



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“You know all about the Middle Ages,” he said to Kivrin, “so I thought perhaps you’d help me get ready, you know, teach me things.”

“You’re not old enough,” she said. “It’s very dangerous...It won’t be anything like you expect.”

-From *Doomsday Book* by
Connie Willis

When I was in elementary school, my least favorite topic was what was then called social studies. This meant studying the cultures, geography and history of various places in the world. I can’t tell you why I disliked it, except that it didn’t hold my interest the way arithmetic or writing did and, consequently, it was my weakest subject.

This disinterest in history continued through high school and college; in fact, I don’t think I ever took a history class after high school. And yet my life has been full of historical events: I was a teenager during the Vietnam War, I remember where I was when I heard about the assassinations of both Kennedys, as well as Martin Luther King. I lived in Paris during the 1968 country-wide strikes and in Berkeley during the People’s Park marches and student strikes. So you could say these recent (to me) happenings have impacted my life. Yet I have continued in my

oblivion about the ways events like these in every country have shaped the world and consequently the society we live in.

In the last several years, I have become more and more aware of my inadequacy in this area. Furthermore, working as a children’s librarian has definitely highlighted it. When the annual questions about ancient Egypt start each fall, I think again about what I don’t know and I am impressed by what the children do know. At the adult reference desk, I am nervous when someone starts a question with: “What century did...” And living in a community like Albany, where so many of the library users are from other countries, makes me constantly conscious of the holes in my history background, since what I do know is centered on the history of the United States.

As I’ve been contemplating this, I realized that much of my information has come from historical fiction of some kind. For example, *The Time Warp*

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Trio is a children’s series in which students visit various periods in history. I have read other children’s books on such topics as leprosy, Shakespeare, slavery in the United States and World War II London. One of my favorites is *Doomsday Book* by Connie Willis, which I have read and reread. This engrossing, enlightening and beautifully written book tells the story of a young historian, who has traveled back into the Middle Ages, just at the peak of the plague.

However, my history knowledge is neither sweeping nor in-depth, and nothing has made this fact more glaring than the conversations that abound in my Arabic class. I am taking this class at the Albany Adult School, and so far, I love it. There is a beauty and logic to the writing that makes the challenge of learning a new alphabet a little less alarming. And, unexpectedly, I am being

exposed to a great deal of history, as my fellow classmates exchange comments about wars, people and the evolution of different languages and cultures.

It is stunning and exhilarating to listen to these conversations and nothing I have experienced so far – not even the repeated exposure to my physical anthropologist sister – has made me feel less adequate or more curious. I have finally reached the point my father predicted forty years ago, when I was complaining about having to study history and geography. Some day, he told me, you will want to know these things. Well, dad, I am there.