask hegemonic structures and previously held assumptions (Giroux, 2004; Sandlin, Shultz, & Burdick, 2010; Zorrilla & Tisdell, 2016). Based on the assumptions of critical public pedagogy, reading literature is one of the spaces where learning occurs. From a transformative learning perspective, Lawrence and

Cranton (2015) discuss the transformative learning of characters in fiction, and how they can also transform readers' perspectives. While they don't discuss public pedagogy per se, they do discuss how fiction as a form of popular culture can change people's perspectives. This indeed is a form of public pedagogy, and if it helps people analyze power relations in a new way, could be a form of critical public pedagogy.

One of the main tenants of critical public pedagogy is that dialogue is necessary to foster critical reflection and critical consciousness (Giroux, 2002; Zorilla & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, this dissertation will also be rooted in the framework of non-formal education and informal learning. For the purposes of this study, non-formal education is defined as an activity based form of education which takes place outside of schools, yet inside the bounds of an educational or community organization (Romi & Schmida, 2007; Hamenachem & Romi, 1997, Taylor 2006; Biniecki, 2015). Under this umbrella would be activities such as book groups, yoga courses, or Bible study groups – groups that are not formally organized but have an educational purpose. By contrast, informal learning is simply learning that happens on one's own through engaging with the world, including through pleasure reading. Critical public pedagogy and its frameworks will be flushed out later in this chapter and in Chapter Two.

It is important to note that the bases for this study is exploring how literature may act as an agent in fostering critical public pedagogy in the non-formal learning site of book clubs and online book forums. The keystone to this study is that dialogue takes place surrounding the material that has been read. As active dialogue and discussion is the central tenant in critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2002; Burdick & Sandlin, 2013). This study therefore looks at book groups, book clubs, and online book discussion forums to study not only the dialogue that takes place,

but how it affects the reader and their critical reflection surrounding the new information which has been presented to them in the books.

Historical Fiction Literature as Critical Adult Education

Historian and cultural critic, Richard Slotkin (2005) states “novels arise from the shortcomings of history” (p.221). Indeed, many authors re-shape and revise history through writing historical novels. Operating under the belief that there is a dire need for a more comprehensive historical understanding in the United States, there is a case to be made that historical fiction literature is one way that adults learn informally by pursuing what fascinates and interests them in popular culture (Taylor, 2006). Literature possesses the power to envelope the reader in a world and context that is not their own (Bartol & Richardson, 1998; Cain, 1983; Jarvis, 2012). Historical fiction literature can take a reader back in time and, if well-written, can heighten their senses to such a degree that they feel like they are living the experience (Slotkin, 2005; Hoggan & Cranton, 2014). “It (fiction literature) can transport us, while remaining ourselves, into the life of another, revealing similarities but also profound differences between the life and thought of that *other* and myself and making them comprehensible” (Hoggan & Cranton, 2014, p. 7).

Thus, using fiction can be beneficial in expanding reader’s horizons in ways that textbook reading and traditional education practices cannot. Bartol & Richardson (1998) explain “these (historical fiction) novels focus a rich, human lens on a sometimes alternative topic has the power to transport us outside of our current time and place, and then return us to ourselves as changed individuals.” Reading literature on one’s own or discussing literature in a book group is educative tool in a number of ways, but could be a way for the reader to learn and think about a historical event more critically. In Adult Education, the theoretical framework of critical public

pedagogy aims for learning and critically assessing new information through public spaces; such as literature, television, film, and public art (Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011; Zorrilla & Tisdell, 2016). In a sense, using historical fiction literature to portray a non-dominant perspective can be a form of critical education; as it asks the reader to reframe their understanding from an outsider's perspective. Readers themselves may not be aware of the change or, if the literature is discussed in a book group or online forum, the dialogue surrounding such a discussion may help the reader become aware of this change (Giroux, 2004; Zeigler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2013). Typically, the non-dominant perspective of a historical event will attempt to come from those that are either oppressed or not represented to any great degree in a historical record; ethnic minorities, women, and those on the "losing side" of history (Lee, Kozak, Nanchoo, Middendorf, & Gale, 2013). This is not to say that only those from a minority group can write such historical literature, but that the narrative and historical stories coming from such groups are often those being portrayed. Christine Jarvis (2012) explains how literature can lead to critical reflection;

The literature on fiction and adult education sometimes claims that fictional engagement stimulates empathy, but expresses this more commonly as seeing the world through the eyes of others. Educators have suggested that studying fiction can promote a better understanding of marginalized others and greater critical social awareness. (p. 743)

Jarvis (2012) and others (Cranton & Hoggan, 2014; Lawrence & Cranton, 2015; Jarvis, 2002) place their emphasis on the educative power of literature on its ability to create a connection between the reader and the characters. Jarvis (2012) furthers this argument in exploring and analyzing the role of empathy in fiction for adult education. She argues:

This analysis leads to a consideration of fictions capacity to promote an involuntary empathy that can help adult learners develop deeper understandings of difference and of

excluded groups. It also shows that an understanding of the factors that inhibit the development of empathy and enable individuals to justify the sufferings of others could be of value to educators. Finally, it suggests that ... empathetic anger is helpful for educators wanting to use the potential of fiction to encourage and promote action in the cause of social justice. (p. 743)

Drawing on Jarvis's insights then, fiction literature potentially allows the reader to become someone else; to understand their struggles, to feel their pain, and to make sense of the power dynamics of another time period. "By allowing the reader insight into the lived reality of characters and worlds different from one's own, literature is uniquely capable of expanding one's sympathies in a way that real life cannot do" (Hoggan & Cranton, 2014, p. 7). It is through the lenses of *others* that give historical fiction literature written from the non-dominant perspective such potential critical educative power and it is the examination of these reader's experiences that I look to explore and frame within the field of adult education (Hoggan & Cranton, 2014; Gouthro & Holloway, 2013).

To be sure, there is criticism of historical fiction and its use as an educative tool, as the term "fiction" can seem to denote a false story; one made up for entertainment. This has made educators leery of the use of historical fiction in formal class settings (Hawking, 1983; Johnson, 2005). While this study focuses on the informal learning of reading and the non-formal learning of discussing such texts in book groups, there could be implications for formal classroom learning. If historical fiction were to be used in a classroom, much investigation would be needed to determine the merit of the piece of historical fiction (Malcom, 2000; Beck, *et al.*, 2000). There are a number of ways one could evaluate the merit of the use of historical fiction in classrooms, depending on the purpose of using it. From a historical accuracy perspective, one

way is to examine peer reviews and peer-reviewed journals, such as the Journal of Historical Fiction or reviews from the Historical Novel Society. These types of formal reviews will often assess the historical accuracy of a novel.

A second way to examine the merit of historical fiction is to look for the author's notes on their research methods. Often, an author includes a postscript chapter which details their research process; including references, citing travel, including research notes, and even disclosing where their plot lines strayed from the historical record. "I always feel more confident about the accuracy of a book when the author includes historical notes at the back" (Beck, et al. 2000, p. 548).

According to Bartol and Richardson (1998) "writers of fiction begin their craft with careful study of the human condition and then present a world rich in detail" (p.75). Mickel (2012) elaborates; "in the strict sense that history represents factual, verifiable knowledge, the greater part of what we call history or write as historians is clearly fiction ... it is merely a personal version of events" (p. 58). Therefore, while it needs to be noted that historical fiction is *fictional*, there are many authors of historical fiction who go to immense detail to ensure that their novels are as historical accurate as possible. In truth, these authors provide the historical narrative that we previously mentioned was lacking in K-12 education and present stories that represent not only the dominant ideology but the non-dominant perspective as well.

An Example: The Century Trilogy by Ken Follett

One potential example of historical novel as public pedagogy is *The Century Trilogy* by Ken Follett; a three book series which follows five international families through the most historically significant events of the 21st century. This is the series of choice and how readers view and discuss it will be the focus of this dissertation. This trilogy is specifically chosen

because it is told from multiple viewpoints and characters whose interwoven lives give varying perspectives of the same historical events. The main characters include members of an American family, an upper class British family, a poor Welsh family, a German family, and a Russian family. Through the lens of these characters, events such as World War I, the Russian Revolution, the Women's Suffrage movement, World War II, the rise of Nazism, the Cold War, the Civil Rights movement, the Kennedy Assassination, and the rise of Rock and Roll come alive.

The first book, *Fall of Giants* (2010), introduces readers to main characters (whose families will be chronicled throughout all three books); the Williams family – a poor Welsh mining family, the Fitzherbert family – part of the British aristocracy, Gus Dewar – an aide to President Woodrow Wilson, Dev and Grigori Peshkov – Russian brothers who are orphans, and Walter Von Ulrich – a German spy. The book series then follows these characters and their offspring through the 20th century; providing perspectives from each corner of the globe on the world's most important historical events; *Winter of the World* (2012) finds the characters coping with the realities of World War II, while in *Edge of Eternity* (2014), they navigate the cold war and civil rights movements. The multiple, conflicting, and intertwining character narratives provides a firm basis for this dissertation, as it often provides the dominant perspective while contrasting it with the lives of those in less powerful stations.

The Century Trilogy books have been wildly popular since their release; all three landing the #1 spot on the New York Times best sellers list. Many online book forums have created and dedicated pages to not only the trilogy itself, but to the individual books as well. Indeed, thousands of book reviews are listed under each title on goodreads.com, while online discussion threads have hundreds of participants. As will be further detailed in Chapter Three, this study

will focus on the experiences of readers who participate in book groups and online discussion forums where active dialogue takes place.

Problem Statement

As previously detailed, the US historical record is often written from a dominant, Euro-American perspective (Sandwell, 2003; Stanton, 2015). Due to the paucity of non-dominant perspective throughout the main historical record being taught in United States K-12 schools, many students are taught history without understanding the bias in what they are learning and with limited knowledge of events and ideas from the non-dominant perspective. Therefore, many adults are unable to contextualize the experiences of women, people of color, and the history of non-western countries. As previously argued, historical fiction literature can be used as a tool to introduce these perspectives to reader. While there is research exploring the use of historical fiction use in a classroom (Gouthro & Holloway, 2013; Slotkin, 2005; Malcom, 2000) and the use of fiction to foster critical thinking and learning (Jubas, 2006; Hoggan & Cranton, 2015), there is a limited amount of research on the experiences that readers encounter while reading historical fiction literature and how their experiences may or may not reframe their understanding of historical people and events.

Furthermore, there is little research on the experiences of book club members or those who participate in online discussion groups. Brookfield (2004) argues that critical dialogue is a hallmark to engaging in ideology critique and understanding a larger perspective. While there are studies that examine book groups and online book discussion in adult education (Alvarez-Alvarez, 2015), there is no specific research into the role of historical fiction. This is equally true of empirical research on non-formal learning in adult education, where research can be found on online learning communities (Zeigler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2013) but not specifically

on book groups or online book discussion forums. Thus, a gap exists in the empirical research surrounding not only the use of historical fiction in adult education, but also the research surrounding book groups, book clubs, and online book discussion forums as it relates to adult education and historical fiction. A synopsis of the existing literature, and the subsequent gap in the literature, will be provided in more detail in chapter two of this dissertation.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore how readers of critical historical fiction who participate in book groups or online reading forums perceive that the literature and the discussion of it has affected their learning and reshaped their historical understanding. The study focused on those who have read literature which details historical events from multiple viewpoints including those which provide an alternate to the dominant discourse. Specifically, this study focused on readers who have read and discussed *The Century Trilogy* by Ken Follett either in an online discussion forum or an in-person book group. The purpose of this research is to understand the experience these readers have while they are reading and discussing historical literature which may contradict or contrast the dominant discourse. The following questions will guide this inquiry:

1. How did the readers understanding of the historical events portrayed in Ken Follett's *Century Trilogy* alter after reading and discussing the books?
2. In what ways did the readers connection with the books characters impact their understanding of the historical events or groups of people represented? How did this connection influence their critical reflection of the text?

3. After reading and discussing the books, what was the readers experience in confronting and reconstructing their previously held assumptions about the historical events or groups of people portrayed in the books?

Theoretical Framework

This investigation is primarily grounded in the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of critical public pedagogy and non-formal learning. Each of these frameworks will be first be defined and then defended within the terms of this study.

Critical Public Pedagogy

Public Pedagogy is the concept that learning can take place outside of the bounds of formal education and thus, many sites of informal education exist; such as literary works, artwork, media, and museums (Sandlin, Wright, and Clark, 2011). In the field of adult education, there is much study on these informal learning spaces and how a learner constructs knowledge and/or misinformation from their interactions with such representations (Sandlin *et. al*, 2011; Giroux, 2002; Guy, 2007). Critical Public Pedagogy goes a step further, in that it encompasses the power networks that play a part in the construction of knowledge in these spaces. At the crux of Critical Public Pedagogy is the belief that adults can be educated through these spaces critically (Sandlin, Shultz, & Burdick, 2010; Giroux, 2004). That is, adult learners can be brought to understand the power dynamics that influence their understanding and actively critique the information being presented to them (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010). Thus, critical public pedagogy seeks to deconstruct hegemony and actively dispute and rebel against miseducation (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010; Giroux 2002). Defined by Zorrilla and Tisdell (2016) “Critical public pedagogy examines spaces of resistance and the attempt to challenge power relations in popular culture and public spaces ... hence critical public pedagogy specifically

encourages audiences to examine how systems of oppression and privilege as portrayed in public venues affect our view of reality and its distortions” (p. 276).

By the definition of public pedagogy, literature is a space where informal learning can take place. Under this assumption, critical public pedagogy could be a potential outcome of reading literature written to provide an alternative to the dominant discourse, especially in understanding the deconstruction and/or reconstruction of context the reader may go through after being presented with conflicting information (Borg & Mayo, 2010; McLean, 2013).

Central to the idea of critical public pedagogy is that learners (readers) must participate in active dialogue committed to critique and activism (Burdick and Sandlin, 2013). Thus, this study will seek participants who have actively engaged in a discussion of the historical fiction literature in a non-formal book group or online book forum setting.

This study is based on the notion that much of history is written based on the dominant discourse, while historical fiction can be written that brings to light non-dominant perspectives. Dominant discourse is a notion that there are societal “norms” of understanding which are influenced and dictated by those in power. Defined Lee, Kozak, Nancoo, Middendorf, & Gale (2013):

Dominant discourse is a diverse version of expectations -spoken, written, or behavioral that we all share within a cultural group ... People from both privileged and marginalized groups often accept the messages from the dominant discourses with or without awareness (Goodman, 2001). Privileged groups, having historically achieved relational power that defines cultural norms and expectations, maintain the dominant ideology ... On the other hand, people from subordinate groups often internalize oppression, which not only undermines their self-esteem and sense of empowerment but also developing

personal and psychological characteristics that are pleasing to the people with power (p.23).

Thus, dominant discourse refers to information which is considered mainstream and disseminated by those in power as their own account or for their own gain (Young *et. al*, 2013; Bagele & Gabo, 2010). In accepting that all formal learning is constructed with some form of bias, counter narratives to the dominant discourse are referred to as non-dominant ideologies (Sandwell, 2003; Stanton, 2015). In the study of history, the narratives and stories coming from the non-dominant perspective are often not equally presented in formal class settings (Seixas & Peck, 2004). Thus, historical fiction literature can present these narratives which, as aforementioned, may cause a reader to reconsider their previously held assumptions and perhaps, critically deconstruct the hegemonic powers with influenced their prior knowledge.

Non-Formal and Informal Learning

This study is grounded in the idea that non-formal learning occurs through book groups and online book forums. While non-formal and informal learning are often used interchangeably, the distinction is that non-formal learning is done purposefully while informal learning happens more organically and sometimes unknowingly (Shrestha, Wilson, & Singh, 2008; Taylor, 2006; Biniecki, 2015). For the purpose of this study, the purposeful act of dialogue in a book group or online book forum will act as a non-formal learning setting.

According to many adult educators (Jubas, 2011; Ziegler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2014; Taylor, 2006, Biniecki, 2015), non-formal learning can be useful in understanding how adults learn and engage outside of formal education. In line with public pedagogy, there are a number of studies which examine non-formal and informal learning in public spaces; such as theatre

(Kemp & Parrish, 2010), television (Jarvis, 2005; Wright, 2010), and most importantly to this study, literature (Jarvis, 2012).

This framework lends itself well to the analysis of learning that happens in book group and online book forums, as these non-formal settings are mostly voluntary participation for personal enrichment. Taylor (2006) finds that non-formal education distinguishes itself from more formalized education because the goal is to foster personal enjoyment and to have fun with learning. In a study of learning outcomes of non-formal learners, Biniiecki (2015) found that learners in non-formal settings did not construct knowledge in a linear fashion; instead they construed the new information with their past knowledge and also their perceived future use of the knowledge during not only the non-formal program, but also “post-gram” (p.65).

Furthermore, there has been some research done on online communities as non-formal learning spaces. Zeigler, Paulus, and Woodside (2014) find “the conversations in these communities emerge from the members, are not guided by an expert, persist over time, and enable the researcher to see learning as it is happening rather than relying on retrospective accounts of the past and are collected by self-reported data” (p.64). Thus, there is a strong argument for using online book clubs and book forums to not only find participants, but also as a space of non-formal learning.

Methodology Overview

This is an interpretative qualitative study, guided by critical research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research seeks to understand the meaning-making process of participants (Creswell, 2014, Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research is useful because it provides data which gets at the heart of the experience of the participant and focuses on their construction of knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The primary means of data in qualitative research studies

are interviews, observations, and analysis of documents. A qualitative study was the best approach for the purposes of this study, as it focused on the meaning-making and understanding processes of readers who have engaged in dialogue through book groups or online book discussions. Qualitative data was collected using reader interviews and from written remarks on book discussion websites. The next few sections will provide an overview of the participant selection process and data collection methods, both in qualitative research in general and as it pertained to this study.

Participant Selection

Participant selection in qualitative research is typically done using the purposeful sampling method, which seeks participants who have a wealth of information on the subject matter (Merriam & Associates, 2002). In this manner, participants were selected using a number of different methods. First, I looked at book club websites to determine potential participants who have read *The Century Trilogy* and further discussed the book online. I sought out book review websites (Historical Fiction Book Club, The Ken Follett Fan Club, *goodreads.com* etc.) which allow private messaging communication between users. This allowed me to message readers who had written lengthy, heartfelt, or profound reviews of *The Century Trilogy* books to request participation. Secondly, I used Facebook and online searches to search for book club groups who may have read *The Century Trilogy* books and sought participants from their ranks.

Data Collection and Analysis

As will be discussed further in Chapter Three, the primary means of data collection for this study was an analysis of *goodreads.com* online discussion forums and personal interviews with participants. As previously stated, I began by using fan-pages and book review websites (*goodreads.com*) to search for participants. Beyond this, I analyzed the online discussion forum

reviews of *The Century Trilogy* books to add depth of the data investigating this dissertation. Zeigler, Paulus, and Woodside (2014) find that analysis of online communities can provide rich data, they explain “as discourse analysis (of online discussions) does not require intervention or interaction with the participants, the persistent conversations can be orientated as archived texts that provide insight into the learning that has occurred” (p.74). The popular book review social network, *goodreads.com*, which was used for this study, has approximately 360,000 reviews of *The Century Trilogy* books. These reviews and posts were analyzed for content and themes. The details of the analysis will be further discussed in Chapter Three.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for a number of reasons. First, it is significant to the literature surrounding popular culture and how it may play a role in shaping the worldview of many. Chase (2000) argues that the study of history has been altered through postmodernist thought to include stories of the *other* and to deconstruct the powerful influences which dictated the written historical record. History and historical settings are a mainstay in arenas of popular culture such as film, television, and fiction. Through these pop culture mediums, many of these “revisionist” stories have been portrayed. In film, literature, and television; the stories of the underrepresented and the oppressed have been told for public consumption. Wright (2010) argues that these types of underrepresented stories can be powerful in popular culture and can even embolden some to resist cultural systems of oppression (p. 51). While much research has been done on the impact of these stories being portrayed through television (Tisdell & Thompson, 2015; Wright 2009; Wright & Sandlin 2009) and some has been done on literature in general (Jarvis, 1999; Jubas, 2005; Jubas, 2007) there has been no study, to my knowledge, which explores the relationship between these *revisionist* historical fiction literature, popular culture, and adult education.

This study is also important to the fields of adult education, and history education. The importance of this study lies in the role that historical fiction literature, and active engagement in discussion of it, can potentially play in non-formal adult education. This study aims to examine not only readers' individual learning from reading historical fiction, but also how engagement in discussion of it relates to understanding a more critical perspective. This study shows how participants perceive the role of the novel itself and how the discussion of it has impacted their understanding. While there is some research relating to transformative learning through fiction (Hoggan & Cranton, 2015; Lawrence & Cranton, 2015), there is little examining the role of discussion and engagement of historical fiction in particular and how this shapes learning. Such research is particularly relevant not only for adult education but also for history education, and could show that historical fiction can be a critical informal and/or non-formal teaching tool. If readers gain a more comprehensive understanding of historical events, including historical figures and groups, and also become more aware of the power structures which surrounded these historical actors, then historical fiction literature can potentially educate towards self-actualization (Hoggan & Cranton, 2015; Jarvis, 2012; Gouthro & Holloway, 2013), as well as act as a form of revisionist history. Therefore, this study will add dimension to the adult education literature on meaning-making and history education; specifically how adult readers make meaning when presented with new historical contexts, especially those that may contradict the dominant discourse.

This study is potentially significant in the realm of critical public pedagogy. As critical public pedagogy espouses, knowledge is not always created in a formal setting (Giroux, 2004; Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010; Wright & Clark, 2011) and therefore lends itself to forms of non-formal education. Thus, as a form of non-formal education, historical fiction literature can

potentially lead to the critical education necessary for critical consciousness and self-actualization. As dialogue is central to critical public pedagogy, this study adds to the literature on learning in a non-formal group setting. As previously mentioned, there is lack in data surrounding critical historical fiction literature and the experiences of the reader.

Finally, this study is significant to me personally because I am a reader and a consumer of all things historical fiction. I firmly believe that the study of history, especially the study of the stories that are untold (and the hegemonic forces that kept these stories from the mainstream) are powerful tools towards self-actualization, cultural competency, and empathy. I am an optimist who whole heartedly believes that learning about the past and better understanding the forces which have shaped history will ultimately lead to a better future.

Assumptions of the Study

There are some basic underlying assumptions in every study. The following assumptions guide the direction of this study:

1. History is fluid. There is no one “fact” that can adequately teach the history of a person, place, or time period. All history is biased by the author.
2. The study of history should be multi-dimensional and include the perspectives of all actors. (Barton, 2002; Bartol & Richardson, 1998; Immerwahr, 2008; Sandwell, 2003).
3. Narrative is critical to understanding history. (Immerwahr, 2008; Sandwell, 2003; Stanton, 2015)
4. The notion that comments left on fan-club and book review websites can be analyzed for themes including and understanding of experiences of power, oppression, culture, and gender. (Zeigler, Paulus, and Woodside, 2014)

5. Though specific to historical fiction literature, this study can inform on the use of critically written literature in adult education.
6. Not all historical fiction literature is adequate for the purposes of this study and not all historical fiction literature is created equal. For the purposes of this study, only historical fiction literature that is intensely researched and written based on historical narratives and/or historical dates or events can be considered. (Beck, C., Nelson-Faulkner, S. & Pierce, K.,2000; Bartol & Richardson, 1998)
7. Generally, education in the United States is lacking in its approach to the teaching of history and often does not include the stories and narratives of the *other*. (Lee, Kozak, Nancoo, Middendorf, & Gale, 2013; Barton, 2002; Bartol & Richardson, 1998; Immerwahr, 2008)
8. My own positionality, as a white, middle-class, American female influenced this study. As a fish in water, I cannot operate outside of the constructs that have molded me.

Limitations and Strengths of the Study

Every study has both limitations and strengths. Some of the limitations of this study include the following:

1. **Sample Collection:** The study is limited in the fact that it focused on readers' experience of one Trilogy: Ken Follett's *The Century Trilogy*. As such, participants were limited to those who have read the trilogy and engaged in discussion about it. Although steps were taken to collect a sample of interviewee's from diverse backgrounds, there were still some limitations to this method. For example, most participants were found using the internet and more specifically, social media. Due to this strategy, people of lower socio-economic status may be less represented, as they may have limited access to the internet

and/or social media. Furthermore, the sample may be skewed towards young adult and middle-aged participants as they are the highest demographic represented on social media.

2. **Positionality:** As a white, middle-class, woman I have a certain set of lived experiences, assumptions, and biases which may have affected my interpretation of data (Bettinger, 2010). Nevertheless, every effort was made to account for bias.
3. **Generalizability:** Qualitative research is not generally intended to be generalizable, but rather aims to study the particular depth. The fact that the study is not generalizable could be considered a limitation by some.
4. **Whiteness:** While there are many attributes to this study, one considerable study is a triple filter of “whiteness.” First, *The Century Trilogy* books are written by a white author, Ken Follett. Secondly, the entirety of the interview participants identified as Caucasian. Third, as a white researcher, I add an additional white viewpoint to the study. Therefore, the data is triple filtered through the lenses of Caucasians and those that identify as white.

While there are some limitations to this study, there are also considerable strengths. First and foremost, this study produced thick, rich data surrounding readers who have engaged in book groups or online discussion forums on *The Century Trilogy* books. The purposeful sampling of those who have participated in a book group or online discussion thread provided data which is detailed and member checks were conducted to further enhance the dependability of the data. Furthermore, the analysis of online discussion threads added not only to the wealth of data, but assisted in the triangulation of interview data.

Summary and Organization of the Dissertation

The information presented in this chapter serves as an introduction to the topic of this dissertation. The second chapter provides a detailed overview of the relevant literature, research and theoretical framework that guides the study, while the third chapter outlines in detail the qualitative methodology used to collect and analyze data. Chapter Four presents the findings, while Chapter Five provides a discussion and conclusion.

Definitions of Terms

Historical Fiction: Literature which is comprised of narratives that take place in the past and are characterized chiefly by a reconstruction of historical events and personages (Chase, 2000; Slotkin, 2005)

Dominant Perspective: The notion that all history is written from an author's bias and that the most widely accepted historical perspectives are disseminated by those in power. (Lee, Kozak, Nancoo, Middendorf, & Gale, 2013)

Non-Dominant Perspective: Perspectives on history told by those whose voices are underrepresented. (Lee, Nancoo, & Middendorf, 2013; Slotkin, 2015)

Critical Historical Fiction: Historical Fiction Literature which constructs its narrative around the story of a person or group of persons from historically marginalized groups. The focus of critical historical fiction is to dispel the dominant discourse, telling a story from the perspective outside of those in power (or with the power to write or re-write mainstream history). (Beck, C., Nelson-Faulkner, S. & Pierce, K. 2000; Barton, 2002)

Historical Narrative: Historical narrative is the structure for organizing factual claims through the combination of facts and stories and most importantly, how they relate to one another (Immerwahr, 2008; Slotkin, 2005).

Dominant Discourse: The idea that discourses and/or societal “norms” of understanding are influenced and dictated by those in power. The dominant discourse refers to information which is considered mainstream and disseminated by those in power for their own gain.

Other(s): Historically underrepresented and marginalized populations. For the purpose of this study, this could include (but is not limited to): ethnic minorities, people of color, members of the LGBTQ community, women, those of lower socio-economic status, immigrants, and those on the losing side of historical political and military battles.

Public Pedagogy: The belief that education is more than just filling a student with knowledge and that learning can take place informally in creative spaces; such as bodies of literature, art, media, museums, or the world-wide web. (Giroux, 2004; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011)

Critical Public Pedagogy: An approach to adult education where informal learning, in spaces of public pedagogy, can be used for cultural critique and activism (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010; Giroux, 2004).

Critical Consciousness: The achievement of an in-depth understanding of the world; including the social and political structures which contribute to one’s understanding. Furthermore, one who has achieved some degree of critical consciousness takes action against the oppressive elements in their life (Brookfield, 2003; Mezirow, 2000).

Self-Actualization: Derived from Abraham Maslow’s *Hierarchy of Needs* (1943), it refers to a state where an individual is motivated to become their best self. In the field of adult education, it

is often used to describe one who is enlightened to the hegemonic forces surrounding them (Mezirow, 2000; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011).

Social Justice: A belief in fairness. That all humans should be represented equally and thus, a solidarity with those who are underrepresented or oppressed.

Informal Learning: Learning which has not been planned or organized in formal settings. (Hrimech, 2005; Jubas, 2011).

Non-Formal Learning: An activity based form of education which takes place outside of schools, yet inside the bounds of an educational or community organization (Romi & Schmida, 2007; Hamenachem & Romi, 1997; Taylor, 2006).

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore how readers of critical historical fiction who participate in book groups or online reading forums perceive that the literature and the discussion of it has affected their learning and or possibly reshaped their historical understanding. The study focused on those who have read literature which details historical events from multiple viewpoints including those which provide an alternate to the dominant discourse. Specifically, this study focused on readers who have read and discussed *The Century Trilogy* by Ken Follett, either in an online discussion forum or an in-person book group. The purpose of this research is to understand the experience these readers have while they are reading and discussing historical literature which may contradict or contrast the dominant discourse. The following questions guide this inquiry:

1. How did the readers understanding of the historical events portrayed in Ken Follett's *Century Trilogy* alter after reading and discussing the books?
2. In what ways did the readers connection with the books characters impact their understanding of the historical events or groups of people represented? How did this connection influence their critical reflection of the text?
3. After reading and discussing the books, what was the readers experience in confronting and reconstructing their previously held assumptions about the historical events or groups of people portrayed in the books?

The purpose of the study and the research questions have a background and context. As detailed briefly in Chapter One, history itself is contextual. A number of different factors influence how history is written and disseminated. Historian Richard Slotkin (2005) explains

“anyone who has worked with historical records knows that the documentation of any large, complex human event is never fully adequate or reliable, and when one attempts to account for the motives and beliefs that govern human action, information becomes even more slippery” (p. 223). Sexias (1994) puts it more bluntly; “If the philosophers of history are right, there is not much real history” (p.314). These issues will be examined thoroughly below.

The study of history is important for a number of reasons. First and foremost, understanding ones background and ancestral heritage provides a framework for understanding oneself. Lee, Kozak, Nancoo, Chen, Middendorf, & Gale (2013) argue:

people from both privileged and marginalized groups often accept the messages from the dominant discourses with or without awareness. Privileged groups, having historically achieved relational power that defines cultural norms and expectations, maintain the dominant ideology ... On the other hand, people from subordinate groups often internalize oppression, which not only undermine their self-esteem and sense of empowerment but also developing personal and psychological characteristics that are pleasing to the people with power. (p.23)

More simply put, the narratives and histories of the dominant group (traditionally, white men) are more prevalent, more valiant, and more readily told than those of minority groups (Manglitz, 2003; Bartol & Richardson, 1998; Immerwahr, 2008; Sandwell, 2003; Slotkin, 2005). This “whitewashing” of history not only promotes and elevates the historical account of white men, but it also intentionally and unintentionally reduces, demeans, and undermines the roles and stories of minorities and their cultures. Thus, history and the teaching of history is usually taught as a form of hegemony which provides a contextual framework for one’s being and self-awareness. This is a basic assumption of the study.

This chapter examines the body of literature relevant to this to this research. First, I will begin by providing contextual information to the study by exploring the literature which explains the problems in traditional K-12 historical education and the literature which provides a rationale for challenging the dominant discourse surrounding historical knowledge and understanding. Secondly, I will review the literature which examines historical fiction literature. This will include examinations into what constitutes historical fiction, how historical fiction can be assessed for quality, and arguments in the literature for or against the use of fiction and historical fiction as an educative tool. I will also discuss the literature surrounding book clubs and online learning forums as educative spaces. In the third section, I will provide literature on the theoretical frameworks that guide this inquiry and situate them within the purpose of this study. Finally, this chapter will close by drawing conclusions from the literature review and presenting a rationale for the study within the field of adult education.

Literature Review Methodology

In order to justify the relevance of this study, it is necessary to situate it within the context of the existing literature. To this end, many search methods and search engines were exhausted in preparing the literature review section of this dissertation. First and foremost, searches were conducted to identify journal articles and relevant book chapters using both Ebsco and ERIC. Search terms included mixtures of the following terms: critical historical fiction, historical fiction, adult education, historical literature, issues in historical education, critical fiction, critical education, critical public pedagogy, fiction in adult education, non-formal learning, book clubs, dialogue, and online discussion forums. These search terms were used to provide background literature on the two main components of this study: the educative purposes of critical historical fiction and dialogue and learning through book clubs. Furthermore, searches

were conducted using the same terms on Penn State's CAT Library search engine to identify relevant books; both within and outside of the Penn State Library system. Additionally, a search was conducted using all of the above search engines to find literature relevant to the theoretical frameworks of critical public pedagogy and non-formal learning.

Admittedly, these searches provided a vast amount of literature; some of which was useful to the topic and others which included keywords but applied more to other areas of academia. For instance, much of the literature on critical fiction relates to a more generalized form of fiction writing and not specifically the historical fiction novel. Additionally, there is much information on using critical historical fiction in the classroom, but little on using these texts as a teaching tool in a non-formal adult education setting. Literature that did not inform the study directly was discarded. By limiting this literature, 56 sources were found that apply to the research questions; 35 which inform the broad areas of historical fiction discussed in this literature review and 21 which apply to various theoretical frameworks. Of these sources, 12 are empirical sources and the remainder are conceptual. This literature will be summarized by topic in the following sections.

Problematizing K-12 Education

As detailed in the previous chapter, this study is grounded in the belief that the dominant historical narrative is prevalent in the K-12 education system. This section will present an argument based on the existing scholarly literature that K-12 historical education in the United States is biased; that course textbooks and lesson plans are chosen based on their value to those in power and that the history taught is largely the history of those who were in power in the past (Sandwell, 2003; Stanton, 2015). This has been especially true in the past few decades, as education in the United States has moved towards a common curriculum dictated by Federal and

State law, and decided upon by politicians or committees chosen by politicians (Stanton, 2015; Immerwahr, 2008).

Many scholars argue that historical education in the United States is not much more than civics or citizenship education (Immerwahr, 2008; Sandwell, 2003; Sexias, 1994; Rothstein, 2004; Banks, 2002). In 2000, Congress laid forth eight education goals. Included amongst these was the goal that students of Social Studies were to “demonstrate competency over challenging subject matter in civics and government, economics, history, and geography so they may be prepared to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (Rothstein, 2004, p. 1382). Furthermore, conservative politicians have made efforts to retain historical education to the study of “traditional history” or history which is based on “fact” (this is problematic for a number of reasons that will be discussed later in this section). For example, in 2006 Jeb Bush, governor of Florida, signed a bill barring historical interpretation in public schools and mandating that “the history of the United States shall be viewed as factual and not constructed” ((Immerwahr, 2008, p. 199). Had the language in the original draft of this conservative bill been accepted, it would have been mandated that teaching history “not follow revisionist history or postmodern viewpoints of relative truth” (Immerwahr, 2008. p. 199).

This consolidation of power regarding curriculum at the legislative level is alarming, as those who are already in some of the most powerful positions in the United States are allowed to dictate what is being taught in public schools. First and foremost, the elected leaders in our country have little diversity. Members of Congress, for example, are 80% men and 83% Caucasian (Bump, 2015). While it is true that much of the legislative work on educational curriculums happen at the state level or in appointed committees, the demographics nationwide at the state level are often not too different (Banks, 2015). In fact, the issue of curriculum

decisions gets further complicated at the state level; where textbooks can be tailored to meet the criteria of state boards of education. This can be illustrated by textbook publisher Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, who boasts on their website that “we now have the ability to deliver completely customized content (to the states)” (Birnbaum, 2010). In the least, this means that students are delivered different curriculum content based on their geographic location, but troublingly, it also implies that state legislators and their appointees have the capability to tailor K-12 curriculum to promote their own ideological agendas.

Furthering the problem of curriculum in K-12 education is that historical information is largely presented as facts (Immerwahr, 2008) in a time when many historians agree that the study of history should include competing perspectives and voices (Barton, 2002; Bartol & Richardson, 1998; Immerwahr, 2008; Sandwell, 2003). Using the aforementioned Florida Bill as an example, historical “facts” refers to that which is written in the official historical records; which are largely Euro-centric and male-dominated (Rothstein, 2004; Sandwell, 2003; Slotkin, 2005). Immerwahr (2008) explains this problem:

We are all so familiar with narratives that explain the character of our nation in terms of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution that they may seem like unquestionable facts to us. When we hear a historian offer an alternative narrative, though – one that emphasizes the proslavery aspects of both documents, perhaps – we are quicker to recognize it as in interpretation, perhaps a ‘biased’ one. (p.200)

Thus, a problem exists in K-12 education with what truly are historical “facts.” Sandwell (2003) argues that the study of history should not be approached as fact vs. fiction. She argues:

The study of history is not, after all, a product to be defined and consumed, but instead a process of critical inquiry to be engaged in ... knowledge is not about facts so much as it is about understanding the process. (p. 169).

As mentioned in chapter one of this dissertation, there are research processes, such as historiography, which give more credence to the study of history (Fallace, 2009; Erkkila, 2015; Chirobocea, 2017). Historiography grew from the postmodernist idea that history was written by those in power for their benefit. The study of historiography examines the motives and factors behind a historical event, figure, or epoch (Erkkila, 2015). Sandwell (2003) explains that biases in historical records can be uncovered by asking certain types of questions, such as “what are the factors that can explain why the author of the primary document represented the world the way he or she did? What were the economic forces, social influences, historical chronology, family situations, ethnic origin, or gender and age factors that made the world look the way it did for the person creating that document?” (p. 173).

In the debate over teaching history as a collection of facts, Chirobocea (2017) concludes, “history as construct exists because of its very epistemological fragility. If it were possible to know very clearly what happened in the past, there would be no point in the many rewritings and ever new versions of a single event or personality or epoch from the past and (the study of) history would stop” (p. 193). According to these historians, history education in K-12 should include multiple viewpoints of events, while teaching students to critically analyze the sources of the information presented to them.

Furthermore, the facts taught in K-12 largely leave out diverse voices. Stanton (2015) writes “textbook authors frequently privilege Eurocentric narratives and perspectives” (p. 182). This sentiment is echoed throughout the research on the importance of literature, as it is argued

that literature provides a space for marginalized stories to be told (Hoggan & Cranton, 2014; Lawrence & Cranton, 2015; Jarvis, 2002). In many classrooms, history of the *other* is presented as an addendum to the historical record (Stanton, 2015). This practice prioritizes “white-mans” history and leaves the stories of people of color, women, gender non-conforming, and poor to be studied as an afterthought. Lee et al. (2013) explain how teaching history from the dominant record hurts students:

The dominant discourse contains particular ideological beliefs that maintain the relational power of the dominant group ... people from subordinate groups often internalize oppression, which not only undermines their self-esteem and sense of empowerment but also developing personal and psychological characteristics that are pleasing to the people in power. (p. 23)

Stanton (2015) argues that the practice of “wrap around” features in US textbooks marginalizes “spatially and literally” those in non-dominant positions and reinforce the experiences of the *other* as separate of that from the mainstream (p. 187-188).

Another factor to consider in evaluating the level of history and social studies education being presented at the K-12 level is the recent introduction of the Common Core. The Common Core is a standards based education system which has transformed the practice of teaching in the United States (Leibtag, 2009; Milner, 2013). Adopted by 45 states, the common core aims to bring equity to teaching throughout the United States. As some experts have pointed out, the previous two standards of education in the United States, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Common Core, focus heavily on mathematics and literacy education (Au, 2013; Leibtag, 2013) and standardized learning, which is evaluated by standardized testing. This focus on mathematics and literacy has had an effect on learning both for students and concurrently,

educators and teachers-in-training, as both are learning less history in their curriculums. Furthermore, there is a deep debate over the politicization of the history which is presented as “standard.” Milner (2013) argues “we lack real talk about the fight over social studies/history content in public schools, a fight we are already in the midst of whether we admit to it or not. The politics of knowledge and the implications for curriculum are at the center of the CCSS” (p. 8).

A consequence of this trend has been a turn towards scripted teaching; where educators are presented with a standardized curriculum and lesson plan to present to students. “Many educators reported that their efforts to align curriculum to standards and focus on tested material in reading and mathematics have diminished the class time available for social studies, science, and other subjects or activities. [The researchers’] observations of the use of classroom time supported this point” (Srikantaiah, 2009, p. 2). Unfortunately, when teachers are relying on scripted knowledge and not personal understanding of history, the educator is then unable to critically facilitate any real discussion about the historical facts being presented (which as was already discussed, are questionably chosen as standard). The introduction of Common Core has only added an additional layer of skepticism into K-12 history education in the United States.

One last concern in K-12 education is time. History is massive and educators (and legislators) need to prioritize lessons; what is important, what can be left out? The time constraints of teaching history are compounded by a vast increase in standardized testing in the United States. Often, teacher’s careers and livelihoods depend on the scores received by their students on standardized tests; which in some states are tied to raises and tenure (Rothstein, 2004). Therefore, there is immense pressure to “teach to the test.” Rothstein (2004) explains how this effects the study of history:

Teachers who delve into selected controversies will fail to prepare students for standardized tests that expect superficial familiarity with all controversies. Testing inevitably creates incentives to teach history as a succession of relatively meaningless facts. (p. 1390).

While testing places its own constraints on teachers, the sheer volume of material to cover presents another and often, the stories outside of the bounds of the dominant record are omitted for time. “The message is clear; with the pressure to cover content, it is just not possible to include high quality multicultural education for all students all the time” (Stanton, 2015, p. 188).

There are a plethora of issues facing K-12 education that create a space where students are taught history inadequately; the problem surrounding the classification of “fact,” the bias of historical documents and records, the bias of chosen curriculum, the propensity of euro-centric male history, and the constraints of time brought on my volume and standardized testing. While these barriers may seem insurmountable, this dissertation is founded on the belief that hegemony should be actively challenged. The following sections will discuss this and also situate how non-dominant historical fiction literature may play a role in educating history critically where traditional historical education is deficient.

Challenging Dominant Discourse

As discussed previously, history and the teaching of history is a form of hegemony which provides a contextual framework for ones being and self-awareness. Also discussed was the prevalence for minority or non-dominant historical accounts to be taught as “supplemental” to mainstream, dominant historical ideology. This practice disseminates the dominant record as fact and truth without leaving much room for non-dominant perspectives or critical evaluation of the material being taught. Manglitz, 2013, explains “Western culture can hide the inequities in

our social structures that privilege some and deny others, as the ways and mores of the dominant culture are universalized as standards of merit, hiring criteria, grading standards, and predictors of success” (p.126). She further explains that learners who are non-white, specifically, are often taught their history in ways that position them as deficient and disadvantaged and in need of special attention by the dominant group (Manglitz, 2003).

The idea of dominant discourse, then, is the idea that discourses and/or societal “norms” of understanding are influenced and dictated by those in power. The dominant discourse refers to this information which is considered mainstream and disseminated by those in power for their own gain. As argued in the previous section, the teaching of K-12 history is steeped in the dominant ideology of what history is important and what historical education should represent. This section will seek to frame dominant discourse in adult education and within the parameters of this study and will present an argument for the need to challenge it.

The concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) refers to the ways in which “prevailing power relations are maintained through inculcating dominant values, beliefs, norms, and discourses, which come to be viewed as “common sense” (Bowl & Tobias, 2012, p. 280). This concept can be used when describing the educative processes surround history. Critical adult educators concur that challenging hegemony and unmasking hegemonic power structures is a goal in adult education (Manglitz, 2003; Bowl & Tobias, 2012; Brookfield, 2000; Mezirow, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Giroux, 2004; Friere, 1970; Shore, 2001). In the United States, critical pedagogy has strong links to the work of John Dewey and social reconstructionist theory which emphasizes educating, both future educators and learners, to be critical of mainstream educational practices (Evans, 2008). Proponents of critical theory argue that there is a system of interwoven power structures which work, in part, to keep wealth and power localized to a select few. They contend

that the only way to change these social dynamics is to critically unmask these forces so they can be resisted. “The role of adult educators and their allies is to provide the conditions for adults to reflect on their past and present experiences, placing it in a wider historical, social, and political context, identifying those “limit situations” (Freire, 1972, p.71) that are obstacles to progressive change, but which can be changed through collective action” (Bowl & Tobias, 2012).

In regards to the hegemonic educational system, renowned adult educator Paulo Freire (1970) refers to a system called “banking” where unknowing students are inundated with *knowledge* from an expert which mirrors the oppression of capitalist society. As previously argued, the way history education is approached in K-12 US education is largely a “banking system;” where students are subjugated to vast array of facts which need to be banked and regurgitated on standardized tests. If, as this dissertation posits, there is an ulterior political or hegemonic agenda behind the history curriculum being taught in K-12 schools, then it is the duty of critical educators to attempt to expose, critically assess, and resist these forces.

Fiction as Historical Education

German philosopher and poet Novalis is attributed with the quote “novels arise from the shortcomings of history” (date unknown). Many authors, educators, and historians agree that fictional novels, in the least, can contribute and be a supplement to traditional (K-12) historical understanding (Slotkin, 2005; Chase, 2000; Jarvis 2012; Sexias & Peck, 2004; den Heyer & Fidyk, 2007). This section will seek to explore the literature surrounding the educative possibilities of historical fiction literature.

The academic literature surrounding historical fiction novels as an educative tool seem to fall under three main categories: (1) historical fiction literature is useful because it is more exciting and interesting than textbook learning (2) the use of characters in historical fiction

literature allow the reader to create a relationship which fosters empathy and understanding through emotional responses, and (3) historical fiction literature can introduce the stories of non-dominant and underrepresented populations. The combination of these three elements creates a powerful place from which historical knowledge can be shared. This section will explore all of these three elements. However, a future section in this chapter will be dedicated to exploring the quality of historical fiction literature; as accuracy in detail and research is imperative towards the educative and enlightenment goals of such literature.

Perhaps the most common complaint amongst K-12 learners regarding history is that it's boring. As mentioned previously, the process of teaching (banking) facts in terms of dates, places, and events towards regurgitation on a standardized test leaves little to be desired. In fiction, skilled authors can present these same historical events and persons in the form of a grand saga. In opposition to traditional history learning, learning history through literature allows the learner to envelope themselves in the context of the historical event (Bartol & Richardson, 1998). Johnson (2005) explains "Authors of historical literature set their stories in the past, using plotlines and deeply developed characters to portray a period of time; its societal norms, language, and culture (p. 15). "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 historical actors experienced it, that they have a direct window into what the past looked like, felt like, and what it meant" (Sexias & Peck, 2004, p. 109). In a sense, fiction can transport a reader to an alternate reality and allow them a window into the past. Through literature, the reader becomes a participant rather than a student.

A second theme amongst the academic literature surrounding the use of historical novels is the importance of characters. “Historical fiction novels focus a rich, human lens on a sometimes alternative topic. The stories and the lives of historical characters help readers see the details of everyday life that are not incorporated into textbooks... it has the power to transport us outside of our current time and place, and then to return us to ourselves as changed individuals; to make us more human” (Beck, Nelson-Faulkner, & Pierce, 2000, p. 546-548). In fact, many educators and authors write about the importance of the reader/character relationship in regards to the educative possibilities of historical fiction, especially where it is related to fostered empathy, sympathy, and cultural understanding (Jarvis, 2012; Slotkin, 2005; van Heyer & Fidyk, 2007; Sexias & Peck, 2004). Keen (2006) argues that through good historical literature, the reader is introduced to a distant time period in a historically accurate manner *and* is imaginatively drawn into the story by interesting storylines and characters; making “readers believe they have legitimate empathetic experience as a result of their encounters with fictional characters and the imagined worlds they move in” (p. 99). In fact, some educators have called the empathetical reaction readers have with fictional characters who are unlike themselves as transformative experiences (Jarvis, 2012; Hoggan & Cranton 2015). A consensus across the literature reviewed shows that most believed that the connections forged between a reader and a character happen organically and unknowingly force the reader to understand context from another’s point of view (Sexias & Peck, 2004; Bartol & Richardson, 1998; den Heyer & Fidyk, 2007). Bartol & Richardson (1998) explain this phenomenon as such:

We can read textbooks that provide descriptions of another culture, but knowledge of facts is not sufficient for understanding. We can become immersed in another culture, and if we are open, gain an appreciation and understanding of that culture. However,

such an opportunity is not always readily available. We cannot easily “Walk in another’s shoes” or “Get inside another’s skin.” But cultural competence can be enhanced with the careful reading of reputable literature. (p. 75)

The relationship to characters lends heavily to the third theme observed throughout the academic literature relating to the educative possibilities of historical fiction literature: the introduction of non-dominant storylines and characters which tell historical stories from the perspective of minorities and those who are underrepresented. Bartol & Richardson (1998) explain “creative literature provides a perspective which guides our associations, casts doubts on our prejudices, challenges our stereotypes, and helps us reflect on our circumstances. In short, literature helps us see life from different points of view” (p.76).

den Heyer & Fidyk (2007) argue that historical fiction permits a space where non-dominant stories can be told, specifically the stories which are “otherwise unbearable, unspeakable, or unimaginable” (p. 141). In fact, some of the most tragic events of human history have been best told through the use of artistic modes of communication such as literature and film. These representations, such as *Schindlers List* or *Ten Years a Slave*, have used characters to humanize tragedy, agony, and torture. den Heyer & Fidyk (2007) argue that these artistic representations are necessary to combat the “epistemological terrorism of knowledge standardization in schools” (p. 143).

Slotkin (2005) argues that through the use of fiction written from a non-dominant perspective, readers can combat the hegemonic forces and social structure they were likely subjected to in their formal K-12 learning:

Cultural change, the transportation of linguistic and ideological structures, happens.

People are evidently not mere victims of inherited myths and ideologies, but have an

active role in transforming received culture. It follows that the forms and genres of culture, including narrative, are not a set of conceptual restraints but potentially a set of tools or instruments for dealing with a changing and troublesome reality. (p. 229)

The use of historical fiction to humanize non-dominant characters and to tell stories that are not told or studied in mainstream history is unparalleled in possibility. In relation to this dissertation, *The Century Trilogy* by Ken Follett was chosen specifically because it presented multiple viewpoints with competing narratives which force the reader to comprehend historical events from the perspectives of characters in different geographical and social positions. It is this type of historical fiction literature which enables the learner to begin to critically analyze the *facts* that they were taught and begin to understand that perhaps they were only taught one side of a story. The possible experience of this realization is what this dissertation seeks to understand.

In summation, the academic literature on the educative possibilities of historical novels seem to lend credence to great potential for increased cultural understanding and perhaps, transformation. “Historical fiction can provide students seeking to imagine what their past has to do with their present understandings of self and society. Historical Fiction offers both students and teachers explorations of difficult choices and human contradictions, as well as insight into the complexities of social life, in order to counterbalance the superficial coverage of human challenges” (van Heyer & Fidyk, 2007). While the criteria for what constitutes good historical fiction literature will be combed out in a later section, it is important to note that fiction has its own set of motives which both align with traditional education and forges its own path. As Richard Slotkin (2005) states:

There is no reason why, in principle, a novel may not have a research basis as good or better than that of scholarly history ... the truth the novel seeks is poetic rather than historiographical: it sacrifices fidelity to non-essential facts in order to create in the reader a vivid sense of what it may have been like to live among such facts – and also a sense of what those facts mean in some larger sense.” (p. 222, 225)

Fiction, in and of itself, is an art-form and historical fiction is a labor of love towards a historical event, person, or saga. Although readers may undergo some form of cultural understanding or transformation and thus, the use of historical fiction in education can be considered critical education; most readers of historical fiction do so for leisure or their own personal enjoyment, outside of the structured bounds of academia. Therefore, the next section will situate the literature on adult education and the use of fiction, yet later sections will seek to explore the non-formal learning perspective of readers and book-club members.

Fiction in Adult Education

While there are few known studies relating to the use of historical fiction in adult education, there are many which examine the general use of fiction (Jarvis, 2012; Gouthro & Holloway, 2013; Sandwell, 2003; Guy, 2007; Wright & Sandlin, 2009, Hoggan & Cranton, 2015; Tisdell & Cranton, 2007). This literature generally falls into three main categories: (1) how the leisure and/or enjoyment factor of literature and reading relates to learning (2) fiction is seen as a way to increase critical awareness surrounding social issues and diversity (Jarvis, 2012; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007) and (3) a focus on the role that empathy plays in the learner/readers learning process (Jarvis, 2012; Hoggan & Cranton, 2015). These will be explored below.

The first main theme in the literature is that through fiction, learners and readers can learn through enjoyment. In a study on how learners make meaning through popular culture and

media, Tisdell & Thompson (2007) argue that modes of media, including fiction, are effective tools in introducing critical pedagogy and diversity issues because “media is a source of pleasure. In short, it’s fun!” (p. 671). Christine Jarvis (2006) also makes note that fiction literature can provide a springboard for deeper discussion of a theme and the pleasurable aspect of reading may make for a less threatening way to initiate such a discussion.

A second recurring point in the academic literature is fictions potential to address issues of diversity and social justice. In their study on popular culture media, Tisdell & Cranton (2007) not only found that students were reframing their knowledge through the media they were presented with, but also that some students were able to “examine some of their prejudices and pre-conceived notions of *others*” (p.671). They note; “entertainment media can also challenge traditional norms, in (non-stereotypical) portrayals of characters of specific cultural groups of those who either do not represent the dominant culture, or who do not ascribe to its values (Tisdell & Thompson, 2007, p. 653). In a similar study on pre-service teachers, Gouthro & Holloway (2013) found that fiction was an effective tool to raise the social issue of diversity and concluded that it was a “powerful way to develop curriculum wherein students exercise agency from within the imaginative, critical choices they are able to make in their own learning” (p.64).

Lastly, the scholarly literature on the use of fiction in adult education found that fiction literature often elicited empathy with the fictional characters. In her article on *Fiction, empathy, and lifelong learning* (2012), Christine Jarvis postulates:

This analysis leads to a consideration of fictions capacity to promote an involuntary empathy that can help adult learners develop deeper understandings of difference and of excluded groups. It also shows that an understanding of the factors that inhibit the development of empathy and enable individuals to justify the sufferings of others could

be of value to educators. Finally, it suggests that ... empathetic anger is helpful for educators wanting to use the potential of fiction to encourage and promote action in the cause of social justice ...the literature on fiction and adult education sometimes claims that fictional engagement stimulates empathy, but expresses this more commonly as seeing the world through the eyes of others. Educators have suggested that studying fiction can promote a better understanding of marginalized others and greater critical social awareness. (p. 743)

As discussed in previous sections of this chapter, there is educative value in the empathetic relationship between reader and character. Hoggan & Cranton (2015) explain “by allowing the reader insight into the lived reality of character and the worlds different from one’s own, literature is uniquely capable of expanding one’s sympathies in a way that real life cannot do” (p.12).

Some adult educators believe that the combination of empathy through character relationship and the story-lines in fiction literature have to potential to promote transformational experiences (Hoggan & Cranton, 2015; Jarvis, 2012). Hoggan & Cranton (2015) conclude “these elements can serve as evocative objects that stimulate readers intellectually and emotionally, that concretize abstract concepts, and that potentially shape the way readers make sense of themselves and their experiences. In this way, the reading of fiction has the potential to contribute to the process of transformative learning” (p. 13). While Jarvis (2012) agrees that fiction can promote transformation, she argues that more research must be done on the “process which our learners undergo in their engagements with fiction” (p. 754).

Although this study does not intend to specifically look at learners in a structured academic setting, the scholarly research on the use of fiction in adult education assists in

situating the purpose of this study within the adult education field. Additionally, the analysis of this research establishes the areas where further research are needed and provides an argument for the usefulness of this study.

Evaluating Accuracy in Historical Fiction Literature

Although the previous two sections laid forth an argument of the educative potential of historical fiction literature, there are many critics to the practice (Hawking, 1983, p. 46; McTigue, Thornton, & Wise, 2012; Powers, 2003). Critics argue that fiction may not always be the most accurate portrayal of a historical event or time-period (Johnson, 2005). Fiction, by definition, is *imaginary* or *made up* stories and thus, the concept of historical fiction seems paradoxical. While previous sections outlined the educative benefits of historical fiction literature, there is some credence to be placed in the argument against it, for not all historical fiction is created equally. For this reason, if academic research is to be conducted, it is crucial to thoroughly evaluate the texts to be used; investigating the authors reputation for accuracy and reading reviews of their novels in peer reviewed journals (such as the Journal of Historical Fiction and the Historical Novel Society). Furthermore, it is important to review and evaluate the research methods used by authors of historical fiction. The process for evaluating historical fiction texts for accuracy is often referred to as *authentication*. Authentication refers to the process whereby a reader or evaluator assesses the veracity of an aspect of literature and verifies its historical claims, events, and the culture (language, clothing, gender roles) it portrays (McTigue, Thornton, & Wiese, 2012). More simply, it is a way of critically analyzing the believability of a piece of literature.

As mentioned, one way of authenticating a work of historical fiction literature is to assess the research process of the author. One of the most common and simplest practices in the

evaluation of an author's historical and cultural research is to examine the novel itself for references, research notes, and reviews. "I always feel more confident about the accuracy of a book when the author includes historical notes at the back" (Beck, et al. 2000, p. 548). In fact, most historical fiction novels have a postscript which details their motivations for writing the book, their research methods (which, if nowhere else, are often espoused through the acknowledgement section), and historical notes. Ken Follett, author of *The Century Trilogy*, includes a postscript section that details which of his characters are real historical figures and which are not. Furthermore, he provides a timeline which illustrates the actual dates of the historical event(s) and typically, a detailed overview of his research travels, methods, and nods to the expert scholars who corroborated his research. Of additional value in the authentication process is understanding the motivations of historical fiction authors. As in dissertation research, authors should confront their positionality and researcher bias.

While the authentication process can be extremely valuable in understanding the merit of a work of historical fiction, it is not always easy for a layperson (or an adult educator teaching historical lessons) to evaluate the legitimacy of historical novels (McTigue, Thornton, & Wiese; 2012). For this reason, a simpler way to evaluate works of historical fiction is to read peer reviewed evaluations by both historians and literary critics. The Historical Novel Society publishes reviews on nearly 1,000 books annually (historicalnovelsociety.com), while awards such as the Scott O'Dell Award and Walter Scott Prize are given to the best works in historical fiction. Furthermore, organizations such as the American Library Association also publish lists of the best works of historical fiction each year. These types of resources can make the daunting task of assessing works of historical fiction for accuracy and authenticity much simpler.

Book Clubs as Space for Learning

While this dissertation is grounded in the idea that quality historical fiction literature can be educative, a more specific purpose of this study is to evaluate readers who have discussed and engaged in dialogue surrounding these books in book groups or online book forums. Book groups were selected as a unit of study to align the study within the theoretical framework of critical public pedagogy. From a critical perspective, the dialogue and discussion surrounding these books has the potential to be its own educative process. The following section will discuss the academic literature surrounding book groups and book clubs.

While reading communities have existed as long as the written word, there has been a recent resurgence in interest and membership in the past few decades. This trend is largely due in part to the popularity of TV host Oprah Winfrey's book club; which in its height of popularity could increase sales of the selected text by \$2.5 million in weeks (Sedo, 2003). Additionally, the introduction of online reading communities and review websites has also increased the prevalence of book clubs. It's estimated that there are approximately 500,000 book clubs and 17 million book club members in the United States (Sedo, 2003). The phenomena of this vast network of readers is largely unexplored from a research perspective. However, in the literature that does exist, there seems to be a consensus that book clubs can be of great benefit to their members (Switzer & Barclay, 2012; Sedo, 2003; Alvarez-Alvarez, 2016; Mensah, 2009).

In general, book clubs are seen as an exciting way for members to discuss their reading in a social setting. "In a book club environment, readers are able to satisfy their need to increase their knowledge, nurture their love of books, and share the bonds of community" (Sedo, 2003, p. 11). The camaraderie that comes through discussing shared experiences, in this case literature, can make learning exciting in a way that textbooks and reading independently cannot.

Furthermore, much of the academic literature on book groups suggest that members who engage in book group discussions increase their critical thinking skills and in cases where a novel is written critically, their multicultural understanding (Mensah, 2009; Sedo, 2003; Switzer & Barclay, 2012). In a large study of pre-service teachers, Mensah (2009) found that book clubs, and specifically the discussion of selected texts, increased the multi-cultural awareness of participants. She concluded that the structure and theoretical framework of book clubs “promoted the kind of change in beliefs surrounding multicultural awareness” that facilitated transformative learning type experiences (Mensah, 2009, p. 1058). Switzer & Barclay (2012) echoed this sentiment in their study of business students participating in extra-curricular book clubs, finding that “whatever format a (book) club takes, readers have the potential, individually or as a group, to transform” (p. 329). These types of experiences are largely attributed to the increase of dialogue, debate, and discussion which enhances student’s critical thinking abilities. “Book clubs offer a way to facilitate critical thinking and reasoning skills” (Switzer & Barclay, 2012, p. 341).

In adult education, Alvarez-Alvarez (2016) conducted a large study in Spain exploring the experience of book club members. She concluded that book club participation spurred a number of different outcomes, including a deeper comprehension of the literature which generated lively debates and discussion. It was these discussions, she argues, that promotes critical thinking:

The debates show apparent conflicts in values among participants also have notable implications, as they open a social and cultural space for discussion of controversial issues among people with different experiences, ideologies and tendencies on equal terms

in a supportive, democratic and educated atmosphere, in which each person shares their knowledge with the group. (Alvarez-Alvarez, 2016, p. 240).

While there is some research on book clubs and their uses in specific academic fields, there is no known research focuses solely on historical fiction literature. Further research can be conducted exploring how the historical fiction genre effects book club members.

Online Discussion Forums

As will be discussed in a later section, adults often learn informally or non-formally outside of the contexts of formal education. This study seeks to understand the learning that takes place in book groups and online book discussion forums. This section will discuss the implications of learning that happens online and situate it within the framework of this study and adult education.

Research into online communities began in the mid-1990s with the rise of internet. Two decades later, and research into online communities and blogs is still an ever-changing field (Zeigler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2014). Porter (2004) argues that online communities fall under two categories: institution sponsored and peer-initiated. This study will examine peer-initiated, voluntary, online discussion forums, where the members of the community guide discussions and content.

In a study on group learning through online communities, Zeigler et al. (2014) found that “the conversations in these communities emerge from the members, are not guided by an expert, persist over time and enable researchers to see learning as it is happening rather than relying on retrospective accounts of past learning collected through self-reported data” (p. 64). This finding is important for two reasons. First, learning in these online communities has been shown to be self-directed and not coerced, which means that the participants are acting organically and of

their own free-will. Secondly, Zeigler et al. (2014) makes special note that these types of discussion forums are favorable for research, as the dialogue can be reviewed long after the discussion has taken place and the research can review the dialogue without interfering with the discussion in any way. “As discourse analysis does not require intervention or interaction with participants, the persistent conversations can be oriented as archived texts that provide insight into the learning that has occurred” (Zeigler, Paulus, & Woodside, p. 64).

While there is literature on social online communities; there is also a wealth of literature surrounding similar online experiences such as blogging (Park, Mi Heo, & Lee, 2011), social networks (Gunawardena, Flor, Gomez, & Sanchez, 2016), and formal education learning communities where discussion of literature is addressed (Song, 2003). In a study on the discussion of literature in online learning formats, Song (2003), found that learner-to-learner interactions without instructor input led to higher levels of achievement and more positive attitudes. A similar result was found in a study of online blogging communities (Park, Mi Heo, & Lee, 2011) which found that adult learners who engaged in blogging communities found the experiences enriching and found that the online format was a more meaningful learning environment than more formalized education. In studying learning interactions on social network platforms, Gunawardena, Flor, Gomez, & Sanchez (2016) found that knowledge construction took place in these online discussion forums.

Throughout the literature on online discussion forums, a common thread was the notion that meaning was being made through the conversations in a group learning setting (Zeigler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2014; Gunawardena, Flor, Gomez, & Sanchez, 2016; Park, Mi Heo, & Lee, 2011). These findings coincide with the principles of learning in book clubs, which was previously discussed, and the ideals non-formal learning in a group setting which will be

discussed in a later section. However, this literature supports the notion that meaning-making can occur through both in-person and online discussion and dialogue.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the theoretical framework of Critical Public Pedagogy and the adult education concept of non-formal learning. The following section will discuss each of these frameworks and situate it within the bounds of this study.

Critical Public Pedagogy

Critical public pedagogy is a philosophy which ascertains that learning can take place outside of the bounds of formal education and that education transmitted in such spaces can encourage students to examine how hegemony influences their consciousness (Zorrilla & Tisdell, 2016; Burdick & Sandlin, 2010). The concept of critical public pedagogy draws from the previously theorized ideas of critical theory and critical pedagogy. Before exploring the concept of critical public pedagogy, it is important to have a general understanding of these theoretical foundations.

Critical pedagogy is a concept championed by famed adult educator, Paulo Freire. In his groundbreaking book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), Freire argues that learners are embedded within and learn through their own social contexts. He argues that because of this contextual web, education should carry the focus of liberating the learner through their own praxis and bringing them to a point where they can critically analyze the outside forces which influence them. “Public pedagogy assumes that much teaching and learning, education and

miseducation, happen in public venues that include media and popular culture” (Zorrilla & Tisdell, 2016, p. 273).

Another foundation for critical public pedagogy is critical theory. Critical theory is the idea that educators should actively seek to educate students to identify the social constraints and contexts which affect their knowing and understanding of themselves. "Critical theory views thinking critically as being able to identify, and then to challenge and change, the process by which a grossly iniquitous society uses dominant ideology to convince people this is a normal state of affairs." (Brookfield, 2005, p. viii) In short, public pedagogy accepts that context influences ones understanding and critical theory challenges educators and learners to deconstruct and resist these forces.

Critical public pedagogy is built from the ideals and ideas of critical theory and public pedagogy. Defined by Zorrilla and Tisdell (2016), “critical public pedagogy examines spaces of resistance and the attempt to challenge power relations in popular culture and public spaces ... hence critical public pedagogy specifically encourages audiences to examine how systems of oppression and privilege as portrayed in public venues affect our view of reality and its distortions” (p. 276). The distinction between public pedagogy, which accepts that “various forms, processes, and sites of education and learning that occur beyond the realm of formal education institutions” (Sandlin et al, 2011, p. 2) and critical public pedagogy is simply that the public spaces are used to raise consciousness about social justice issues (Zorrilla & Tisdell, 2016).

Critical Public Pedagogy and Literature

By the definitions of public pedagogy and critical public pedagogy, literature is a public sphere where learning can take place. Under this interpretation, if a piece of literature is written

critically with the intention of dispelling the dominant discourse surrounding the topic, it can be considered a work of critical public pedagogy. According to Giroux (1994), people understand their own identities and the identities of others through their perception of themselves and others as perpetuated through and presented by popular culture. Therefore, in reading literature written from a non-dominant perspective, readers may confront previously unchallenged biases and beliefs. Furthermore, for a reader who hails from historically underrepresented or marginalized group; reading a piece of historical fiction written from a voice or perspective of someone like them could be liberating.

This study is founded upon the notion that history is written based on dominant discourse. As mentioned, critical public pedagogy seeks to unmask the forces of dominance and privilege which control ones contextual understanding (Sandlin, Wright, & Clark; 2013). Lee, Kozak, Nanchoo, Chen, Middendorf, & Gale (2013) explain the importance of this:

Dominant discourse is a diverse version of expectations -spoken, written, or behavioral that we all share within a cultural group ... People from both privileged and marginalized groups often accept the messages from the dominant discourses with or without awareness (Goodman, 2001). Privileged groups, having historically achieved relational power that defines cultural norms and expectations, maintain the dominant ideology ... On the other hand, people from subordinate groups often internalize oppression, which not only undermining their self-esteem and sense of empowerment but also developing personal and psychological characteristics that are pleasing to the people with power (p.23).

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, most formal education is constructed with some form of bias. Thus, counter narratives to the dominant discourse are crucial in achieving the liberation of

critical public pedagogy. These counter narratives can be presented in a number of ways, but literature may be an especially important mode as it can put the reader in the shoes of the *other* and cause an empathetic connection with non-dominant characters (Hoggan & Cranton, 2015; Jarvis, 2012). Sandlin, et al. (2015) explains “we learn who we are (or should be) with regard to race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on and whose cultures and identities are portrayed to us through public pedagogies” (p. 7). It can be argued that literature written from a non-dominant perspective could act as a critical public pedagogy which could assist in informing members of a historically underrepresented population of their group’s roles and actions in history. In this sense, non-dominant historical fiction literature could not only be a piece of resistance of the dominant ideology; informing the dominant culture of non-dominant perspectives; but it could unbound members of non-dominant groups from the constraints of the dominant culture. Kemp and Parrish (2010) explain the power in telling the historical stories of the non-dominant (through theatre), as they seek to “connect people to themselves, the seen and unseen, and remembered and dis-membered, parts of themselves with the goal of empowering learner-participants to acquire knowledge for others” (p. 55).

According to Mezirow and Associates (2000) “imagination is central to understanding the unknown, it is the way we examine alternative interpretations of our experience by trying on another’s point of view” (p.20). Through historical fiction literature, readers can envelope themselves in the stories of *others*, causing empathy for these fictional characters and thus, a better understanding of the non-dominant experience. As a space of critical public pedagogy, literature written from an underrepresented perspective affords these opportunities to a reader and thus, is incredibly educative in its own right. However, as the following section will discuss, these reading experiences can be further enhanced through the principles of dialogue.

Dialogue

Central to the idea of critical public pedagogy is that learners (readers) must participate in active dialogue committed to critique and activism (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013). Giroux (2004) argues that through the goals of public pedagogy “a society must constantly nurture the possibilities for self-critique, collective agency, and forms of citizenship in which people play a fundamental role in critically discussing, administrating, and shaping the material relations of power and ideological forces that bear down on their everyday lives” (p. 500). For this reason, book clubs and online book discussion forums which discuss non-dominant historical literature are being studied for elements of critical public pedagogy. In her study on the educative possibilities of historical fiction literature, Ruth Sandwell (2003) argues that failure to engage in dialogue exiles students from the crucially important contexts of community. It is in these spaces of discussion and debate where cultural understanding can be enhanced. The role of community will be further addressed in the next section with regards to non-formal learning settings, such as book clubs and online book discussion forums.

Non-Formal Learning

This study is grounded in the idea that non-formal learning occurs through book groups and online book discussion forums. According to many adult educators, the principles and study of non-formal learning is useful in understanding how adults learn and engage outside of formal education (Jubas, 2011; Zeigler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2014; Taylor, 2006; Biniecki, 2015). This section will begin by defining non-formal education and will continue by discussing the principles of non-formal education as they relate to adult education and more specifically, fiction literature and this study.

Throughout the literature, there are many different definitions of non-formal learning and many terms which are used interchangeably with non-formal learning. For example, informal learning, incidental learning, and free-choice learning are all terms used in the literature interchangeably with non-formal education. For the purposes of this study, non-formal education will be defined as an organized, intentional, voluntary, and structured learning opportunity, often for personal enrichment, that takes place outside of formal education systems (Shrestha, Wilson, & Singn, 2008; Taylor, 2011). By this definition, the learning which takes place in book groups and online book discussion forums is non-formal education; as readers intentionally and voluntarily read books and participate in the structured discussion surrounding them.

The literature surrounding non-formal education generally takes a constructivist view of education and adopts elements of self-directed and experiential learning (Tisdell & Thompson, 2007; Taylor, 2006; Jubas, 2011; McLean, 2013). “Human beings do not find knowledge, but construct it” (Tisdell & Thompson, 2007, p. 656). Jubas (2011) explains “as people live they continually learn. Most of this is unplanned, and it is often tactic, but it is very powerful” (p. 229). Additionally, many adult educators note that non-formal education is often engaged in for personal enrichment or enjoyment purposes (Taylor, 2006; Biniecki, 2015; McLean 2013). Non-formal education often takes place in learner-centered, non-hierarchical setting (Taylor, 2006). Thus, those that participate in non-formal learning are often doing so because they have voluntarily chosen, of their own free-will, to learn. This type of learning directly contradicts formal education systems which are often mandatory, bureaucratically and hierarchically managed, and convey knowledge through a banking system model (Taylor, 2006; Shrestha, Wilson, & Singn, 2008).

The empirical literature studying participants in non-formal education systems also had some common threads. One such commonality is that the learning that took place in these settings was non-linear and new information was received and constructed with the participant's prior understandings. In a study of the learning outcomes of non-formal learners, Biniiecki (2015) found that "the knowledge construction process for these participants was not a linear one. Participants past experiences and projection of a future use, which may or may not relate to intention, may be present during the non-formal program or post-gram" (p. 128). Other studies have shown that participants articulated themselves as co-constructors of knowledge in these non-formal learning settings (Biniiecki, 2015; Jubas, 2006; Shrestha, Wilson, & Singn, 2008). Biniiecki (2015) explains that in these settings "knowledge is individually constructed but socially mediated" (p.129).

Based on the existing literature, an argument can be made that book clubs meet the criteria for a non-formal learning environment. While there is no known study that examines the non-formal learning through book clubs centered around historical fiction literature, there is some theoretical and empirical research which explores how fiction and other arts-based modalities can be non-formal learning. This will be discussed in the next section.

Fiction in Non-Formal Learning

Literature exists which examines the idea that arts and popular culture can be considered forms of non-formal education. This study is specifically investigating the role that historical fiction literature discussed in book club or online book discussion forums can act as non-formal education. The following section will address this body of literature.

In a study on arts-based learning, Lipson-Lawrence (2008) presented an argument that learning can happen informally through reading literature and interacting with other forms of

critical art. She argues that “the arts have always played a prominent role in education for social change both inside and outside of formal education” (p. 71). This sentiment is echoed by Spehler & Slattery (1999) who argue that “prophetic poets, visual artists, dancers, actors, lyricists, and novelists challenge us to investigate – not ignore – such despair, injustice and paralysis” (p. 2). Thus, critical artistic expression, which would include historical fiction written from a non-dominant perspective, is intended to disturb the status-quo and enlighten the viewer or reader to injustices.

Lipson-Lawrence (2008) and others (Jubas, 2006; McLean, 2013) argue that literature and other creative works invite dialogue which focuses on social justice issues, confronting *otherness*, and ultimately, understanding difference (p. 73). Much of this literature argues that non-formal education and critical artwork, including fiction, can increase a reader or viewers critical awareness (Lipson-Lawrence, 2008; Shrestha, Wilson, & Singn, 2008; Biniecki, 2015). “Outside of the context of formal higher education, the use of fiction can bolster explorations of social issues” (Jubas, 2006, p. 67). Javis (2000) found that arts and humanities non-formal learning encouraged critical thinking skills in participants and reported that through studying fiction, subjects reported reading future texts with a more critical eye (p. 535).

The literature on non-formal education provides support for the research aims of this study; as it presents evidence not only that critical historical fiction literature can be a subject of non-formal education but additionally, that book clubs and online book discussion forums meet the criteria of non-formal education settings. Paired with the theoretical framework of critical public pedagogy, this study will seek to explore the experiences of book club and online book discussion forums who have read critical historical literature and the results of the study will be evaluating using these theoretical lenses.

Summary

This chapter presents a synopsis of the relevant scholarly literature as it pertains to this study. In addition, the literature reviewed provides an argument for the purpose and necessity of this study by positioning the importance of the elements being studied and also providing documentation of the gaps in the literature. I began this chapter by discussing the problems surrounding K-12 history education and the necessity to challenge the dominant discourse of history. I then presented literature which evaluates the educative potential of non-dominant historical fiction literature and the literature which reviews the use of fiction in adult education. Next, I presented literature which discussed learning through dialogue in book groups and online book discussion forums; which demonstrated that deep learning can occur in these settings. Lastly, I discussed the literature on the theoretical frameworks of critical public pedagogy and non-formal learning and explored how these frameworks would inform my study. In each section, I discussed areas which were not covered by the relevant scholarly research and argued how my study may address some of the gaps in the existing literature.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how readers of critical historical fiction who participate in book groups or online reading forums perceive that the literature and the discussion of it has affected their learning and reshaped their historical understanding. The study focused on those who have read literature which details historical events from multiple viewpoints including those which provide an alternate to the dominant discourse. Specifically, this study focused on readers who have read and discussed *The Century Trilogy* by Ken Follett either in an online discussion forum or an in-person book group. The purpose of this research is to understand the experience these readers have while they are reading and discussing historical literature which may contradict or contrast the dominant discourse.

This study is grounded on the assumption, as detailed in chapters one and two, that K-12 education in the US focuses heavily on the dominant discourse surrounding historical events, and the majority of people know little beyond the history from the perspective of what was learned in the K-12 system (Sandwell, 2003; Stanton, 2015). Due to the deficiency in K-12 education, non-formal educative spaces, such as online and face to face book groups could possibly act as a space for critical public pedagogy (Giroux, 2004; Sandlin, Shultz, & Burdick, 2010; Zorrilla & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, this study sought to understand the experience of readers who have participated in book groups or online reading forums. More specifically, the study sought to understand the experience of readers who have read *The Century Trilogy* books by Ken Follett, which are historical fiction novels that use multiple perspectives, including non-dominant perspectives. The following questions guide this inquiry:

1. How did the readers understanding of the historical events portrayed in Ken Follett's *Century Trilogy* alter after reading and discussing the books?
2. In what ways did the readers connection with the books characters impact their understanding of the historical events or groups of people represented? How did this connection influence their critical reflection of the text?
3. After reading and discussing the books, what was the readers experience in confronting and reconstructing their previously held assumptions about the historical events or groups of people portrayed in the books?

This chapter will discuss the methodology used to answer these questions. First, the research paradigm will be discussed, which focuses on the use of qualitative research. Next, the methodology and research design will be provided in detail. This section will include a note on researcher positionality, the rationale and the method behind the selection of participants, and the methodology of the data collection process. After these matters are stated, I will provide an overview of the verification of this study; including confirmability, dependability, transferability, and credibility.

Qualitative Research Paradigm

The purpose of qualitative research is to understand a process in context and/or how participants make meaning of their life experience or a particular phenomenon. As such, qualitative approach was the most appropriate approach for this study, since it focuses on their experience of making meaning of history through critical dialogue and discussion from the perspective of the participants (Patton, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study sought to develop a holistic account of the experience of the participant (Creswell, 2014). This qualitative research study aimed to understand the multiple realities and perspectives of participants as they

made meaning out of their experiences and those that shape their worldview, particularly around understanding history. Qualitative research is not intended to be generalizable as it studies the particular in depth; the samples are purposeful and exploratory on an individual level (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A qualitative design was specifically chosen for this study because it made use of data which got to the heart of the experiences of readers and their construction on knowledge.

As with any research method, the paradigm of qualitative research has some underlying assumptions and characteristics. One characteristic of qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection. Data is therefore mediated and interpreted through the researcher in the sense that the researcher conducts interviews and observations and is generally present in doing so, rather than collecting data through a quantitative design such as a survey instrument. To this end, the data analysis of qualitative research is an inductive process; meaning researchers build their abstractions and themes through their interpretation as they code and analyze the data throughout the study. Benefits to this method include the ability of the researcher to be adaptive as the data is being collected; the researcher is able to read nonverbal cues, be reactive to verbal communication, analyze some aspects of data immediately, and check with participants for clarity and accuracy of their responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2016).

Another characteristic of qualitative data is that it is focused on the context and process of how participants make meaning. The qualitative paradigm for research is focused on richly descriptive data that brings deeper understanding to a particular phenomenon. For this reason, any conclusions derived from qualitative data are written up to draw insight into only the particular arena being studied.

An Interpretive Study and Critical Research

In light of the discussion above on the different types of qualitative research, this study stands at the juncture of an interpretive study (Merriam, 2002) and a critical research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interpretive qualitative research is “interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, this meaning is mediated through the researcher as instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive” (Merriam, 2002, p.6). This type of research is interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, what meaning they attribute to their experiences, and how they construct their worldview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is these types of questions that this study sought to understand in relation to readers of non-dominant historical fiction literature and thus, why this type of qualitative research was selected for this study.

While this study followed the methods and principles of qualitative research, it also was guided by a critical theoretical framework and thus, research was conducted and data was analyzed using a critical lens. Critical qualitative research aims to uncover the “social, cultural, and psychological assumptions that structure and limit our ways of thinking and being in the world” (Merriam, 2002, p. 8). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain:

critical research has become a broad term that covers a number of orientations to research, all of which seek to not just understand what is going on, but also to critique the way things are in the hopes of bringing about a more just society ... Questions are asked about who has power, how it’s negotiated, what structures in society reinforce the current distribution of power, and so on. Critical perspectives generally assume that people unconsciously accept things the way they are and in doing so reinforce the status quo ...

Critical research seeks to make these dynamics visible so that people can challenge power relations. (p. 60-61).

Merriam (2002) summarizes “the ultimate objective of this type of critique is to free ourselves from these constraints, to become empowered to change our social context and ourselves” (p. 9). To this end, this study followed a critical framework and the researcher, as an instrument of data collection, sought out whether participants were able to unmask the hegemonic forces that influenced recorded history after reading *The Century Trilogy* and discussing the book in book groups or online book forums.

Background of the Researcher

Creswell (2009) states that qualitative research is an interpretive process in which the researchers interpretations “cannot be separated from their own backgrounds, history, contexts, and prior understandings” (p.176). When engaging in qualitative research, the researcher must “identify, explain and justify the epistemological stance adopted” (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). As the researcher and the primary instrument in data collection and analysis, it was imperative that I engaged in a critical self-reflection of my own background and culturally constructed ideas of knowledge. Accordingly, in an attempt to be transparent, I will briefly share my own personal philosophy and attempt to divulge any research biases that may be pertinent to this study.

First and foremost, it is important for me to self-identify my positionality as a white, educated, middle-class woman who was raised in a rural, middle-class household, with educated parents. Thus, my construction of knowledge and my worldview have always been filtered through this lens. Furthermore, I strongly align with the ideas of critical theory and critical public pedagogy. In my educative roles, both as a college administrator and an adjunct faculty

member, I actively seek to foster critical thinking, critical reflection, and influence and understanding of hegemony in my students.

The purpose of my study was to seek out the experiences of readers who are presented with alternative viewpoints to the dominant historical record. It is important as the researcher to note that I actively seek out and consume these types of historical fiction novels. As an avid reader, I could be considered an “insider” in the world of book groups and forums. This positionality may help me gain credibility with the participants. Furthermore, my positionality as a “book worm” may have provided me with a greater ability to generate thoughtful, meaningful, and multifaceted questions. While insider insight may provide certain advantages, I was also cautious that this did not cause a bias in the research; as I may have unintentionally asked leading questions based on my own understandings and knowledge. It was important that I was mindful of asking open-ended questions and that I truly listened to the experiences of my participants. Despite my positionality and the aforementioned possible biases, I was committed to conducting my study with integrity.

Participant Selection

Qualitative research participants are typically chosen according to a purposeful set of criteria. Participants for this research study were purposefully selected from participants whom will best help understand the problem being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Unlike quantitative research which seeks to study random samples, qualitative studies rely on *purposeful sampling*; which seeks information rich participants where one can learn a great deal about subject matter (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The main tenant of purposeful sampling is choosing participants for interviews and observation that provide the best hope in giving the researcher the data that will answer their research questions. Given that, these will be discussed in detail.

Interview Participant Criteria

The following inclusion criteria guided the selection of interview participants. First, the participant must have read at least one of *The Century Trilogy* books by Ken Follett. I did not limit my participants on their reading all three books, as each book can be read as a stand-alone novel without knowledge of the prequel(s) or sequel(s). Also, since my focus is on book clubs, which often assign one book per month/session, I did not want to prematurely exclude participants in book groups who were not assigned the entire series. Additionally, I did not put a time limit on the amount of time that had passed since reading the book, as this study sought to understand whether or not a participant had a deep connection or experience from reading the books. It is an assumption of this study that readers who have made these types of deep, meaningful connections to the reading will remember their experiences whether they have recently read the texts or whether they read them when they were first published (all within the past ten years).

With that said, the crux of this study is not only that the readers have read the novels, but that they have engaged in active dialogue and discussion about the books. Therefore, participants must have had participated in some form of book or reading group. Since the framework of this study is non-formal learning, there were no restrictions on the type of book group or online book forum and thus, the guidelines of this study simply state that the participant must have critically assessed the book with other readers.

Participants were sought using a number of different strategies. First, a search was conducted using social media. I made a post on social media asking if any of my contacts participated in book groups (online or in-person). I also asked my contacts to share my post with their social media friends or “tag” any of their friends whom they know to be involved in book

groups. Secondly, posted a similar request on the following Facebook pages: Ken Follett Fan Club, Historical Fiction Book Club, Historical Fiction Book Lovers, and the Historical Novel Society (all of which I am a member). Most fruitful were the further inquiries for participants I made through goodreads.com by sending messages to members who have posted lengthy reviews on the book discussion forums that accompany the review pages for *The Century Trilogy*. To be sure, the method of selection of participants could lead to a bias in this study, as generally people are self-selecting historical fiction to read and therefore are potentially already searching for further knowledge on a given subject. A summary of my interview participants, including how they were located and their demographic data is shown in figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1 Interview Participants

Participant Name	Geographical Location	Age	Gender	Selection Method
Leslie	Washington D.C.	65	Female	Facebook
Chocka	St. Louis, MO (Bulgaria)	64	Female	Goodreads.com
Scott	Boston, MA	58	Male	Goodreads.com
Rachel	Kansas City, MO	22	Female	Facebook
Hans	Vienna, Austria	34	Male	Goodreads.com
Jean	Paris, France	52	Male	Goodreads.com
Kaycie	Switzerland	26	Female	Goodreads.com
Douglas	Portland, Oregon	36	Male	Goodreads.com
Jim	New York, New York	57	Male	Goodreads.com
Mark	New York, New York	64	Male	Goodreads.com
Carolina	Poland	33	Female	Goodreads.com

Maren	Germany	47	Female	Goodreads.com
Valerie	Seattle, Washington	42	Female	Goodreads.com
Judith	Australia	43	Female	Goodreads.com
Dee	United States	57	Female	Goodreads.com
Alania	Australia (Chicago, IL)	60	Female	Goodreads.com

Online Book Forum Criteria

Documents are one of the main forms of data in qualitative research, including online documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study used book review discussion thread posts made on the online book review website *goodreads.com* for analysis. As previously mentioned, on *goodreads.com*, there are over 360,000 reviews of The Century Trilogy books. Therefore, some degree of criteria must have been implemented to ensure manageability. For this reason, restrictions on the selection and number of forum posts were well-defined to maintain an unbiased selection and uphold the integrity of this study.

Goodreads.com is a social network for readers where members can review and discuss books. Members can add friends to their network; allowing the member and their friends to share their reviews of books they have read and are currently reading. Furthermore, book reviews and book discussion threads are made on this site are public, and therefore can be read by anyone around the globe. This study focused solely on book discussion threads, as it is in these spaces where dialogue takes place which could possibly be analyzed for elements of non-formal learning and critical public pedagogy.

As previously mentioned, *goodreads.com* is a vast social network with hundreds of thousands of reviews on The Century Trilogy. Each of the three books has 40-100 book group

discussion threads associated with their review page. This study reviewed 9 of these discussion threads (3 per book) and will followed clear criteria to ensure the most unbiased selection. First, only general book review discussion threads were chosen (as opposed to specialized topics surrounding a particular character, for example). Secondly, the general book review discussion threads with the most comments were chosen; as it is active dialogue we were looking to analyze. Lastly, for the sake of the researcher, only discussion threads in English were analyzed.

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

As qualitative research focuses on gathering thick, rich descriptions of a participants lived experience, data collection methods were implemented to best capture this type of data. Merriam (2002) states that interviews, document analysis, and observation are the three main data collection methods of qualitative research (p. 12). This study sought to uncover rich, meaningful data utilizing two of these methods: interviews of book group participants who have read *The Century Trilogy* book(s) and document analysis of online book discussion threads on the website *goodreads.com*.

It is important to note that the use of online documents as data is a relatively new and ever-changing form of qualitative analysis. Many researchers believe that online discussion(s) can provide a wealth of rich data for a qualitative research study (Zeigler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2014; Park, Heo, & Lee, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). With this said, there are some factors which must be considered when accessing online data sources. These issues, and the method for analysis for both interview data and online data, will be described in detail in the sections below.

Interviews

This study utilized semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. The benefit to conducting either a basic interpretive study or a critical research e study through

semi-structured interview questions is that it allows for an interpretive process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The researcher is able to build upon the information the participant provides, allowing the researcher to delve deeper into the experience of the participant and truly get at the driving forces behind their meaning-making process in semi structured interviews. . “In qualitative research, it is the rich, thick descriptions, the words (not numbers) that persuade the reader of the trustworthiness of the findings” (Merriam, 2002, p. 15).

For the purpose of this study, I relied on interviews with book club members who have read and discussed any of the three *Century Trilogy* books. Interviews are especially useful to gather information about behavior and feelings when we are unable to observe it ourselves or when we seek to learn about past events that cannot be easily replicated (Merriam, 2009). As discussed above in the participant selection section, I interviewed 16 participants for this study. These participants were interviewed primarily by phone, as my participant selection took place on an international forum. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using transcription software.

Interviews followed a semi-structured format; where a set number of interview questions were asked but the answer to each prompted follow-up questions. Interview questions sought to explore the experience of the reader and were cautiously worded in an attempt to not ask leading questions. A summary of interview questions can be found in Appendix 1.

Once the transcript was prepared I analyzed it using the constant comparison method. Merriam (2009) contends that “data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data. And making sense out of the data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read – it is the process of making meaning” (p. 176). Data was analyzed using the theoretical frameworks of non-formal learning and critical public

pedagogy as a guide, while also looking for data which serves the purpose of answering the research questions (Merriam, 2009).

Online Book Discussion Forums

In addition to interviews, this study used data collected as documents from the online book forums of *goodreads.com*. In the era of the World Wide Web, researchers are able to analyze online forums, chat groups, and other forms of interaction online. Merriam & Tisdell (2016) explain “online data collection offers an electronic extension of familiar research techniques, widening the scope of data available to the researcher” (p.185). Many studies suggest that online group discussion can be positive and enhance conceptual learning (Zeigler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2014; Park, Heo, & Lee, 2011). The use of analysis of book discussion forums was an important element to this study, as it allowed the researcher to see discussion and dialogue that took place in an organic setting, without the intrusion of a researcher, which surrounds the themes of *The Century Trilogy* books. Furthermore, it was an important tool in triangulating the interview data for common themes, as the text of the online book discussions dialogue was analyzed and coded according to emerging themes, much like the interview data. Song (2003) suggests that the use of online data and online interaction is a useful supplement to interview data in qualitative research.

With this said, it must be noted that the use of online data in qualitative research is relatively new and evolving both in the realms of possibility and in the parameters for how to ethically handle such research. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) the internet provides a wealth of interactive and dynamic data that can act as an extension of traditional qualitative methods (such as document review). However, it must be noted that there are concerns surrounding the use of online discussion forums as data; as the researcher is not present to make

inferences about the context of the discussion. Additionally, although these discussions were held in a public forum, the participant is unable to consent to the use of their words for a research study. An additional consideration in online discussion, as with document analysis, is people often take more time to reflect on their written words than they would in an in-person interview and thus, their communications could be artificially enhanced (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These concerns were recognized by the researcher and taken into consideration when analyzing and describing any data collected through these mediums.

Qualitative Data Analysis

In qualitative research, it is critical to discuss the plan for data analysis. Once the interview process and document processes were complete, I analyzed data for themes and common concepts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data collected for this study was analyzed using the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of non-formal learning and critical public pedagogy. Therefore, the analysis looked for any themes (or lack thereof) pertaining to the meaning-making through the non-formal learning that takes place in book groups and online book forums. Additionally, the analysis of the data looked to see if any critical reflection, critical dialogue, and possibly, the deconstruction of hegemonic forces or emergence of challenges to power structures was examined.

Qualitative data analysis involves the identification, examination, and interpretation of patterns, relationships, and themes found in the data set (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, the method of qualitative data analysis further informs how any themes identified helped answer the study's research questions. As the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, the researcher plays the critical role in determining how and through what lens to analyze the data. This section will discuss in detail how data from both online book discussion

forums and participant interviews was analyzed, specifically as it relates to the theoretical framework of critical public pedagogy and the qualitative critical research paradigm.

Interview Data Analysis

As detailed earlier in this chapter, interviews took place using a semi-structured format. Interviews took place over the phone or skype. In each of these interviews, notes were taken by the researcher and audio recordings were utilized and the recordings were transcribed. According to Creswell (2009) qualitative analysis is an ongoing process where the researcher is consistently reflecting on the data; both while collecting it and during final analysis. Taking this into account, I used Creswell's (2009) six step method to analyze data qualitative data collected from interview participants.

The first two steps consist of organizing and reviewing the data; collecting notes and transcriptions and evaluating these records for any general themes that appear. From this, the third step is to code the data. Coding is essentially the process of categorizing the data sets (text) into common themes (Creswell, 2009). For the purposes of this study, data was coded to include common and emergent themes, as well as themes that address the larger theoretical framework of critical public pedagogy. A fourth step in this analysis process is to generate descriptions, or "detailed rendering of information about people, places, or events in a setting" (p.189). Through this process, the most important few themes (those that will be selected to discuss in the research findings) were brought to the forefront. In the fifth step, I created a table to convey my research findings in a clear manner, highlighting the key themes and depicting how they interrelate. Lastly, I drew interpretations from the data; writing up conclusions and explaining what meaning has come from the study.

Document Analysis of Online Book Forums

Like the data analysis for the interview data, the document analysis portion of this study took a thematic approach. As previously detailed, this study examined *goodreads.com* discussion forums surrounding *The Century Trilogy* books. For the purpose of this study, these discussion forums were analyzed as documents and were selected based on the chronological and substantive criteria which was discussed previously in the data collection section.

As mentioned, the analysis of documents mirrored that of the interview data; including the use of Creswell's (2009) method for analysis of qualitative data. As described above, the model utilizes six steps in analyzing qualitative data:

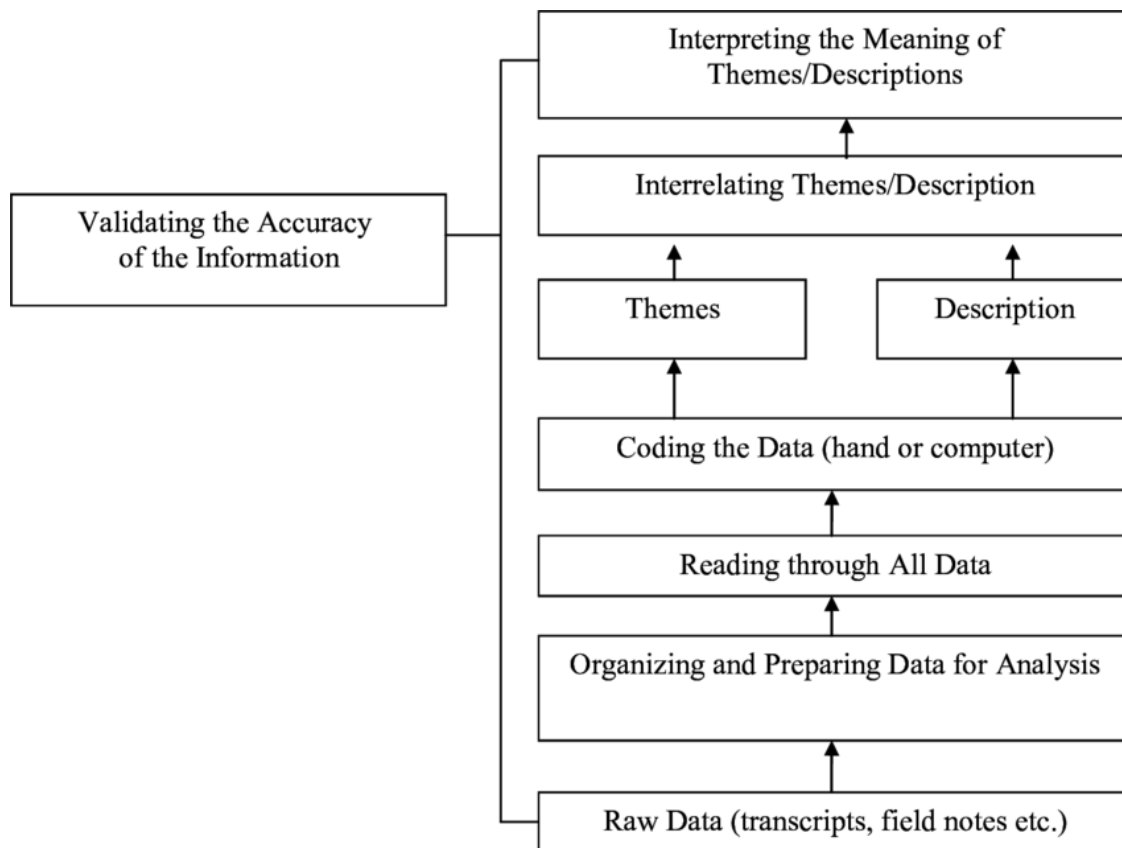


Figure 3.2 (Creswell & Creswell, 2009, p. 185)

Essentially, the document data derived from *goodreads.com* was analyzed for themes. In qualitative research, thematic analysis of the data allows the researcher to determine which data

is relevant and which is not (Bowen, 2009; Creswell, 2009; Corbin & Strass, 2008). However, it is important to note that while the researcher is able to discern important data and themes based on their own understanding of the research question; they must not cherry pick data that meets their hypothesis. Bowen (2009) explains:

Document analysis, is not a matter of lining up a series of excerpts from printed material to convey whatever idea comes to the researchers mind. Rather, it is a process of evaluating documents in such a way that empirical knowledge is produced and understanding is developed. (p.33)

According to Creswell (2009) the process of data analysis involves making sense of the text, like “peeling back the layers of an onion (and) making an interpretation of the larger meaning of data” (p.183).

The goal for the document analysis portion of this study was to understand the emerging themes from the online book discussion threads. I coded the data and, based on premise of basic interpretive qualitative research (Creswell, 2009) came to highlight four to five core themes. While this study utilized the process of basic interpretive qualitative research and its data is analyzed accordingly, it also was informed by a critical lens, which will be discussed below.

Critical Data Analysis

As this study is informed by the theoretical framework of critical public pedagogy, both interview and document data were analyzed using a critical lens. To achieve this, a method of critical discourse analysis was applied to the data analyzing strategy. Discourse analysis is a form of qualitative content analysis meant to evaluate themes, topics, and central terms (Neuendorf, 2002; Van Dijk, 2001). Neuendorf (2002) explains that discourse analysis seeks to “engage in characteristics of manifest language and word use, description of topics in media

texts, through consistency and connection of words to theme analysis of content and the establishment of central terms” (p.5).

Critical discourse analysis seeks to understand how power is wielded through text and discourse; how does language legitimize dominant ideology and perpetuate it further? Van Dijk (2001) explains that critical discourse analysis is “a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in social and political context” (p. 352). Thus, the use of discourse and/or text can also be used to uncover power structures. “Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile, and makes it possible to thwart it” (Focault, 1978, p. 1010). Central to this study are both existing dominant discourse (the formal historical record taught in schools) and the attempts to dispel dominant discourse (non-dominant historical fiction and the discourse/discussion surrounding it). Therefore, it only makes sense to apply a critical lens and critical discourse analysis to the methodology of this study.

To utilize critical discourse analysis in the data analysis of interview and document data, I employed a dual strategy of both looking for emerging themes and also evaluated the data for predetermined themes, as they related to the critical implications of this study. Predetermined themes such as hegemony, power structures, power relations, marginalization, and any resistance to such institutions were evaluated and coded accordingly.

Verification Strategies

Every research study requires strategies for verification. For qualitative research, verification strategies are enacted in an attempt to construct research that is trustworthy. Trustworthiness is a term used in qualitative research which encompasses all of the virtues of

qualitative data: dependability, confirmability, and applicability. Furthermore, steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness, which means “the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings” (Creswell, 2009, p.190). For this dissertation, methods were taken to enhance trustworthiness which included the processes of member checks and triangulation of data sets, as well as keeping detailed field notes and recorded interviews. These strategies will be explained in the next section.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability in qualitative research refers to whether the results of the research can be supported by the methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 as cited by Creswell, 2014). There are a number of strategies researchers can use to enhance the dependability and confirmability of a study. One strategy for ensuring dependability is for the researcher to keep detailed field notes that outline how data was collected and how the researcher came to identify themes in the research. Then in the final report of the research, the researcher can identify the research strategy and hopefully, dispel any perceived biases. I cross-referenced my field notes to my interview recording transcripts to look any obvious mistakes in transcription.

There are also other strategies that are used to enhance dependability. A second strategy is making use of member checks with participants. Member checks is the process of sending the final report back to the participant to ensure that they feel they were adequately represented. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I utilized this strategy of member checks to ensure that the themes derived from the transcribed interviews capture the participant’s words properly and to their satisfaction (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 2002). A third strategy is to make use of data triangulation. Triangulation is the process of examining evidence from different data sources to ensure that the themes derived from the data are common to the difference sources (Creswell &

Creswell, 2018). I triangulated the thematic data from the interviews with the data captured in analyzing online book discussions.

Transferability

The goal of qualitative research is to provide enough deep and meaningful data which can add insight to a particular set of research questions, yet this data is not intended to be generalizable to people and settings other than those being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The purpose of qualitative research is to study the particular in depth, and to examine a particular phenomenon embedded in context and time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), not to offer generalizability. For this reason, qualitative research looks to provide transferability rather than generalizability, meaning that it is up to the reader of the report to determine if the findings would be applicable to another situation. Transferability refers to the ability which the findings of a study can be transferred, or inform, another study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Although by nature, qualitative research is not meant to be generalized, it can sometimes be generalized to a broader theory (Creswell, 2014). Thus, there are some strategies to increase transferability in qualitative research. One such strategy is to provide copious amounts of details in notes and in the qualitative write up. Rich, thick descriptions should be used to describe the data; including plenty of background information on the participants. Secondly, triangulation of data sources can help add to the internal validity of a qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This study employed both of these strategies to increase validity and ultimately transferability within the field of adult education and the frameworks of non-formal education and critical public pedagogy.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a comprehensive overview of the methodology for this study. After providing a summation of the purpose statement and research questions guiding this study, I outlined the research model. Additionally, I provided a statement on my own positionality as it relates to this study. I concluded by outlining my methods for participant selection, data collection and analysis, and the verification strategies utilized. The next chapter of this dissertation will delve into the depth of the research itself; including rich descriptions of the interview and document data.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore how readers of critical historical fiction who participate in book groups or online reading forums perceive that the literature and the discussion of it has affected their learning and reshaped their historical understanding. The study focuses on those who have read literature which details historical events from multiple viewpoints including those which provide an alternate to the dominant discourse. Specifically, this study focuses on readers who have read and discussed *The Century Trilogy* by Ken Follett either in an online discussion forum or an in-person book group. The purpose of this research is to understand the experience these readers have had while reading and discussing historical literature which may contradict or contrast the dominant discourse. The following questions guide this inquiry:

1. How did the readers' understanding of the historical events portrayed in Ken Follett's *Century Trilogy* change after reading and discussing the books?
2. In what ways did the readers' connection with the books' characters impact their understanding of the historical events or groups of people represented, and how did this connection influence their critical reflection of the text?
3. After reading and discussing the books, what was the readers' experience in confronting and reconstructing their previously held assumptions about the historical events or groups of people portrayed in the books?

As discussed in the last chapter, to investigate these questions, I utilized a two-prong methodological approach of: (1) conducting a qualitative analysis of in depth participant interviews and (2) conducting an interpretive analysis of posts made on online book discussion

groups obtained from goodreads.com. These two data sets were analyzed using the constant comparison method and also through the lens of the theoretical frameworks of this study; critical public pedagogy and non-formal learning.

In the first section of this chapter, I provide a brief synopsis of the books (as I have earlier) to help the reader be better prepared to focus on the findings of the study, a summary of the participants, and some contextual information about some aspects and findings related to the study overall. Next, I will highlight an interview with a participant whose life story and connection to *The Century Trilogy* books merits a deeper investigation because of her unique experiences and perspectives on the history portrayed in the books. In the third section I will provide a detailed discussion of the findings as they relate to the literature itself, while the fourth section relates to the findings related to their new learning.

Book and Participant Summary and Overall Context

In order to help the reader more easily follow the findings discussed in this chapter, here I provide a brief summary of the books, and then a participant summary, and some general information in regard to the findings in order to provide context.

Trilogy Book Summary

As noted earlier Ken Follett's three-book trilogy is the focus of this study. The trilogy was selected for this study because it utilizes the method of multiple viewpoints and follows characters, and the same families of characters, throughout the trilogy series; all with differing nationalities, socio-economic status, gender, and race.

Book One. *Fall of Giants*. In the first novel, *Fall of Giants*, Follett leads readers through the events leading up to and through World War I. In this novel, Follett introduces

readers to the main families: the Williams/Leckwith family who are a poor, British, mining family, the Fitzherberts, whom are British aristocratic nobility, the Peshkov brothers who are Russian peasants prior to the Russian Revolution, the VonUlrich family which represents the German and Austrian perspective, and the prosperous Dewar family of Buffalo, New York in America. The first novel not only introduces these characters, but places them within the historical events and contexts which allow Follett to delve into the rise of the First World War, the British Suffragette Movement, and the Russian Revolution. Included in the cast of characters for this novel are fan favorites (as will be detailed later in this chapter) Ethel Leckwith, who rose from the simple beginnings of a house servant to become suffragette leader and eventually a British MP, Walter VonUlrich, a German aristocrat and political insider who tries desperately to stop the trajectory towards World War I, and Grigori Peshkov, a poor orphan turned Russian Revolution and WWI hero. This book interconnects many of the main characters to demonstrate the socio-political forces which caused World War I.

Book Two. *Winter of the World.* The second book, *Winter of the World*, continues to follow these five main families, including previously introduced characters and their children, through the rise of Fascism, the Spanish Civil War, and World War II. Some of the main characters in this novel find themselves in Pearl Harbor during the Japanese Attack, inside President Roosevelt's inner circle, in pre-Nazi Germany as the seizure of Nazi control begins, and inside the leadership of Soviet Russia where decisions on treaties and allies are forged. Furthermore, characters are placed in situations of resistance movements and as military service members on all fronts. Included amongst the characters in this novel are perspectives like that of Chuck Dewar, a senator's son and a homosexual male serving in the American forces and Carla VonUlrich, a female resistance worker and nurse doing her best to stop the Nazi's in her home

country. This book shows the interrelationship between the Spanish Civil War and World War II, as well as the lead up to American involvement.

Book Three. *Edge of Eternity*. The third book, *Edge of Eternity*, covers the history of the Cold War, the American Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the rise of Rock and Roll. This book centers on characters like George Jakes, an African American Harvard graduate (and grandson of Lev Peshkov) who finds himself in Kennedy's Justice Department, Tanya Dvorkin, a Russian resistance author, and Jasper Murray, a British journalist who ends up enlisted in the American Army in Vietnam. The characters in this book interact to demonstrate the politics surrounding the Cold War, including perspectives on both sides of the Berlin Wall and during the Cuban Missile Crisis. This book also explores the American Civil Rights Movement, and events such as the Freedom Rides and riots in Birmingham, Alabama in horrific detail.

Throughout all of these books, the author strives to give differing perspectives of the same historical events and often, the characters interact to demonstrate the complexities of international politics. While these books were chosen for this study because they present multiple international, socio-economic, gendered, and racial perspectives of history, they were also chosen because they are largely popular and in that context, made it easier to find participants who had read the trilogy and discussed these books in a book club or online book discussion forum.

Participant Summary

As described in Chapter Three, participants were located through two main social networks: goodreads.com and Facebook. Using social media platforms to locate participants provided me with a geographically and demographically diverse group of participants. While a

more detailed discussion of the participants appears in Chapter Three, here I provide a summary table that lists some general information about the participants.

Table 4.1: Geographical Location and Selection Method

Participant Name	Geographical Location	Age	Gender	Selection Method
Leslie	Washington D.C.	65	Female	Facebook
Chocka	St. Louis, MO (Bulgaria)	64	Female	Goodreads.com
Scott	Boston, MA	58	Male	Goodreads.com
Rachel	Kansas City, MO	22	Female	Facebook
Hans	Vienna, Austria	34	Male	Goodreads.com
Jean	Paris, France	52	Male	Goodreads.com
Kaycie	Switzerland	26	Female	Goodreads.com
Douglas	Portland, Oregon	36	Male	Goodreads.com
Jim	New York, New York	57	Male	Goodreads.com
Mark	New York, New York	64	Male	Goodreads.com
Carolina	Poland	33	Female	Goodreads.com
Maren	Germany	47	Female	Goodreads.com
Valerie	Seattle, Washington	42	Female	Goodreads.com
Judith	Australia	43	Female	Goodreads.com
Dee	United States	57	Female	Goodreads.com
Alania	Australia (Chicago, IL)	60	Female	Goodreads.com

In addition to geographical diversity, the participants ranged in ages 22-65. A limitation of this study is that all of the participants identified as white and no data was collected on the socio-economic background of participants. The interview sample included ten females and six males. The sample also included seven participants who were not living in the United States (one of the participants grew up in the United States but currently lives abroad), which added an additional geographical and cultural perspective to the data.

Contextualizing the Interview and Goodreads Data

Interview questions can be found in Appendix 1, but generally centered on the participants' experience reading the books and discussing them in a book club. While questions were asked about whether the readers found themselves making connections to the history and the characters of the books, questions were not asked about the participant's belief in the level of usefulness of historical fiction, fact-checking the historical accuracy of the literature, or about the connections to today's society. All of these aforementioned topics emerged as themes in a thematic analysis of the interview data using the constant comparison method. These are highlighted later in this chapter.

In addition to collecting data through interviews, I also analyzed online discussion forums from each of the three *The Century Trilogy* books on goodreads.com. To limit the data set, I selected the three most recent discussion boards from each book which had more than 10 comments. This sample selection resulted in 112 pages of online discussion. While much of the discussion on the goodreads.com boards echoed the themes that emerged from the interview data, there were also some vast differences. Most glaringly, in the thematic analysis on these discussion forums, there were two relevant themes which far surpassed in volume any other and neither of these themes were mentioned to any significant degree in the interview process. These

two themes will be discussed further in the themes of findings section and the differences that came up in the two data sets will be further analyzed in Chapter Five. The Data Display in Figure Table 4.2 on the next page depicts a summary of the findings.

The participants in the study who were not from the US have a somewhat different perspective on the books than those who were from the US. While this is not a narrative study, I was most struck with my interview with Chocka, my second participant interview, and my discussion with her certainly left the most lasting impression. I begin with her story and provide significant aspects of her narrative that highlights some issues that show a different perspective based on her life experience as someone who grew up in Eastern Europe, and that come up again in the themes of findings discussion. Hence, it is to her narrative that we now turn.

Chocka: A Closer Look and Different Perspective as Lived Experience

As a political asylee to the United States who had grown up in the Eastern European regime of Bulgaria, Chocka had a different view on *The Century Trilogy* than that of many of the other participants. Chocka's life experiences—as a Bulgarian citizen growing up in the Eastern Bloc, as an immigrant to the United States, and simply as a woman who lived through many of the books' events—permeated into our discussion of *The Century Trilogy*.

Throughout our interview, Chocka reiterated her belief that Ken Follett did an excellent job depicting most of the historical information that was weaved into *The Century Trilogy*. However, based on her own experiences growing up under the shadow of the USSR, she felt that as a Westerner, he missed the mark depicting the realities of the Eastern Bloc. To substantiate these discrepancies, she told me her own life story; which was equally enthralling and heartbreaking.

Table 4.2: Data Display**Chocka: An Eastern European Narrative in Focus**

The Eastern Bloc: Her Experiences vs. *The Century Trilogy's* Depiction

America and Racism

Book Club Relationships on Goodreads.com

Findings in Connection to the Literature

Connections and Emotional Reactions to Historical Events

Surprised by Historical Events

Dismayed by Brutality

Different Perspectives of Participants Outside of US

Goodreads Discussion of Follett's Liberal Bias

Bothered by Some Historical Omissions

Connections with Characters

Gendered Connections to Characters

Connections to Specific Characters

Ethel Leckwith

Walter Von Ulrich

George Jakes

The Peshkovs

Goodreads Discussion of Characters as Unrealistic

Findings Relating to New Learning and Further Curiosity

Checking Historical Accuracy

Connecting with Current Events

Appreciating Learning Through Historical Fiction

Book Club's Discussions Increase Learning

Interviewees focus on their individual learning

Goodreads discussion more critical

The Eastern Bloc: Her Experiences vs. *The Century Trilogy's* Depiction

Growing up in Bulgaria but with ties to the United States, Chocka's family had a cloud of suspicion that surrounded them which caused her to have a more difficult time than most under the Iron Curtain.

I grew up in Bulgaria and I came here to America in 1991 as a political asylee. I was imprisoned and tortured when Communism was falling in Bulgaria. We were the ones that were protesting. So I have firsthand experience with the Eastern Bloc at that time. I think that he (Follett) really does try to be fair, but I don't think that being a Western writer—I don't think that he has the point of view where he can see things completely without bias.

Chocka continued to explain that overall, the poor conditions of the Eastern European Bloc (as portrayed by Follett in the novels and as it relates to his portrayal of West Germany and Russia) were exaggerated. While she agreed that there was police corruption and political unrest, she felt that most citizens went on with their lives without feeling any great oppression.

Again, there's a bit of a bias there. With the Stassi guys being evil, not that they weren't, but it's the scale. The same thing in Bulgaria with the KGB. The scale was usually above the people that weren't involved in politics to begin with or wanting to be involved in politics. Most people were not bothered by anybody, people just kept their noses down and did whatever they were supposed to do. So the scale is a bit off, you read this and you think that everyone was arrested by the police and that's not exactly true.

Chocka, however, did have experiences like some of the characters portrayed living in the Eastern Bloc.

We had them (interactions with the secret police) because my mom, she had connections to the USA and she had been here in the fifties and sixties and they were convinced that she was a spy. So we, anything that happened in the neighborhood, we were the first ones to get interrogated or checked. So, that's why we kept up with politics, because we were actually affected by it.

She goes on to explain further that some of the historical inaccuracies are as minimal as the process for the procurement of television sets and others are more obvious in the way the books address issues like gender relations.

You can tell a little bit the Western Bias just in that he made it a point to include a women's perspective (in the storyline). In Eastern Europe, he portrayed it as mostly male dominated altogether. It's funny, because that's not exactly true. Women and men were much the same. It didn't matter if you were male or female. It meant more to have the right kind of connections. Males and females were pretty much equal, and much more than here (the United States), it depended on what kind of connections you had.

While Chocka did feel that Follett showed some western bias in his depictions of Eastern Europe and his plot lines in East Germany and Russia, there were aspects that she felt were spot on. For example, I asked Chocka whether there were any events in the books that had an emotional effect on her and she elaborated on one of the Russian storylines, the Russian Revolution, as it related to her own understanding of the event.

That was heartbreaking to me. Probably because I'm well aware of it and I think he did a really good job at describing the human condition at that time. They were trying to take over and they cut off all of their food and water. I remember speaking to an old lady

and she told me the shame that she had in her heart because at the time, she had a baby, and she remembered looking down at the baby and thinking “food.” That really wasn’t so rare. That was their basic existence and he did a really good job describing that.

America and Racism

After spending much of her life in the Eastern Bloc, Chocka did finally emigrate to the United States and settled in South Carolina, where she and her family were embraced by an African American family. This experience adds to her rich analysis and interpretation of *The Century Trilogy* books, especially the third book, which touched on the Civil Rights Movement. While she was not in the United States for the Civil Rights Movement, her experiences with racism in America shaped her perspective on the events portrayed in the books.

Whenever I came to this country, the family that took me in, they were a second mom and sister to me were African American. I had never met a black person before and I came from a communist country, so we didn’t really have movies or anything to create that baggage. I didn’t have any prejudices towards folks and it was really shocking to me, being in the South and seeing the segregation and the racism, and still today. I hated that, because I loved her.

Even in the nineties, Chocka explains her deep shock at the racism in the United States and how reading *The Century Trilogy* books she was able to empathize with some of the characters portrayed through the Civil Rights Period.

When I visit South Carolina, even today, everything is so segregated. There’s a village that they (her family friends) and it’s only black folks and then there’s another village

that's only white folks. Nothing is much better. We like to travel a lot and we would go to Alabama or Mississippi or something and she couldn't relax because she felt a lot of that.

Chocka also opened up about dating a black man in the nineties and how she was able to connect to the interracial couples in the books based on her own experience.

I dated a black guy in 1993 and 1994. One time we were stopped and a man asked me if I was okay. Like he kidnapped me or something. I know we were stopped by the police more than once because of it.

Book Club Relationships and Goodreads

I identified Chocka as a participant for my study by reaching out to another member of a very active book club that she belongs to on Goodreads.com, Scott. Through this connection, I was able to interview two members of this book group and not only get their opinions on *The Century Trilogy* books, but on their experiences as a member of an online Book Club. Chocka and Scott have never met in person, but have forged a friendship that centers on their love of historical fiction.

It's funny, we don't really know each other, but we feel like we know each other because we read books together, we know each other's views. We don't always agree and our life experiences definitely play into our interpretation of the books. Scott is from Boston and he was really disturbed when he went to New Orleans and the people sleeping on the streets and the misery and poverty, and me being from South Carolina, I get that – you see that a lot. He wasn't keen to the systemic poverty thing, the economic thing, the black and white thing.

In my interview with Scott, he echoed the same sentiment about his online conversations with Chocka:

We chat online and it's really good because we'll be able to empathize with each other's perspectives. Chocka is one of those people who comes from a completely different background and a lot of times we agree, we just generally attack things from a different perspective, it's a really good contrast.

Findings in Connections to the Literature

One of the main themes derived from the interview data was that the participants forged connections with the literature while reading. These connections came in two forms; connections to the historical events being depicted and connections to the characters through their fictional lived experiences. The experiences of the participants will be detailed in the following section.

Connections and Emotional Reactions to Historical Events

As discussed in Chapter Two, one of the goals of historical fiction literature is to bring historical events to life. Through the author's pen, a historical event which may otherwise be bland or presented as a fact to be memorized can be presented as a story, a saga, or deep narrative into a historical character's life. In presenting history through fiction, a reader can become enveloped in the historical era and even begin to understand the social context of a past time. It is no surprise then that one of the overarching themes of the interview data was that all of the participants identified that they felt some emotional connection to the historical events presented in *The Century Trilogy* books. In particular, there were two main triggers which

caused the emotional reaction: (1) an event or event(s) that the reader participant was previously unaware of, and (2) a surprise to the level of brutality described in the literature.

Surprised by Historical Events

Of the sixteen research participants who identified with having an emotional reaction to the history presented in *The Century Trilogy*, thirteen of them admitted that their emotional reaction was sparked because they were presented with new knowledge of a historical event. This new knowledge ranged from not knowing an event occurred completely to having a new understanding or context of an event that they previously thought they fully understood. There are a few historical events which are presented in the books that emerged throughout the interview data. These will be discussed in this section.

One of the most commonly cited historical events which triggered an emotional reaction from the reader participants was the politics behind the lead up to World War I. Of the sixteen participants, ten admitted that they had little to no understanding of what led to World War I and therefore, some of these participants had emotional and spirited reactions to the fictional build-up of World War I that is presented in the first of *The Century Trilogy* books. As Mark explains,

Quite honestly, World War I, I wasn't even really sure what the catalyst and getting into that war was. I didn't understand that rage of it. It (the book) changed my thinking a lot ... how idiotic people were in their thinking on the onset of World War I, and it just seemed to me incredulous that the events could have led to that war because it was just like a snowball and nobody, nobody, nobody made any effort to stop that snowball from rolling. And it was so, so needless. And I know that it could very well be that Germany

could have become just as aggressive if it weren't for World War I and the incidences that took place in Austria beforehand, but that really struck me.

Another participant, Kaycie, had an equally angry response to how World War I was presented in *The Century Trilogy*:

What's really getting to me, and it could be how Follett wrote it, but I doubt it, is how the people who are making all of the war decisions [regarding World War I] are the ones who aren't really making the sacrifices. I know that this is pretty much the same with all politics, but that is why the topic gets me so fired up. It's funny how quickly men can resolve their differences when their own asses are on the line, as opposed to when someone else has to pay up. This war and the continuation of this war are basically results of wounded pride, and it's disgusting that men died because higher-ups didn't want to lose face. This was just particularly obvious with the Battle of the Somme; where the generals knew they didn't accomplish what they needed to with the artillery fire, but continued with the battle anyways because too much money and time had already been spent. WHAT?? Argh!

Rachel also echoed that sentiment, and highlighted how so much of what began the war related to the intricacies of politics. She noted:

I'm surprised by the intricacies of the politics that led up to the war, how not every person in Germany wanted to go to war and not every single person wanted to go to war. What decision have led up on every side of this is a massive equation that ultimately led to World War I. I think that definitely altered me, that not everything is cut and dry, it made me appreciate the complexities.

Other participants highlighted the character Walter Von Ulrich, a German, and how desperately he was trying to stop World War I from occurring. Walter's plotline in the first book gives the reader an introspective look into the politics, context, and events which led to World War I. Valerie remarked:

He was trying too hard to prevent it from happening, you know, that was something that I just had never thought of that. Oh, there were probably people on both sides saying 'this is a bad idea,' and that really stuck out to me as something I had not considered.

Douglas echoed this sentiment, stating that he truly enjoyed the character Walter and his plotline because it took him on an emotional rollercoaster:

Walter was one of my favorite characters in the first book, but then he ends up leading the charge of his guys and he killed a lot of people and you remember that this guy is fighting for the German side and I'm like 'Damn Walter, hard to like you right now.' It leaves you with mixed feelings. I had to do a re-examination, can I judge him? Are his actions justified? It pulled on my heartstrings.

Another historical event that seemed to take the reader participants by surprise was the Spanish Civil War, which is described in the second book of *The Century Trilogy* through the plotline of the character Lloyd Williams. Intertwined with the descriptions of the Spanish Civil War are the storylines of the rise of Fascism in Britain and Germany, which were other historical events that many participants weren't fully aware. Many participants had emotional responses to these events.

Chocka, the participant highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, stated that the most surprising aspect of the books was the time period between World War I and World War II. She explains:

You know what really surprised about the Second World War, the lead up to it. The character Lloyd who went to Spain and the way the Russians and the Americans and the British and the Spanish were involved. It's something I've never read before and it was very jarring to read. Furthermore, the way he (Follett) portrayed the rise of Fascism, it's terrifying. I didn't know that there were Fascists in Britain until reading about the Fitz character and the Mosley march.

Other participants mentioned that they had little to no understanding of how Fascism and Hitler came to power prior to World War II and were horrified at how the historical events played out. Mark explains; "It's very, very alarming. When Hitler was given complete authority and they locked the opposition out of the vote or intimidated the opponents to where they couldn't stop it, 'Oh my God!'"

Furthermore, themes emerged from the participants expressing surprise over the Japanese motivation for attacking the United States. One participant stating "I never understood before why Japan attacked the US, but they essentially had no choice." Other participants explained that they never knew how close the United States and Russia came to nuclear war. "I lived through it, but I was young, and once I was old enough to understand it, I think I just looked at it like it was all a game of chicken that never came to fruition. Now I see that fingers were on the triggers" says Mark. While there were many singular events that were pointed out by participants, there was also an almost unanimous surprise at some of the most brutal scenes written throughout all three books: including elements of the Nazi treatment of homosexuals, the

Russian Army's treatment of Germans, some of the storyline surrounding the Vietnam War and atrocities committed by US soldiers, and the brutality and hate spewed during the American Civil Rights Movement. The fact that many of the participants were surprised by the brutality woven into these novels was so intense that it will be described in more depth as its own theme in the next section.

Dismayed by Brutality

A theme throughout my interviews was an emotional reaction to the brutality depicted throughout the books. Throughout *The Century Trilogy* the major historical events of the 21st Century are not sugarcoated. They are depicted through raw and vivid descriptions of the historical events, the social climate, and through actions and events which the books' characters live through. To some participants, especially those who are avid readers of historical fiction, this was expected. To others, the extent to which these events are described in horrid detail took them off guard.

Of all of the brutal realities that are described in *The Century Trilogy* books, many of the participants were shocked by the extent to which Germans suffered at the hands of Russian soldiers during the "liberation" of Berlin. In the second book, one of the main characters, Carla, is gang raped by Russian soldiers; and, as the book shares in detail, so are many of the other women in Germany. Many of the participants were not sure whether this was gratuitous violence or whether the Russian soldiers truly did pillage and rape their way through Germany and they turned to Google to fact-check (a trend which will be discussed later in this chapter). Douglas explains:

When it got around to the extent to which the women in Berlin were raped when the Russians marched into town—that was a very disturbing thing to read. So of course, I went to go look into it and sure enough, they came into town, took whatever they wanted and that made me disgusted and sad.

Valerie echoes this, stating “it was surprising to learn some of the experiences in Germany and Russia, the Russian invasion of Germany and the idea that they just let the soldiers’ rape their way through Germany; that was so hard to read, it was very hard on me.” Rachel, similarly describes her difficulty with this, and describes her experience as:

an emotional turning point ... there is a lot of sexual violence and those scenes are definitely hard to read. That is where character connection comes into play, it’s one thing to read it, but it’s another thing to feel like you know someone who has lived through it.

Another plotline that drew emotional responses from many of the participants was the death of homosexual character, Jorg (partner of Robert VonUlrich) at the hands of the Nazis. Six participants admitted their knowledge of Nazi brutality was limited to the suffering of those of Jewish faith and that they had little knowledge of Nazi aggression towards homosexuals and persons with intellectual disabilities, which are two topics covered in the series. In the books, a subsidiary character named Robert Von Ulrich and his partner Jorg are taken into police custody in retaliation for Robert not being willing to sell his restaurant, for pennies, to an SS officer. Jorg is brutally beaten, left for dead with his injuries in a cell for days, and ultimately marched naked into a jail-yard where the SS set ravaged and hungry dogs upon him, while Robert is forced to watch. One participant, Mark, explains his reaction, “when his lover [Robert Von

Ulrich] was murdered. I really felt the hollowness that Robert must have felt when he witnessed that.”

While participants described many different events throughout the book which caused them to have an emotional reaction, there is one last historical event in the books which was almost unanimously cited by the participants: the Civil Rights Movement. More specifically, the third book places a main character, George Jakes, on the Freedom Rides and the book vividly depicts not only the vile hatred they encountered by angry racists but in one particular scene, a brutal, almost deadly attack on George’s bus and a graphic description of George breaking his arm. Not only did eight of the participants cite this as one of the more emotional parts of the book, but one of my participants, Valerie, had to pause our interview for a few moments because she was overcome with emotion speaking about her reaction to the scene. She explains:

The one (event from the books) that sticks out the most is the civil rights movement, when they were attacked, for just no reason at all. Just people, you know, hating them for their race, and all the things in the book about civil rights ... It really changed my perspective because I knew it was horrible but I wasn't aware of just how horrible it really was. I do think that when you read something like that it reminds you and makes it connect. It wasn't surprising to me, but it just really touched me. I'm getting emotional just thinking about it, but there were things in the story that I felt like he did a phenomenal job humanizing it.

Other participants described feeling “disgusted” and the hatred “dumbfounding.” A few participants also made connections with how little it feels we’ve come since the Civil Rights Movement and made connections to current events (a topic which will be discussed later in this chapter).

Different Perspectives of Participants Outside of US

As previously mentioned, seven of the sixteen participants in this study currently live outside of the US. This was an unexpected outcome of my search for participants, but as goodreads.com was my main mode of recruitment and is a global website, I found some unlikely participants. Overall, the foreign participants had a bit of a different perspective on *The Century Trilogy* than the US participants. When asked if he thought his understanding of the historical events described in the books altered in any way, participant Hans, from Vienna, Austria said:

Not at all, I have read other books on the subject that seem much more real to me. This seems to me a novel that forces the historical context many times, but it does not seem to me the central theme. Sometimes I thought that the novel postured a simplistic view of the issues.

Jean, a participant from Paris, France echoed this sentiment, exclaiming that he knew much of the history that was being detailed, but that he still found the books compelling:

I have a relatively good knowledge of 20th century history, which I taught to students on some occasion when I was a researcher in International relations, and kept studying ever since. But the events described in the trilogy are not often taught in the same level of detail. The first volume contains very interesting historical details, especially on the First World War and the Russian revolution. Volume II is essentially about WWII, and the events it describes are generally better known. Volume III is really bad but still contains some interesting stuff about the Cuba missile crisis or East Germany.

Overall, most of the European participants expressed opinions like that of Hans; they mostly had a firm understanding of the history being covered but found a few plotlines that detailed history

they were previously unaware of. This previously unknown history was unanimously part of the American or Russian plotlines. Maren, from Germany, explains:

To a certain extent, the novel provides the reader with a story that can help him (the reader) appreciate or imagine how human beings perceive historical events when they live through them. That is probably one of the main purposes of historical novels, and the reason these things are so difficult to write. So yes, I had a better appreciation of how a person could feel in the trenches or in a protest in Moscow during the 80's, I suppose. But although I learned some historical details, my understanding of these events didn't really change.

The reverse effect was not as clearly seen with the American participants; who equally confessed to being surprised by events that took place in Europe (such as the buildup to World War I) and in United States History (the Civil Rights Movement).

Goodreads Discussion of Follett's Liberal Bias

While it did not come up for the most part in interviews, a theme that emerged from the Goodreads discussion board's analysis is the feeling that the author, Ken Follett, had a major liberal bias throughout the books. There were twenty-two mentions of liberal bias throughout the data sample. Commenter Shlomo elaborates this point as such: "he beat us over the head with liberals are good, conservatives are bad" and "the major political bias was completely unnecessary, I understand that many of the characters work in politics but I find it hard to believe that they all lean the same direction" are found throughout. Other comments echo this sentiment, like that of Sud666, who states:

The liberal outlook of this book was over the top and bordering on stupidity. Did I mention that not a single conservative/Republican is portrayed as good or even historically important? The only ones described are crooks, weirdo's, or some other MSNBC clone of what their historical significance was. Where was Jimmy Carter? That buffoon is conveniently left out of the story.

At one point, the discussion participants on a thread begin to do research into the author, Ken Follett's, political activity; with one commenter stating "he's a labor party member and active in UK politics, I understand why his more sympathetic characters are very working class people and he does strongly champion their cause against ruling classes." Blogger Sarah surmised his political affiliation, explaining:

On the other hand, though, I can see how Follett is a Labour Party member, as most of his more sympathetic characters are very working class people, and he does strongly champion their cause against ruling classes. I do know that we are going to get the 'both sides' arguments of this book, but I was slightly disappointed in his other books that the other side of the argument was always the bad guy. There was never any sympathy for these characters and there was never meant to be.

While the theme of liberal bias was found throughout the goodreads.com message boards, it did seem that in each instance, one discussion member brought this to the forefront and the others agreed in a more superficial manner. One blogger argues:

I do feel that we've only heard one side of the debate. I hope Follett will include in future chapters several first-person perspectives from the ruling class without making them

clear villains. But to me, the great description of the environment, both social and physical, made up for that.

While commenters noted a liberal bias at least once on the discussion forums for all three books, this view was particularly prevalent on the message boards of the third books, which centers on Civil Rights and the Cold War. In one exchange between posters, a discussion board member notes “I hated the third book, somehow, Republicans were responsible for everything bad that has ever happened. What a crock of shit,” to which another replies “It was tiresome drivel. You forgot to mention that the entire world was saved due to the hardworking liberals, who are all heroes.” Discussion member CC then chimes in that:

Follett is a liberal writer ... all three books were written from the same viewpoint. I think the other books didn't seem as biased because the events happened a long time ago and we are somewhat able to put some emotional distance between then and now... and, of course, one would have a more informed view of more recent events. But throughout the trilogy, the non-liberals were evil. Or, if not that, not very smart anyway. And the conservatives were so hated or clumsy or weak that they didn't even get laid!

Overall, the criticisms of liberal bias were mostly limited to the thematic analysis of the discussion forums. Of my sixteen interview participants, only one, Douglas, mentioned that he felt the books “leaned a bit to the left.” There were also posts that were combative of the idea that Follett had a liberal bias. One blogger, Lisa, noting that she was “glad he showed the Kennedy’s to be far from perfect. I’m a liberal, but I never bought into Kennedy being such a saint. Johnson never got the credit he deserved, but Follett did elude to his clout with Congress.”

Bothered by Some Historical Omissions

One final theme that emerged from both the interview data and the analysis of the goodreads.com online discussion boards was the fact that many readers took offense to some of the historical events that were omitted from the *The Century Trilogy*. In both data sets, participants and online posters mentioned events that were not included amongst the texts that they felt should have been included. This included events such as the United States role in the lead up to World War I, the Holocaust, a Japanese perspective from World War II, the internment of US Japanese, the moon landing, the Vietnam War (in more detail), and the Russian involvement in Afghanistan.

Interviewee Douglas, who is a high school English teacher, discussed many of these omissions and while he found many of them acceptable (“there’s been enough written on the Holocaust and he could never do it justice in only a few words”), he found the lack of a Japanese perspective in the second book “unacceptable.” He elaborates:

For him to do a book that centers around World War II and to have a family from all of the major players: England, Germany, Russia, the U.S. and then not to include a Japanese families perspective is absolutely unacceptable.

Everyman, one of the posters on the online discussion forums, found it irritating that the United States’ involvement and culpability in the lead up to World War I was lacking or even maliciously omitted. He argues:

The shipment of arms to Huerta on the Ypiranga and Wilson’s ordering the invasion of Veracruz to prevent the arms from being landed are historical facts, but the arms were

NOT provided by Germany. The way it's written implies that it (the shipment from Germany) was one of the catalysts of German aggression.

Participants also took issue with the fact that sometimes characters were built in one book, only to be non-present or mentioned in the remaining trilogy books. This was especially mentioned in regards to Billy Williams from the first book (brother of Ethel, WWI hero, and future MP) and Eric VonUlrich (Nazi follower, WWII soldier) from the second. Overall, from the interview data, five of sixteen participants noted historical omissions and in the goodreads.com data, the omissions are discussed between participants quite a bit, at 32 mentions throughout the subsection chosen for analysis.

Connections with Characters

Another main theme from the interview data was that fifteen of the sixteen participants named at least one character that they connected to and explained how this connection enhanced not only their reading experience, but their understanding of the historical events portrayed in the books. Rachel explains:

I feel like just reading all of the characters involvements in the different parts of the story altered my historical perception. The words on the page changed my thinking through my connection to the characters. Maybe it made me appreciate them more, like I put myself in their shoes and felt how they would have felt.

Some participants expressed that the characters' conditions caused them to have empathy or sympathy for their situations. Scott explains "With the character Vasili, who was in the Russian work camp in Siberia, it just struck a chord about how hard a particular life could be. It

definitely drew empathy from me, with the telling of that story.” Some participants even felt a sense of understanding for the books “villains,” as Chocka explains:

I had sympathy for some of the characters who were in the wrong. For Fitz because he thought he was doing the right thing. You have to judge people based on what they thought they were doing was best in their time. I do think that this book, because of those characters, has opened me up a little but to try not to judge other people and what they think.

The theme of connection to characters was congruent throughout the interview and goodreads.com discussion forum data. Blogger Sarah stated, “I’m very emotionally connected to Walter. I feel an affectionate pity for him.” Other bloggers, such as annoyous554 stated their initial dislike for some of the characters, like Lev Peshkov, only to have their feelings “come around” on them as the books progressed and their characters were developed further.

Some specific aspects of their connection to characters warrant further discussion: namely the gendered connections to characters; the specific characters to which the participants related; and the goodreads.com discussion of characters as unrealistic.

Gendered Connections to Characters

Of the sixteen participants, fifteen acknowledged that they forged strong connections to at least one of *The Century Trilogy* characters. Of these fifteen who affirmed a connection, thirteen found their strongest connection with a character of their own identified gender. Rachel describes this connection as such:

I consider myself as being a pretty liberal feminist. Girl power all the way! I appreciate a strong female lead and there are quite a few, so I certainly connected to all of the

strong female characters. Not to say I did not connect with the male characters, but I just gravitate towards the female characters.

Dee also found herself connecting to female characters “I think I connected to Ethel Leckwith, Carla, and Rosa because they were females who were prepared to fight against injustice and this is a type I always respond to.”

One participant, Leslie Susan, who was part of a Bryn Mawr book club, made several references to her connection with the female characters throughout the book:

I remember liking the character Ethel because she was kind of an adventurer, you know, kind of bold. I guess I tend to latch onto, and this is not surprising I guess in a Bryn Mawr book club, to someone who kind of strikes me as a stronger female character. With Follett throughout the book there seems to be an overarching theme of women who kind of breakthrough in some way and stand against male power. Even with the sexual violence, it seems to me, in my sense that in each case the women sort of rose up, it was almost like those experiences pushed them to be even stronger and achieve even more and I guess that was redeeming or something. In the book group, some said the violence was gratuitous, I think it was not out of line with the context and it actually made the characters, the women, overcome and grow stronger from.

For their part, the participants who identified as male did not mention manhood as being the reason they connected to one of the male characters from the series. However, they found qualities such as bravery to stand up for what is just (as in the character Walter during WWI and WWII, George during the Freedom Rides, and Grigori Peshkov during the Russian Revolution and in marrying his brother’s pregnant girlfriend) as redeeming. The male participants also often

mentioned the wholesomeness or goodness of certain characters and how they could relate to these qualities.

Connections to Specific Characters

Over the course of three books (and nearly 3,000 pages of text) there were a plethora of characters depicted in *The Century Trilogy*. However, there were a few characters who were mentioned by multiple participants.

Ethel Leckwith. Amongst participants, Ethel Leckwith was overwhelmingly the most mentioned character connection. Of the sixteen participants, ten mentioned feeling a connection to her character. Furthermore, of the ten female participants, six asserted that their strongest connection was to Ethel's character. Ethel's story begins in the first book, but her storyline, and her child Lloyd, continue through all three books of the trilogy. Ethel begins her story as a housemaid for an English Earl. After a love affair with the Earl, she finds herself pregnant with his child and flees to London to hide the pregnancy from her religious family. In London, Ethel eventually becomes active in the Suffragette movement, marries a low level political activist, and becomes involved in politics herself, eventually becoming an influential MP in the British government.

Many of the participants felt strongly about Ethel's advocacy for Women's Rights and her ability to overcome the obstacles of her early life. Dee explains, "I connected with Ethel Leckwith throughout book one. I admired her struggle to recover from her early mistake to establish herself as an independent woman and as an advocate for rights for women." Chocka also refers to Ethel's early struggles in her synopsis of her character; "what a strong character. I

didn't particularly like her choices, but I think that he (Follett) does that on purpose. He tries to make them not perfect."

Other participants felt connections to Ethel based on their own personal experiences or their ability to connect with her as someone who they feel relatable. Leslie Susan explains:

I connected to the housemaid, Ethel. I think because I like to think of myself as a romantic heroine. Actually, in terms of the Suffragette movement, my own grandmother was a bit of a suffragette and trailblazer. She got a Ph.D. from Columbia in Portuguese Literature. One of the first women to get a Ph.D. She was disowned from her family for going to Columbia. She was a proto-feminist and a big supporter of Women's Rights. I think, on these topics, having such strong family connections to the book character made me enjoy it.

Valerie echoes this sentiment, stating "she was the ultimate feminist and she's somebody that was not going to be put into a place that somebody else gave her and, you know, I am a feminist so it was really easy for me to identify with her."

Walter Von Ulrich. As mentioned briefly in the analysis of the books events, the character of Walter Von Ulrich was also deeply popular with participants; both because his character was central to a plotline that was one of the lesser known historical perspectives and also because participants found him relatable. Appearing in the first two books, Walter Von Ulrich is a unique character. A German, Walter has to choose country over his beliefs during World War I; taking up arms and fighting for Germany even though he does not believe the war is justified (and did much to attempt to stop it from happening). His story brings him into World

War II as a political leader in an opposition party to Hitler and the Nazi's. Unfortunately, his resistance to Hitler is his undoing and his character meets a brutal end. Mark explains:

Walter was such a good person, so sensible and loving. I connected with him because I think his personality as probably a lot like mine. He seemed like such a wholesome, well-rounded person and sensible and in recollection I still feel a connection to him.

Of the six male participants, five identified Walter as a character they connected with. Most finding him admirable in his attempts to stop World War I and II from the German perspective.

George Jakes. Another character participants held in high regard was George Jakes from the third installment of *The Century Trilogy*. George is the illegitimate child of a United States Senator, Greg Peshkov, and an African American actress. Raised by a single mother but financially supported by his father, George is one of the first African Americans to attend Harvard Law School. After graduation, George's story takes him through the Freedom Rides, the Bobby Kennedy Justice Department, and on the Civil Rights trail with Dr. Martin Luther King.

Of the sixteen participants, nine mentioned a connection to George Jakes, including all six of the male participants. Most of the participants who mentioned George admired his ability to rise to a notable social position despite his mixed race background. "I definitely found a connection to George. I really liked his character. He was one of the most realistic characters, he wasn't afraid to conscientiously object with what some major historical figures were thinking; even in the case of Kennedy or King. He himself was flawed, he had failed relationships and I felt like I could empathize with him" says Mark.

Others felt a connection on a more personal level, as did Jim who explains in detail his connection:

I connected so much with George Jakes character. I felt like I was side by side in the East Wing of the Kennedy Justice Department. I lived through the sixties and I know that being a child of a mixed-race couple was, well it's much more commonplace today, but back then, that was a tough thing to do and I related with how George rose above. Also, if I'm being honest, I guess for my own career, if it had gone differently, I guess I would have aspired to maybe something along those lines, so I enjoyed following George.

The Peshkovs. One of the books main five families is the Russian Peshkov's. Brothers Lev and Grigori were both mentioned as characters which participants felt connections. Grigori's character remains in Russia and is a leader in the Russian Revolution, while Lev flees for America and becomes an active gangster in 1930's Buffalo, New York. Interestingly, participants felt connected to both on different levels despite the fact that one was portrayed as the moral character and the other as immoral, yet loveable and of the seven participants who mentioned the Peshkov brothers as characters they were drawn to, they all mentioned them both in a compare and contrast manner. Douglas explains:

I really liked Grigori and his brother Lev. I liked how different they were from each other; how one was a straight shooter. I like how they switched roles from the beginning. One was supposed to go to America and the one who stayed ended up charging in the Russian Revolution and the other one became a bootlegger and then Lev's son was raised by Grigori. I'm big on internal strife. People go through more. Man vs. himself, Man vs. Society. They were very multifaceted.

Other participants began their explanations of their connections with the characters by beginning with a disclaimer-like statement. Chocka states, “I know it’s kind of weird, but I did like both of the Russians. Grigori to me was like my (Bulgarian) Grandma, she really wanted to believe in something better for everybody, in big ideas, utopia. People are very flawed though so we don’t do well with idealistic views and idealistic systems.” While Valerie echoes that sentiment in her own analysis of the characters; “Even that gangster, the Russian guy who moved to the States. Oh my gosh, you just want to punch him in the face and at the same time, he’s such a richly drawn character and he’s believable.”

Goodreads Discussion of Characters as Unrealistic

While readers related to the characters in the ways noted above, one of the main themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the goodreads.com discussion forums was an overwhelming disbelief in the circumstances of the characters. One of the prevalent criticisms was that the characters written by Follett were too unbelievable. This criticism ranged from their successes based on their status in life (socio-economic beginnings, age, gender), to the circumstances that the characters found themselves in, especially as it surrounded the interactions between the different characters.

In the sample selection of nine discussion threads, there were twenty-eight references to the unrealistic nature of characters. One commenter, Luffy, summarizes “they are all too much ... too good, too smart, too brave.” While another blogger notes that some of the characters are “unbelievable in their perfection.”

Other discussion board members note the unlikely nature of which some of the characters interact. One member saying “there’s too much random meeting of chance between characters

whose predecessors knew each other previously in a different context.” Another point of contention is that most of the characters find themselves to be successful and in positions of importance. A commenter, Christine, notes:

It's unrealistic, Follett seriously does not expect us to believe that a university graduate can immediately get a job as a lawyer to Bobby Kennedy or that Kruschev would give a 23 year old the responsibility of overseeing the delivery of nuclear weapons to Cuba? Come on! I know it's fiction but this is just nonsense.

Discussion board members also noted that the female characters in the first two books seem to be a bit too progressive for their time. Participants in the online discussion forums particularly found fault with the character of Ethel Leckwith and her ability to go from a housemaid to a member of the British Parliament. Blogger Lisa writes “Esther and Billy are unbelievable in their perfection and the way that the characters interact in close proximity, it becomes a little more obvious of how all of them are kind of ridiculous in their depictions.” Discussion board member Jacquelyn summarizes “I’m having trouble with Ethel. He (Follett) seems to have progressive and liberal views of women in the early 1900’s class-entrenched European society. It is just difficult to believe that a women of Ethel’s social class would so easily and naively ignore the rules of society.”

Findings Relating to New Learning and Further Curiosity

Another major theme which arose from the interview data was the participants experience in new learning through reading historical fiction. This section will explore the learning process and reflection experiences of participants reading *The Century Trilogy* and discussing the books in their book clubs. Included in this section will be a discussion of the major themes which

emerged surrounding the learning process; including the participants beliefs in the level of usefulness of historical fiction literature, how reading *The Century Trilogy* prompted further exploration of the historical events being depicted in the books, and how participants found parallels between the history being discussed and current events. Additionally, this section investigates how participants learning experiences were shaped by their participation in book clubs.

Checking Historical Accuracy

One of the most surprising themes to emerge from the interview data was that many of the participants cited checking the historical accuracy of *The Century Trilogy* as they read. Nine of sixteen participants admitted to “fact-checking” the information presented in the trilogy. One example of this comes from participants Douglas, Mark, and Scott, who all researched the Christmas Day futbol match that took place in “No Man’s Land” during World War I. Douglas explains:

The field, the Christmas Day Celebration between the Germans and the French and British. Something like that had never been on my radar, so I read about it in the book and I’m surprised, so I had to do my due diligence and research it to see if it was true.

Ironically, another participant had an extremely similar reaction to reading about the Christmas Day meetup. Mark stated:

When they met in the bunker, Walter and Fitz on Christmas Day, I actually dropped the book and went to research and realized that actually did happen. And of course it did because it’s historical fiction.

Furthering the fact-checking trend, Dee stated “I discovered both (the sections on the rise of Fascism) were historically accurate and was pleased to have added to my knowledge,” while Rachel explained that she “was excited to learn about different historical movements and later to explore them further on my own.” Scott concurred with Rachel and said that aspects of the books gave him avenues for future reading: “There are definitely some facts in there that when I read them, I went and cross-referenced them quickly on the internet to find out if that was true or a little bit of literary interpretation.” Valerie may sum this phenomena up best stating:

We're in the days of Wikipedia, so as you read, you are checking how accurate is that? So that takes me down the path of trying to figure it out. I felt like through reading, reading the blog, and doing all my google research while reading the book I got a better appreciation for the history.

The theme of checking historical accuracy was also found within the analysis of the goodreads.com discussion posts. Participants mentioned checking the accuracy of the facts being presented and even checking into the author and his motives as well. Blogger Zulifya mentioned fact-checking and further research, stating “if anything, it’s making me want to do more research into the time period, which I suppose should be the greatest compliment to the author.”

Connecting with Current Events

Another theme that stood out from the interview data was that eleven of the sixteen participants drew connections between the historical events of *The Century Trilogy* and current events happening in today’s world. Most frequently cited, seven times, was the rise of Fascism

in Europe, the build up to World War II, and the racism detailed surrounding the Civil Rights Movement as moments from which they see parallels happening today.

It was the oldest of the participants who were gravely concerned about the rise of Fascism described in the second of *The Century Trilogy* books as it parallels to today's geopolitical climate. Chocka, who as previously mentioned lived under the Iron Curtain, describes her horror at the rise in Fascism:

When they were describing the rise of Fascism in Britain and here are these two characters who are supposedly smart and they buy into it. It was really scary, it really makes me draw a lot of parallels to our current time. To me, that whole thing, reading the book was like, Oh my God, we're doing the same thing over and over. It's terrifying. It's terrifying because we don't learn from our mistakes historically.

Other participants felt that people in today's society are ignorant of the events that led to World War II and Fascism and are therefore doomed to repeat its mistakes. Mark explains:

*Speaking about World War I and the aftermath, that's not something that I would have dived into and it changed my thinking a lot, especially the way things are happening today, I never would have had the perspective on the things that are happening currently, if I hadn't read *The Century Trilogy* and what Follett described about the 1930's. Honestly, Janelle, I'm very alarmed, very alarmed. The event escapes me, but when Hitler was given complete authority in 1933. It really frightens me today because you think that something is just a completely off the wall and never would take place and it does. These things can happen. I look at my young nephews and nieces and I'm very alarmed because they just don't know. I wish that everybody could read this and be*

aware of the events that led up to World War II. I see the parallels. People are less tolerant today and people that necessarily should not have any weight in today's society are beginning to feel empowered and that bothers me a great deal.

While the oldest three participants were certainly the most vocal in their connections to current events; the concern was across the board in relation to age, gender, and geographic location, Jim cites Holocaust deniers and those that choose to ignore facts:

It's chilling to me that there are actually people who argue that the Holocaust did not happen. It's haunting. I don't know how anyone can say that this didn't happen. I just have no logic. Facts aren't fact anymore.

Lastly, three of the sixteen participant (Mark, Douglas, and Valerie) all made references to President Trump and his role in the rise of racism in the United States, as well as the rise and visibility of hate groups. Valerie elaborates:

When Trump was elected with his racist rhetoric, I was like, holy crap, we can't get beyond this. It's horrible if people think this way and I was thinking that at the time that I read it that WOW, this is pretty recent history and now I'm looking at the world and I'm going, what's going on?

Appreciating Learning Through Historical Fiction

Another common thread throughout the interview process was that participants mentioned how they felt historical fiction literature was useful. Unlike some of the other themes that emerged from the data, there was no specific interview question aimed at gaging how participants felt about historical fiction literature in general. Of the sixteen participants, eleven elaborated on the role they feel historical fiction literature can or should play in society.

Some participants expounded on the learning potential of a historical fiction novel. Rachel, the youngest participant in the study, explained that she “has a new appreciation for historical fiction, I think because it was so accessible and it made me feel like I was learning in an accessible way. It didn’t make me feel dumb. It explained them (the historical events) without making me feel belittled.” Jim reiterated Rachel’s message, stating “I learned from these books. You have families going through drama like the first World War, the Russian Revolution, Suffragette, etc. and these novels did such a marvelous job; you’re living in the history but it’s subtle.”

Other participants reflected on how the plotlines and character development helped them develop a deeper understanding of the historical events, climate, and time-period being discussed. Jean gives an overall analysis of historical fiction, declaring that “the novel provides the reader with a story that can help him appreciate or imagine how human beings perceive historical events when they live through them.” Some participants mentioned specific historical events from the book which forced them to challenge their preconceived notions of history. For example, Valerie felt like she came to understand a viewpoint of German citizens during World War II that had not previously been something she had considered. She explains:

It made me stop and think what people in Germany were going through as their country was vilified, the bad guy. You know, not everybody was on board with all those decisions and it must have been painful for some of their citizens to experience that. It gave me a better appreciation of different people at different societal levels and the impact it had on them.

Douglas, too, felt that he was given a perspective he hadn’t thought about before and was forced to understand the perspective of the “enemy.” He explains:

In the third book, I feel like I was given a doorway into Japanese Imperialism. When the Dewar's are having the discussion at dinner. All the tariffs and embargos and all that, we had starved out the natural resources. The Japanese had no choice but to go to war.

Throughout the interview data, participants mentioned that their connections to characters and historical events and the way that they were written, including from the “alternative” perspective, caused them to have emotional or responses of empathy which helped them better understand the history being discussed. The participants who mentioned the usefulness of historical fiction also unanimously felt that there was value added in reading historical fiction. Douglas summarizes this added value, with caution:

I think some people irresponsibly read historical fiction and all of the sudden they're a historian. But it's also a beautiful thing because I know a lot of people, my sister included, who read these books and she didn't know the first thing about World War I and it gave her a base to build upon. That's a beautiful thing too.

The theme of historical fiction and its usefulness was also brought up in the analysis of the goodreads.com discussion posts. Blogger Luffy, who was critical of the characters being “too smart and too brave” also noted that he “liked how Follett introduced the WWI geopolitical situation using memorable characters ... typically it's a lot easier for me to remember people-details than a list of facts.” Another discussion post from Everyman echoed this sentiment, stating that the book assisted in making the story interesting, writing:

It was a good way to get the information to the readers in a painless, in fact somewhat enjoyable, way. Other authors might have tried just presenting it in the form of letters or

press articles or just by the narrator, but he chose a very good way to get us to enjoy reading some fairly technical material.

Overall, while there were some critiques of historical fiction and its use in learning, most of the interviewees and bloggers found it useful for learning in at least some capacity.

Book Clubs Discussions Increase Learning

As laid forth in the first three chapters of this dissertation, one of the participant criteria was that participants must have discussed *The Century Trilogy* books in a book club or online book discussion forum. As such, a few of the interview questions were positioned around the reader participants experience in these book clubs, and all generally felt that the discussions enhanced their learning.

Interviewees focus on their individual learning. Of the sixteen participants, eleven found the book club experience beneficial to their overall reading experience and learning, while nine felt that it enhance their understanding and comprehension of the trilogies storylines. But they tended to discuss it more from the perspective of how it increased their own learning in general, and highlighted how it happened.

A few participants explained that the knowledge that they'd be later discussing the books in a group made them pay more attention to details. Carolina explains "for me, the discussion in the book club motivated me to take more attention to the details in the book. I highlighted more things and took notes so that I could discuss them later on." Many of the participants also noted that gaining the perspective of others helped deepen their understanding of the material. Scott explains:

It's really good because usually for the most part, we're able to empathize with each other's perspectives, but also, somebody will come up with something you hadn't thought of, which is even better and you'll be like, 'I hadn't thought of it from that perspective and it kind of opens your mind to looking at it in a different way. It provides a really good contrast and nuance.

Other participants felt that the entire process of discussing the books as or after they were reading them enhanced the experience. Jim explains "I've reviewed like 900 books on Goodreads and joined the discussion boards for many of them. I just find it enjoyable to discuss a book as or after I've read it."

Of my sixteen participants, fourteen were active participants on goodreads.com and members of online book clubs. Four of these online book club members joked that they have deep relationships with people they've never met in person. Valerie notes "I have a whole bunch of dorky friends that I've never met in person and we talk about books all the time and you know, they'll bring up point that I hadn't thought of sometimes. I think it enhances the whole reading experience, having fellow readers read it with you."

Some of the older participants in particular seemed to have found real value in the discussion surrounding the book. Leslie explains how she was swayed by the discussion of her in-person book group:

The focus of the book club discussion was that the other members felt the books were too male dominated. I'm in a number of book clubs and it was just with the Bryn Mawr book club that we read these books, and of course Bryn Mawr is all women, so duh, it occurred

to me that they may react like that. But it did make me re-evaluate what I had just read, because I didn't have that opinion.

Of the four participants in their sixties, all said that discussing the book gave them an appreciation for others viewpoints. Alania explains “I often find that the online discussion brings a viewpoint that I have never or would never have thought about. I appreciate the diversity of views and opinions.” In fact, all eight of the participants over fifty answered positively to the interview question which asked if any of the dialogue from their book group discussion surprised them while only two of the eight younger participants answered yes to that interview question.

Goodreads discussion more critical. It is important to point out that in general the Goodreads discussion board showed more critique of the text or the author than did the interviewees. This is perhaps obvious in some of the discussion above, where some discussion board activity highlighted the liberal bias of the author, or that the characters were not realistic. While this will be discussed further in Chapter Five, this may be due to the fact that there is no researcher asking questions; rather, the researcher is simply reading and analyzing comments that have already been written. While efforts were taken to write interview questions that did not lead the subject, participants may have felt obligated to answer with a positive spin simply because they knew the research study centered on *The Century Trilogy* books. For this reason alone, they may have felt that they should not be critical of the trilogy.

An additional reason the discussions on the forums may have been a bit more critical is because whomever posts first in the threads often leads the discussion. Therefore, if the first post is a negative or critical post; others may feel inclined to echo their sentiment and follow their lead. In fact, a book discussion is meant to do just that – to debate the positive and negative

aspects of the books being read. In in-person book groups where the participants know each other, it can often be more difficult to be forthcoming about their negative experiences. Leslie, who participates in an in-person book group and was one of the interview subjects explains that in-person:

I'm very seldom the one that goes in and says I hated this book because, I don't know, I think as a reader I just read for what can I get from this book rather than a sort of stance of "okay book prove yourself to me" so, it's not that I think everything is great, I'm not quite a panglossian [someone who likes everything they read] reader where I think all books are awesome.

Overall, while the goodreads.com message boards carried a more critical tone on the text and the characters than the interview data set (which focused more on individual learning) many of the same themes prevailed throughout. The implications of this phenomena will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

Summary

This chapter explores the experiences of sixteen participants who read *The Century Trilogy* books and discussed these books in some form of a book club. Furthermore, this chapter shares their voices and opinions; exploring how their connections to the history and characters presented in the trilogy effected their understanding of historical events. Additionally, it presented the participants experience in developing new learning and further curiosities surrounding the historical events. This chapter also evaluated a sample selection of online book discussion forums and threads which discussed *The Century Trilogy* books and analyzed these threads for common themes. Lastly, this chapter presented a critical analysis of the thematic

data. The next chapter will explore the implications of the findings and analysis presented in this chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore how readers of critical historical fiction who participate in book groups or online reading forums perceive that the literature and the discussion of it has affected their learning and reshaped their historical understanding. The study focuses on those who have read literature which details historical events from multiple viewpoints including those which provide an alternate to the dominant discourse. Specifically, this study focuses on readers who have read and discussed *The Century Trilogy* by Ken Follett either in an online discussion forum or an in-person book group. The purpose of this research is to understand the experience these readers have had while they are reading and discussing historical literature which may contradict or contrast the dominant discourse. The following questions guided this inquiry:

1. How did the readers' understanding of the historical events portrayed in Ken Follett's *Century Trilogy* change after reading and discussing the books?
2. In what ways did the readers' connection with the books' characters impact their understanding of the historical events or groups of people represented? How did this connection influence their critical reflection of the text?
3. After reading and discussing the books, what was the readers' experience in confronting and reconstructing their previously held assumptions about the historical events or groups of people portrayed in the books?

This chapter will be organized around the research questions of this study discussing the findings explained in Chapter Four as they interconnect with the relevant literature explored in Chapter Two. This discussion will also analyze the findings in relationship to the theoretical frameworks which guide this study: critical public pedagogy and non-formal learning. This chapter will also

provide an analysis of how this research can inform theory and practice in the field of Adult Education, and will offer suggestions for further research in light of the limitations of the study. Lastly, this chapter will offer a conclusion and a personal reflection on the research process.

Findings in Light of the Research Questions, and Theoretical Frameworks

As noted in the research questions, the main purpose of this study was to understand how reading historical fiction literature and discussing the books in a book club affect the reader. This section will discuss the findings as they relate to the research questions in light of the theoretical frameworks: non-formal learning and critical public pedagogy.

How Did Readers Reframe Their Understanding of History

The first research question asks: “How did readers’ understanding of the historical events portrayed in *The Century* Trilogy change after reading and discussing the books. It appears, in light of the findings discussed in Chapter Four, that readers did reframe their understanding of history from reading the three books of the trilogy. How they did so will be explored in light of both the literature relating non-formal learning and critical public pedagogy.

Non-Formal Learning. This study was grounded in the idea that non-formal learning occurs through reading fiction literature and discussing literature in a book group or online book discussion forum. Adult educators who discuss non-formal learning point out that adult learning occurs outside of formal education (Jubas, 2011; Zeigler, Paulus & Woodside, 2014; Taylor, 2006; Biniecki, 2015). For the purposes of this dissertation, non-formal learning is defined as an organized, intentional, voluntary, and structured learning opportunity which is often sought for personal enrichment outside of formal education systems (Shrestha, Wilson, & Singn, 2008;

Taylor, 2011), whereas informal learning happens while people are living their lives, in relationships, dealing with life's pleasures and obstacles in their personal lives and workplaces.

The framework of non-formal learning applies well to this study because the participants were not only engaged in some form of a book club or group; but all were voluntarily reading *The Century Trilogy* for their own personal enrichment and enjoyment. As previously noted, many of the participants cited a desire for a deeper understanding as their motivations for participating in a book group or online discussion group. Jubas (2010) in speaking of informal learning explains "as people live they continually learn. Most of this is unplanned, and it is often tactic, but it is very powerful" (p. 229). Studies involving non-formal learning argue that participants in non-formal educational activities (such as book groups) become co-constructors of the knowledge being presented or discussed (Biniecki, 2015; Jubas, 2006; Shrestha, Wilson, & Singn, 2008). Biniecki (2015) argues that knowledge is constructed by the individual but socially mediated (p. 129). The participants of this dissertation study echoed this sentiment in the interview data, as they consistently cited that the discussion in their book groups surrounding *The Century Trilogy* books and the diversity of these groups added deeper layers to their understanding of the historical events. Additionally, the data presented in Chapter Four of this dissertation shows strong evidence that participants were not only surprised by some of the historical events depicted in the books, but that they also had emotional reactions to some of the brutal and unjust storylines. This indicates that participants were introduced to new historical information and thus, changed their understanding of history through reading the novels.

Furthermore, Biniecki (2015) argues that knowledge construction in a non-formal setting is non-linear, yet the information being sought is often based on a persons' "projections for future use" (p. 128). As highlighted in Chapter Four, many of the participants in this study

admitted that they were seeking to understand the larger historical narrative in reading *The Century Trilogy* and that their reading of these texts prompted them to seek out further knowledge, either by fact-checking the information being presented to them or by opening new paths of historical exploration for them. While it can be argued that the participants, and those who read historical fiction in general, are seeking to learn through the reading process; the fact that these books prompted the reader participants to search for truths and dig deeper into other avenues of history was prevalent in the interview data.

Critical Public Pedagogy. This study is also grounded in the critical public pedagogy literature. Critical Public Pedagogy focuses on how learning can take place outside of the bounds of a formal learning context, and further, that learning which happens in these non-formal spaces can at times encourage the learner to examine or re-examine how hegemonic forces influence their cognizance (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010; Zorrilla & Tisdell, 2016). As Rossing (2016) explains, critical public pedagogy aims to: “(a) deepen and expand sociopolitical agency by developing the capacity to critique conditions that sustain social inequities and (b) to animate social transformation” (p. 617)

To further understand critical public pedagogy, it is important to understand that it draws on ideas from both public pedagogy and critical theory, which as Brookfield (2005) discusses focuses on ways of challenging the dominant discourse. Burdick and Sandlin (2010) suggest that public pedagogy is what happens outside the walls of formal educational institutions, such as schools and universities. In speaking of public pedagogy in general beyond formal educational systems, they note that:

A wealth of other spaces and practices possess strongly educative capacities, despite having little or nothing to do with the process of schooling. These public pedagogies—

spaces, sites, and languages of education and learning that exist outside schools—are just as crucial, if not more so, to our understanding of the formation of identities and social structures as the teaching that goes on within formal classrooms. (p. 349)

While the above is a definition of public pedagogy, they describe *critical* public pedagogy as the “pedagogical *other*, the forms and practices of pedagogy that exist independently of, *even in opposition to*, the knowledge within the commonsense” (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010, p. 351, emphasis added). More recently, Rossing (2016), in discussing critical public pedagogy states: “Critical public pedagogy struggles against dominant discourses that sustain social injustices. It renders visible assumptive, unscrutinized beliefs: for example, familiar representational politics that support unjust power relationships and position people as ‘other’” (p. 617). Using these insights about critical public pedagogy, it is important to discuss the findings of this study as they relate to the construction or deconstruction of knowledge centering on hegemonic forces.

As a form of popular culture, historical fiction is a space where critical public pedagogy can occur in the right sets of circumstances such that readers’ understanding can begin to be influenced by the aspects of the text that challenge the dominant discourse. Dominant discourse refers to the set of accepted cultural norms, in this case the historical record, which often is comprised of expectations, histories, and culturally accepted norms of those with privilege (Lee, Kozak, Nancoo, Chen, Middendorf, & Gale, 2013). For the purposes of this study, this includes both the hegemonic forces within the historical events that take place in *The Century Trilogy* books and the larger hegemonic force of the historical record and historical learning. According to historian Richard Slotkin (2005) the documentation of the historical record is never fully accurate because history is written by humans who have their own motives and beliefs. Historical fiction literature, like *The Century Trilogy*, can provide a space outside of the formal

bounds of an educational institution where alternative and non-dominant viewpoints can be presented. This is specifically relevant in light of the overarching research questions being examined in this dissertation: Did reading and discussing *The Century Trilogy* books, a series of novels written with multiple viewpoints, assist in challenging readers' preconceived ideas surrounding the historical events?

It is important to note, however, that critical public pedagogy cannot be explained as something that did or did not occur. It is best to understand critical public pedagogy as a continuum, where spaces of critical learning can lean towards being critical or not critical (Tisdell & Thomson, 2007). Furthermore, it is important to realize that not all media or literature that acts as critical public pedagogy is equal. Some pieces of critical literature are more combative of hegemony than others; further the dominant culture can appropriate oppositional voices, sometimes as the dominant culture become more accepting of oppositional views, such as is the case of gay characters or gay marriage. For example, back in 1997 when Ellen Degenerese's character came out as gay (and she herself came out as gay) the show was canceled. But only three years later in 2000, *Will & Grace*, the comedy show featuring two gay characters in lead roles won a Prime Time Emmy award for the best comedy series. Rossing (2016) issues a caution in understanding critical public pedagogy, stating:

to be sure, dominant groups may appropriate these oppositional voices; however, these critical projects also carry the potential to make visible dominant discourses, disrupt common sense, and struggle over identification and representation. As participants in ongoing struggles over hegemony, they create possibilities for reshaping material realities and power relations in ways that may disentrall culture from oppressive practices. (p. 617)

Certainly popular culture has a role to play in this regard. This includes movies, television, and historical fiction.

As noted, the purpose of the first research question was to focus on how readers' understandings of historical events changed, or didn't change, in light of their reading the text and discussing it in a book club. Viewing this from the lens of critical public pedagogy, there was affirmative evidence that readers changed their perspectives on the history detailed in *The Century Trilogy* books. The emergent themes from the interview data provided evidence that readers were surprised by some of the historical facts in the novels and were prompted to fact-check information that was being presented to them to see if it were accurate. This indicates that not only were readers being introduced to new historical information while reading the trilogy, but that they were so surprised and unsure by the foreignness of the new information that it prompted a further curiosity which led them to check the accuracy of the information. The combination of these two themes, presented below, show that readers did in fact change their understanding of the history surrounding the events presented in *The Century Trilogy*.

As noted in Chapter Four, many participants cited not knowing historical events took place; such as the Christmas Eve "truce" in No Man's Land during World War I, the backstory to Japanese aggression leading up to Pearl Harbor, the brutality that surrounded the Russian Revolution, post-Nazi Berlin, and the events surrounding the Civils Rights movement. Through the fictional write-up of these events, readers were able to better understand the socio-political climate and context of the event. For example, Douglas, a high-school English teacher, mentioned in his interview that he never understood why Japan attacked the United States until reading *Winter of the World* (the second book in the series), stating "the part where the Dewar

family is sitting at dinner discussing how the United States was cutting off Japan economically, you realize that they really didn't have a choice (to attack).”

One of the surprising themes which emerged from the data was the participants' desire to fact-check the history being presented in *The Century Trilogy* or explore different caveats of history more deeply. Kemp and Parish (2010) explain that one of the goals of critical public pedagogy is to empower the learner to want to acquire more knowledge about their context. The fact that many of the participants curiosity was piqued by reading the series shows that critical public pedagogy is occurring; for the participants wanted to further their consciousness surrounding the history being told and actively sought out other avenues to do so.

During the interview process, nine of the sixteen participants admitted to checking into the historical accuracy of what they were reading. In today's age of the smart phone, fact-checking is only a few fingertip clicks away. Other participants admitted that they read something which caused them to look for other historical fictions books surrounding the topic; Douglas noted that he was looking for a book from the Japanese perspective of World War II, while Mark and Jim both admitted to wanting to look further into the Spanish Civil War. Historical fiction, therefore, is a mode of popular culture which can truly awaken a reader and their desire to learn.

As cautioned earlier in this chapter, it is important to remember that critical public pedagogy operates on a continuum and not all critical literature is equally critical. In the case of *The Century Trilogy*, some of the historical content and characters are certainly depicting a storyline that is divergent from that of the dominant discourse. However, one limitation of this study (which will be further discussed later on in this chapter) and the use of *The Century Trilogy* books is that the grand scope of the story being told (100 years of world history) does not

allow for any of the characters or historical events to be too deeply explored. While the characters and historical events being portrayed are sometimes critically depicted, they would certainly be more critical on a critical public pedagogical continuum if they could be explored in more depth.

Connection to Characters and Critical Reflection

The second research question of this study aims to understand whether a readers' connection to a fictional character has a role in how a reader formulates and critically reflects on the historical information presented to them through *The Century Trilogy* books. Unlike textbook reading, fiction provides an enjoyable and creative way to present information about historical events and the larger historical socio-political climate. Through fiction, characters are introduced to readers not only to present the historical information, but also to provide a narrative that keeps readers interested. One of the main tenets of both non-formal and informal learning is that it is a learning endeavor that is often taken for personal enjoyment (Taylor, 2006, McLean, 2013; Biniecki, 2015). As it is the goal of fictional writers to create characters that readers can connect with for enjoyment, from a non-formal learning perspective, characters and the fictional work itself are then solely a vessel from which to present knowledge.

Non-Formal Learning. As has been summarized in Chapter Four the research data shows that the participants unanimously found themselves connecting to at least one of the many characters in *The Century Trilogy* novels. Furthermore, participants often found themselves connecting with characters of their own gender or whom they could see elements of their own personalities within the character. Biniecki (2015) argues that this is to be expected, as participants in non-formal learning activities bring their past experiences into any new experience and thus, project it on their future learning and understanding (p. 128). However,

while learners may bring in their past experiences, connections to characters in fiction can still forge a deeper understanding on social justice issues and critical awareness (Lawrence, 2008; Shrestha, Wilson, & Singn, 2008). While predictably, many of the participants connected to the characters they felt most in common with, there were still many interview participants who felt connections to characters they did not expect: including characters of different genders and race, but also connections with the characters pegged as the “bad guys.” These connections seemingly helped the reader emotionally connect to, and critically reflect on, the historical events and settings being presented.

In Chapter Four, the theme of being deeply disturbed by brutality is discussed, as many interview participants and discussions on the online forums being analyzed centered on the bad events that befell the characters. One prevailing theme from this study was the outrage at some of the social injustices that were previously unknown to the participant, such as the atrocities of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, the hard realities of Russians during the Russian Revolution, and the brutality that occurred in Russian-occupied Berlin at the end of World War II. Some of the discussion surrounding *The Century Trilogy* on the online discussion forums which were analyzed centered on the harshness of Ken Follett’s writing of some of these historical instances. One of the tenants of the framework of non-formal learning in adult education is based on how learning is formed through the arts. Lawrence (2008) presented an argument that learning can occur through reading literature and interacting with other art forms. Others argue that through the arts, a person can be challenged to investigate injustices (Spehler & Slattery, 1999). Thus, if one of the tenants of non-formal learning, especially arts-based non-formal learning, is to disturb the status-quo and show a non-dominant narrative; then the data

from this dissertation corroborates this theory and perhaps indicates that the participant's knowledge was reconstructed.

While it can be assumed that the readers did not set out to be disturbed by the literature, the connections they forged with characters brought on new learning and understanding of some of the hard historical realities being discussed. Based on these emergent themes of character connections in the data set, it seems there is sufficient evidence to support the idea that reader participants connections with and empathy for the various characters of *The Century Trilogy* incidentally furthered their understanding of the historical events being presented in the books.

Critical Public Pedagogy. As noted in Chapter Four, many interview participants and bloggers highlighted their emotional connections to characters and the historical events the characters found themselves in. The fact that many of the readers formed emotional connections to the historical events and fictional characters being depicted reinforces the idea that a novel can be a space of critical public pedagogy. Hogan and Cranton (2015) explain “by allowing the reader insight into the lived reality of character and the worlds different from one's own, literature is uniquely capable of expanding one's sympathies in a way that real life cannot do” (p.12). Many of the participants cited feeling empathy for the fictional characters being portrayed and further, citing that their connection to characters forced them to “see it from someone else's shoes,” as a participant, Valerie, stated. Citing *The Century Trilogy's* German characters, many participants admitted that they had never sought to understand the perspective of a German citizen during World War II.

According to Giroux (1994) people understand their own identities and the identities of others through their perception of themselves and others as perpetuated through and presented by popular culture. Unsurprisingly, the majority of popular culture surrounding the history of

World War I and World War II paints Germans as villainous. The participants consistently stated that they had never taken into account the perspective of a German citizen who was against the Nazi's and against the war. Rachel states "I never stopped to think that there may have been Germans against the war and how hard that must have been for them." Through the Von Ulrich family characters portrayed in the book, readers followed a family fought to stop World War I, was part of an opposition party prior to World War II, and ultimately was devastated by the Nazi's of their own country.

Additionally, participants in this study forged connections with many of the characters which led them to have emotional reactions. In the interview process, many of the participants said that their emotional connections to the characters caused them to understand a historical event differently. In one particular interview a participant, Valerie, began to cry and asked for a moment to collect herself when discussing the character George Jakes where his storyline centered on the Freedom Rides. A tenant of critical public pedagogy is the deconstruction of contextually dominant knowledge (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013). Mezirow and Associates (2000) argue that "imagination is central to understanding the unknown, it is the way we examine alternative interpretations of our experience by trying on another's point of view" (p.20). The connection to George Jakes character, an African American and champion of Civil Rights, by so many of the all-Caucasian participants shows that literature can be effective in illustrating a non-dominant perspective and thus, forcing readers to challenge their previously unchallenged historical beliefs.

As noted in Chapter Four, many of the participants also found relationships with the characters based on their own gender identity. Many of the female participants cited Ethel Leckwith as their favorite character because of her enduring spirit and fight for women's rights.

Most of the participants who connected with one character or another specifically cited their reason for a connection was because they saw a bit of themselves, or who they would like to perceive themselves to be if they were in that particular historical context, in the character. It was these connections which were often cited as the strongest, largely because the participant could realistically see the character as themselves and thus, see themselves living through the history.

Even characters in *The Century Trilogy* who were “the bad guys” found sympathy from the participants. Lev Peshkov, the criminal brother of Grigori who left a pregnant woman and ran to the United States, only to become a bootlegging gangster, was one of the characters who was often cited in the interview discussions. Chocka says “even Lev, you want to shake him, but at the same time you want to root for him too.” The same is true of Lord Fitzherbert; the father of Ethel Leckwith’s child (who he never claimed as his own) and a follower of fascism. A few participants mentioned being able to understand the contextual forces which caused him to do the things that he did or that he was a “victim of his circumstances.” Christine Jarvis (2012), in her discussion of fiction and empathy, describes this an empathetic anger and argues that empathy and empathetic anger have the potential to promote social justice. Therefore, the power of historical fiction in showing readers differing perspectives is not limited to the characters that are well-liked.

According to Mezirow and Associates (2000) “imagination is central to understanding the unknown, it is the way we examine alternative interpretations of our experience by trying on another’s point of view” (p.20). In the connection to characters, whether the character is completely opposite of themselves or they connected to the character because they drew similarities with themselves, the participants in this study were clearly “trying on” others points

of view. Throughout the interviews, participants mentioned that the characters made them understand a different perspective. *The Century Trilogy* was chosen as the subject for this study because it presents the storylines of characters from each main “front” of the twentieth century; Russia, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States. While these books are not perfect in presenting all of the major contexts which shaped the twentieth century (they lack a Japanese character, for example), they do present multiple perspectives which were effective in forming or reforming the historical understanding of the participants.

While this study provides evidence that participants were gaining insight through the literary experiences of *The Century Trilogy* characters, it should be noted that often works of media, including literature, both reinforce and challenge hegemony at the same time. “Certainly popular culture has a seemingly unlimited potential to control, to misinform, and to manipulate; however, the reverse may also be true” (Wright & Sandlin, 2009).

Critical Public Pedagogy, the Book Club, and Confronting Previously Held Assumptions

The third research question centered on understanding how readers constructed or reconstructed their understanding of history based on reading and discussing *The Century Trilogy* books. Critical public pedagogy seeks to unmask the forces of dominance and privilege which control ones understanding (Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2013). There is evidence in the thematic data which indicates that readers gained depth in their overall understandings of the historical information presented in *The Century Trilogy* from their book club conversations. Furthermore, there is evidence that overall, participants found value in historical fiction as it relates to their overall contextual understanding of history and historical events.

Dialogue in critical public pedagogy. In the data, it was indicated that dialogue between book club members often led to understanding of different peoples’ perspectives on the books

and therefore enabled them to learn through another's experiences. According to Tisdell and Thompson (2007), "human beings do not find knowledge, they construct it" (p. 656), and they do so partly by their experiences as consumers of popular culture, including media and historical fiction, and their discussion of it. Evidence from the interview data surrounding the topic of book clubs and discussion forums showed that participants were introduced to and found value in the viewpoints of their book group members that were unlike their own. One of the criteria for this study was that interview participants had to have not only read at least one of *The Century Trilogy* books, but must have discussed these books in an in-person book club or an online discussion forum. Jarvis (2006) notes that fiction can be a springboard for deeper discussion, as reading and discussing fiction can be a less threatening way to confront preconceived notions. Based on this criteria, a few questions were asked in the interview process about the book club experience. Overwhelmingly, interviewees saw value in the book club process. Chocka summarizes "our [the book club members] life experiences definitely play into our interpretation of the books." Chocka's fellow book club member, Scott, also notes that "somebody will always come up with something you hadn't thought of ... and you'll be like 'I hadn't thought of it from that perspective' and it kind of opens your mind to looking at it a different way." Indeed, research on book clubs finds that there is an increase in critical analysis and in some cases, participation in book clubs can enhance one's multicultural awareness (Mensah, 2009; Sedo, 2003; Switzer & Barclay, 2012; Alvarez-Alvarez, 2016).

The fact that the participants found added value in discussing the books in a book club or online discussion, and changed and expanded their historical understanding lends support to the fact that book clubs can indeed be a form of critical public pedagogy, particularly those that engage in critical dialogue. Many leading scholars (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010; Giroux, 2004;

Sandwell, 2003) believe that open dialogue is central to the goals of critical public pedagogy. Giroux (2004) notes that critical discussion is a keystone in understanding the competing power dynamics which shape ones understanding. Thus, if it can be argued that historical fiction literature written from multiple and non-dominant perspectives is a space where critical public pedagogy can occur, the role of the book club in creating a dialogue centering around the pedagogical material is crucial to forging a deeper understanding of the hegemonic forces that shape history.

Seeing the usefulness of historical fiction for critique. Last but not least, without prompting, almost all of the participants provided their own thoughts on the usefulness of historical fiction literature. As discussed in the fourth chapter, many of the participants enjoy historical fiction because it allows them to take a step back in time and follow characters through historical events. While the enjoyment factor of historical fiction is certainly part of its usefulness and will be discussed later, it can be said that historical fiction is a form of critical public pedagogy.

Overall, participants found that reading historical fiction literature opened their eyes to perspectives they otherwise would not have understood as fully. *The Century Trilogy* is full of counter narratives that explain the power dynamics of the twentieth century. Through literature, the reader can be put in the shoes of the *other*, causing an empathetic connection. The concept of empathy is a pillar of critical public pedagogy (Hoggan & Cranton, 2015; Jarvis, 2012). Jarvis (2012) states that fiction can promote transformation through the “process which learners undergo with their engagements to fiction” (p. 754) while Hoggan and Cranton (2015) explain that “literature is uniquely capable of expanding one’s sympathies” (p. 12).

While many of the participants agreed that historical fiction was an effective avenue for presenting the overall power dynamics behind a historical event, a few participants cautioned that it should not be a substitute for formal learning. Furthermore, in the data from the online discussion forums, many of the participants thought that the trilogy had a political bias. As discussed in Chapter TWO of this dissertation, the usefulness of historical fiction depends largely on the accuracy of the history being presented and the amount of research done by the author.

Implications for Theory and Practice in Adult Education

The study and the discussion above offer a number of implications for theory and practice. From its onset, this study has been grounded in the theoretical frameworks of critical public pedagogy and non-formal learning. Both of these theoretical fields provide support to teaching and learning in adult education. The implications for adult education, non-formal learning, and critical public pedagogy will be laid out in the next section.

Implications for Theory

Reviewing the findings presented in Chapter Four, there are a few theoretical implications which can be made in the field of adult education. First, the data supported the idea that a readers understanding of historical events is altered through reading and discussing *The Century Trilogy* books. As highlighted in Chapter Four, almost all of the participants were surprised by some elements of the historical information being presented. This is supported by the emergent themes of participants being surprised by brutality, not understanding the rise of World War I, or having to further research certain events being described in the book to see if they were being written accurately. This is also confirmed by the themes surrounding participation in book clubs or online book discussion forums; where many participants cited that

their discussion with others and learning others perspectives helped them formulate their own understanding of the books and the history being presented. Overall, this study clearly supports the notion that reading historical fiction can be a critical form of non-formal learning as critical public pedagogy. This study also supports the idea that historical fiction literature is an art-form of popular culture which triggers learning, not only in the understanding of the historical event but in formulating at times a more critical perspective of history. Nevertheless, it is important to point out here, that the extent to which a text or series of texts such as portrayed in *The Century Trilogy* exist on a continuum on the extent to which they are critical. None of the stories and historical events portrayed in *The Century Trilogy* were *too* critically explored. These expansive books total almost 3,000 pages; yet cover 100 years (roughly) of world history, so this is not necessarily a criticism of Follett per se, but rather something to point out that has theoretical implications for public pedagogy and critical public pedagogy.

Too often issues in critical pedagogy are portrayed as either/or -- some text or action critiques the power structure or it does not. But the fact of the matter is that many texts of public pedagogy whether they be movies, television, songs or fictional books including historical fiction are multidimensional: they may be critical in some respects in terms of challenging of the dominant culture, or they can reinforce it in other ways. Hence critical public pedagogy exists on a continuum, and should be recognized as such. While some authors have touched on this (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010; Rossing, 2016; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007), it needs to be discussed further in theoretical considerations of critical public pedagogy.

It is important to note that the theoretical framework of non-formal learning lends itself to the more critical framework of critical public pedagogy, which also explores the spaces where learning occurs outside of the bounds of formal education. According to Manglitz (2003), the

history of minorities and non-dominant groups is often taught in ways that position it as secondary history that needs special attention in addition to the dominant group. One of the goals of critical adult education to unmask hegemonic forces and power structures (Bowl & Tobias, 2012; Brookfield, 2000; Mezirow, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Giroux, 2004; Friere, 1970; Shore, 2001). Thus, the findings in this study that suggest that participants were able to “try on another’s shoes” through reading indicate that there are some critically educative properties to reading and discussing fiction literature. Rossing (2016) supports this notion and argues that it is the goal of critical public pedagogy to “struggle against dominant discourses that sustain social injustices” and makes the case that “critical public pedagogy has the potential to redirect how people look at the world, what we see, and the value we assign to what we see” (, p. 617). The findings of this study indicate that participants, in the last, learned new historical viewpoints in their experiences reading *The Century Trilogy*.

A further implication of this research study is that it could be relevant to the research on empathy and adult education. Some adult educators believe that emotional empathy can lead to experiences which promote transformative learning (Hoggan & Cranton, 2015; Jarvis, 2012). As noted, many of the participants in this study revealed that they forged connections to the characters and had emotional responses to some of the brutality and situations which the characters encountered.

While this is a qualitative dissertation and the findings are not meant to be generalizable, the findings of this study can, at the very least, inform theory and practice in formal education settings. The idea that formal historical learning and understanding is dictated by the dominant culture was thoroughly explored in Chapter Two. Stanton (2015) argues that historical learning is Eurocentric and largely ignores diverse perspectives. While others (Chirobocea, 2017;

Erkkila, 2015; Immerwahr, 2008; Slotkin, 2005) argue that it is reasonable to critically analyze the written historical record based on the motives of the authors. Many proponents of historical education believe that history should be taught using multiple perspectives and voices so that students can be presented with all sides and voices of a historical event (Barton, 2002; Bartol & Richardson, 1998, Sandwell, 2003). While there is not much academic research surrounding the use of fiction in adult education, there are some arguments surrounding media literacy and public pedagogy which suggest that literature can be a space for marginalized stories to be told (Hoggan & Cranton, 2014; Lawrence & Cranton, 2015; Jarvis, 2002). In that respect, this study adds to the body of literature on historical fiction as an educative tool.

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings of this study, reading historical fiction can be a form of critical public pedagogy. This has implications for the practice of both formal adult education and non-formal adult education. In formal educational settings, instructors could use critical historical fiction literature to dispel dominant discourses; by using it as a critical form of teaching and finding creative ways to engage students in dialogue. This applies not only to historical fiction literature which attempts to unmask the power structures which reinforce the dominant historical narrative, but to other types of literature as well (Jarvis, 2012). This idea is supported by some adult educators, who have found that media sources can challenge traditional norms and represent those who are not always represented in the dominant culture (Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2013; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007, Giroux, 1994). The possible suggestions for learning based on the findings of this study will be addressed in this section.

As I've discussed, some media forms of public pedagogy are critical and meant to dispute and unmask hegemonic forces while others simply reaffirm dominant discourses. Knowing this,

and in light of the results of this study, an implication for practice would be for adult educators who choose to use historical fiction literature in their classrooms to thoroughly investigate the media they are presenting to their classes; deciding whether the historical content being presented is told from a non-dominant perspective and additionally, investigating the authors research methods, possible motives, and positionality (McTigue, Thornton, & Wiese, 2012). It's noted earlier in this chapter that *The Century Trilogy* is not the most critical historical fiction literature available. However, this study implies that readers can change their understandings based on reading historical fiction, and therefore, adult educators could choose very critical historical fiction literature to present non-dominant narratives of history to their classrooms. In practice, the presentation of these non-dominant historical perspectives would be beneficial not only for the historical learning that could occur, but in enlightening students to the hegemonic forces that have constructed their prior understanding of history and culture (Brookfield, 2005; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2013). A practice such as this, introducing students to alternative perspectives that compete with what their prior perceptions, can not only open a students' eyes to new information but prompt them to critically analyze prior and new knowledge (Hoggan & Cranton, 2015; Jarvis, 2012).

Additionally, this study implies that through the empanthetical connections that participants forged with the fictional characters of *The Century Trilogy*, the participants were able to better understand the complexities of the history being presented. Participants noted that they were able to see things from another's point of view and even found themselves empathizing with some of the stories villains. In practice, an adult educator could choose a text to review in class that has deeply drawn and developed characters whose stories are presented in such a manner that it could encourage a reader to empathize with them. As noted by Hoggan and

Cranton (2015), the feeling of empathy for another can lead to perspective transformations. If an adult educator is seeking to teach critically and perhaps, even from a transformative learning pedagogy, then creating situations which stimulate critical thinking and empathy (through fiction) could be useful to this end (Hoggan & Cranton, 2015, Jarvis, 2012).

One further recommendation for practice that can be drawn from the findings of this study is that the use of book discussion groups is indeed useful as a form of adult education. As mentioned in the previous sections, historical fiction literature has the potential to assist readers in seeing alternative perspectives which can reshape their understandings. With this said, much of the literature surrounding critical public pedagogy includes the belief that critical dialogue surrounding the space where critical public pedagogy occurs is crucial in achieving its full learning potential (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013; Giroux, 2004; Sandwell, 2003). Therefore, in an adult education classroom, a critical instructor could not only address the issues of hegemony and dominant discourse by assigning a piece of critical historical fiction literature, but they could further the learning objectives by facilitating a discussion or book groups on the texts.

While some of the findings of this study can be transferred to practical application in a formal adult education classroom or setting, the crux of this study examines non-formal learning. Therefore, there are some practical implications which could be applied to non-formal learning settings, such as book groups, book discussion forums, or for the individual reader of historical fiction literature. First, participants in book groups could apply a lens of critical public pedagogy to their reading lists by choosing books that tell their stories from a non-dominant perspective or multiple perspectives. Book group members could then discuss and question the motivations and research methods of the author, including their positionality. Asking these type of questions would serve as one form of critical public pedagogy by critically analyzing the source of the

historical information their consuming. Secondly, book groups could seek to discuss the literature they read from a critical lens. This could be done by asking questions which probed the hierarchical structures and hegemonic forces as they were depicted in the historical literature and history as a whole. Questions such as “what forces caused the character to act the way they did?” or “what were the larger controlling forces which can explain or shed light on the situation\historical event?” would add to a critical dialogue of historical fiction literature. Lastly, for the individual reader – who is the ultimate non-formal learner- they could simply be more self-aware of these forces as their reading novels and more critically reflective of the information presented to them both in the past and in present.

Limitations, Strength and Suggestions for Future Research

As with all research, this study has some limitations. I will discuss these limitations here and then suggest ways in which future research could bridge the gaps this study was unable to fill. Additionally, I will discuss areas where future and further research could be conducted to enhance the literature in adult education.

Limitations and Strengths

While this study did its best to limit bias and to be as diverse as possible, there are still some limitations to this study which must be discussed. First and foremost, while the interview participants were diverse in geographical location, gender, and age; there was no racial diversity amongst the participants. All of the participants identified as Caucasian. A further limitation is that there was no concrete data collected on the socio-economic status of the participants. With this said, most of the interview participants self-identified their employment or education background and it can be inferred that most of the participants would fall into the upper-middle class (or upper class) categories. Therefore, the sample set of interview participants lacks both

racial and socio-economic diversity which is a limitation of the data outcomes. Alternatively, the sample population from the review of online discussion posts cannot be quantified in any meaningful way; as there is no way to know the demographic data of the posters. Future research on readers of historical fiction with a more diverse sample population would provide more depth to this research.

A second obvious limitation of this study is the study centered only on *The Century Trilogy* books. The books of *The Century Trilogy* were chosen for this study for two main reasons: (1) they depict historical events using characters from multiple perspectives of the same events and (2) they are widely popular and largely read. However, the books themselves are a limitation for a number of reasons. One, they are authored by a Caucasian, British, and wealthy male. While author Ken Follett is known for his attention to historical detail in his writing, it is obviously from a perspective, and every perspective has bias (whether intentional or not). It was noted in both the interview and document data that there were undertones in the books which seemed to have a liberal bias. Furthermore, participant Chocka, the only participant from Eastern Europe noted that there was a Western bias to the books. While there are limitations with any text, a possible implication for further research would be to explore how other works of historical fiction, and book clubs discussion of it affect people's understanding of history. Further, differences could be examined by audiences more specifically in different parts of the world. Given that many participants noted glaring admissions of the historical record that were not covered; a Japanese perspective, the Vietnam War, the Holocaust, to name a few. Furthermore, with the sheer number of perspectives, characters, and years to cover; none of the historical events were delved into too deeply. It would be very interesting to replicate this study using a more critical text on only one period of history or one event.

A third limitation (and strength) of the study relates to my own biases and expectations, that offers further implications for research. The study unfolded differently than I expected in a number of ways. First, the sample group selected for the interview process reached much further, geographically and demographically, than I expected. Secondly, while I expected some of the themes which emerged with prevalence from the data such as the usefulness of historical fiction and participants having an emotional connection to characters; others took me completely off-guard, such as fact-checking and making connections with today's society. This in and of itself, that a researcher can be wholly surprised by the outcomes of their own study, supports the notion that research in adult education is important and necessary.

I also did not expect the thematic data to be different between the interview data and the online book discussion forums, but it was. The online discussion forums that were reviewed to triangulate data from the participant interviews showed two themes which either were not present at all in the interview process, or were discussed only by one participant in very minor detail. The two themes which arose from the online discussion forums were a perception of a liberal bias from author Ken Follett and the belief that some of the characters were too unrealistic. As mentioned, neither of these themes were prevalent in the interview process. There are a few reasons that could explain this dichotomy in the data set. First, the presence (albeit over the phone) of the researcher could have caused interviewees to hold back on making negative statements about the author or *The Century Trilogy* as a whole. While I indicated at the beginning of each interview that I was not looking for a review of the book, but rather exploring their experience in reading and discussing the series, my presence as a researcher could have caused them to remain positive about the literature. Another explanation is that the online discussion forums are a place for readers to review and discuss books. In many instances, one or

two bloggers made a statement regarding political bias or unbelievable characters and many other bloggers commented on that same discussion thread. Therefore, the discussion took a “follow the leader” approach, so to speak, and could the discussion could have been swayed by the opinions of a few posters. Additionally, as book reviews are often mixed with positive and negative thought, the discussion forum simply could have been a place where readers felt compelled to critically review the text. Lastly, without the presence of a researcher in the review of online discussion forums, the discussion was led by others and therefore, not following any preset questions framed around the nature of this study. All of these could be plausible explanations for the differing data sets between the interview data and the analysis of online discussion boards. Hence and implication for further study, would be related to examining through discourse analysis how the dynamics of online discussion boards related to historical fiction tend to unfold when the discussion becomes the most engaging and the most critical. Such analyses could be conducted with a number of foci in mind, such as a consideration of relationships to the issue being discussed, its parallels with current events, etc.

It is also important to note my own positionality and how it could have affected the research process. As a fish is in water, I am a middle-class, white, American female and am limited to the worldview and constructs that surround and mold me. Therefore, my own experiences have undoubtedly affected each step of this research process; including the interviews and analysis of the data using the constant comparison method. Nevertheless, in spite of the above limitations, the study itself has a number of strengths. First, while there were some limitations to the pool of interview participants, there were also many strengths. The interview subset included diversity in age, gender, and especially geographic location; with seven participants coming from outside of the United States. The addition of an analysis of the

goodreads.com discussion board to the interview data is an additional strength to this study; as it not only enabled me to triangulate the interview data, but it provided a data set that was free of researcher/interviewer bias. Although qualitative data is not meant to be generalizable, the qualitative nature of this study and the wealth of interview data from sixteen participants is an additional strength to this study. Many of the interview participants engaged in an interview lasting over an hour long and the ability to ask follow-up questions to truly gauge the educational experiences of the participants provided for thick, rich data to be used for analysis.

Suggestions for Further Research

In light of the research findings, implications for theory and practice, and also some of the limitations of this study where some suggestions for further research were made, there are a few more. First, it would be interesting to explore the research questions of this dissertation as an action research study in both a formal learning environment, like an adult education classroom, and a non-formal book group. This would allow a researcher to observe the dynamic of the class or book group and ask more meaningful questions based on the responses and reactions of the group. Secondly, it would be interesting to explore this study using a more critical historical fiction novel. As will be discussed in the limitations section of this chapter, *The Century Trilogy* was chosen for reasons that made it practical to the aim of this study, but it is certainly not the most critical piece of historical fiction literature that exists. Therefore, if a more critical text could be chosen that takes a deep and profound look at a specific historical event from a non-dominant perspective, it could provide more meaningful results to the field of adult education and critical public pedagogy. Lastly, it could behoove the field of adult education to replicate this study using the researcher as the moderator of an online book

discussion forum. As with an action research study, this would enable the qualitative researcher to ask more probing questions and perhaps provide more thick, rich data to report.

Conclusion and Personal Reflections

This study aimed to explore the experiences of historical fiction readers and how they made connections to the literature. The findings of this study indicate that historical fiction literature written from a non-dominant perspective can be educative and in some instances, critically educative. The participants of this study overwhelmingly found that they learned new historical information through reading *The Century Trilogy* books and indicated that they were introduced to alternative perspectives through reading and connections to the novels characters. This study also finds that book groups and online book discussion forums are spaces of non-formal learning where critical reflection occurs. Participants in this study found added value to their learning experiences when discussing the books in their book groups and listening to other members' viewpoints and perceptions of the reading.

With this said, there are larger implications towards society as a whole through the use of literature which expands beyond the traditional or adult education classroom. This study supports the body of literature which explores the use of literature in non-formal learning, especially that in book clubs or book discussion forums, as spaces of critical public pedagogy. This study could add to the body of literature on the use of fiction as critical public pedagogy in education, a subject that is only shallowly researched in adult education.

In conclusion, this study adds value to the field of adult education in both theory and practice. As the findings of this study demonstrate, historical fiction literature, and book club

discussions surrounding historical fiction literature, has the potential to be a space of critical public pedagogy which can be utilized in both teaching and learning. The findings of this study indicated that critical reflection did come from reading historical fiction. With this in mind, hopefully, this study will be a contribution to the field of adult education; especially in the areas of critical public pedagogy, non-formal learning, and the use of historical fiction literature in educative settings. If history is truly written by the victors, may this study contribute to learning the stories of those underrepresented and oppressed voices; showing and teaching us the larger, more complex historical picture.

A Personal Reflection

It's been nearly 8 years since I began my journey as a doctoral student and what a journey it's been. After breezing through and completing the coursework in 2014, I stalled out in the process of writing my dissertation. While I'm personally responsible for most of the "stalling;" I have had two children in these five years, dealt with the death of my father (who was truly my best friend and biggest cheerleader) and dealt with being diagnosed with and treated for breast cancer. As with the outcomes of this study, life unfolded a little differently than I expected.

Most of my struggles in writing this dissertation and completing this study surrounded landing on a topic that was important to me and interesting enough for me to carry through. My dissertation topic started as an action research study on short-term study abroad programs. An idea I scrapped when I became pregnant with my first child and realized I didn't want to leave his side, even for a short-term study abroad trip. I then shifted my focus from travel to another of my passions; reading historical fiction. I joke often with my students and colleagues that I'm

a “history nerd” in disguise, as most of them do not know that my bachelor’s degree is in history and that I enjoy reading historical fiction in my (limited) leisure time. Luckily, I landed on topic that merged my love of historical fiction with the field of adult education. I truly believe that this study provides value to the field of adult education in understanding how reading historical fiction can promote critical thinking. Furthermore, I believe this study provides value to the arenas’ of critical public pedagogy and non-formal learning.

On a personal note, completing this study has changed me as a researcher and as an educator. I realize that I have a responsibility to promote critical thinking and critical education in all spaces where I am able to do so; through formal and informal educational practice. Furthermore, I realize the importance of reading critical literature and how impactful historical fiction literature written from a critical perspective can be. To me, it’s not enough to simply be a critical educator in formal practice, but to live and breathe critical education. It’s my goal to espouse to the masses, from every pulpit and platform I’m given, the importance of critical reflection, critical dialogue, understanding the perspective of *others*, promoting empathy, and deconstructing hegemony. If my platform is to do this through promoting critical historical fiction literature, then so be it, but as I said, life has a funny way of unfolding differently than the way you anticipate. I’m hopeful and optimistic about what my future holds.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you describe your experience reading *The Century Trilogy* books?
2. Can you describe your prior knowledge on the events in these books (World War I & II, Cold War, Civil Rights Movement)?
3. Overall, do you think your understanding of the historical events described in the books altered in any way after reading them?
 - If so, how did your understanding change?
4. Discussing the first book, centered around World War I, was there anything you read that surprised you?
 - What about book two, which centered around World War II?
 - What about book three, which centered around the Civil Rights Movement and the Cold War?
5. Overall, did you find yourself connecting to any of the characters?
 - If so, which characters did you find yourself connecting to?
 - Why do you think that is?
 - Do you think that your connection to the characters had any effect on changing or altering your understanding of the historical events discussed?
6. Where there any events described in the books that had an emotional effect on you?
 - If so, which events?
 - Why do you think you had an emotional reaction to these particular events?
 - Do you think that this emotional connection had any effect on changing or altering your understanding of the historical events discussed?
7. Can you describe the experience of discussing these books in a book club or discussion forum?
8. Do you think that discussing these books in a book club/discussion forum altered your understanding of the texts?
9. Did any of the viewpoints expressed by other members of the book club/discussion forum surprise you?

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