Uprising by Margaret Peterson Haddix

Compelling Historical Fiction For Teens

Around her the workers were screaming out prayers and curses.... She herself was sobbing tearlessly.... Her only prayer was still, I dont want to die.Oh, please, God, dont let me die, she thought. Ive never even had a chance to live.Bella, newly arrived in New York from Italy, gets a job at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. There, along with hundreds of other immigrants, she works long hours at a grueling job under terrible conditions. Yetta, a coworker from Russia, has been crusading for a union, and when factory conditions worsen, she helps workers rise up in a strike. Wealthy Jane learns of the plight of the workers and becomes involved with their cause. Bella and Yetta are at work -- and Jane is visiting the factory -- on March 25, 1911, when a spark ignites some cloth and the building is engulfed in fire, leading to one of the worst workplace disasters ever.Margaret Peterson Haddix draws on extensive historical research to bring the tragedy of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire to tangible life through her thrilling story of Bella, Yetta, and Jane.

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My Personal Review:

On March 25, 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory burned down, killing 146 garment workers, mostly women, mostly immigrants, and of an average age of 19. The largest industrial accident ever in New York City, this incident is in every U.S. History textbook. This fire changed the idea that in a free country, government could not regulate business. Locked doors, decrepit fire escapes, short fire ladders and hoses that couldn't spray water high enough prevented the workers from finding safety. This tragedy shocked the nation and spurred the recognition of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union.

This is what students will learn in their textbooks. But in Margaret Peterson Haddix's book of historical fiction, readers will get to know the people who lived (and died) around this event. The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire is so much more than a story about government regulation of business. It is a story about the irony of the American dream. People came (and still come) to this country to have the freedom to find a better life. So often, the pursuit of that better life has meant finding a way to profit handsomely from someone else's labor. Such was the case with the institution of slavery,
with indentured servitude, and with factory labor. One hundred years after this fire, remnants of this irony still tear at this free nation’s dream.

Haddix has been a popular author in my middle grade classrooms. Her Shadow Children Series, futuristic fantasy about population police hunting down illegal third children, was well-liked and read avidly by both boys and girls. So far I have given Uprising to a few ninth grade girls. Even though they were not fans of historical fiction, they all really liked this book. One of them commented that it didn’t matter what the genre or the subject matter was, really good writing can make any book worth reading.

When students ask why they have to study history, they are told they need to understand history in order not to repeat it. Well-written historical fiction like Uprising delivers that understanding by giving young readers fully dimensional people who lived the history. Appropriate for readers as young as sixth grade, Uprising is a book I would recommend for anybody who likes to learn something about history while reading a great story.
Gaby Chapman

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