

Black Potatoes and Nory Ryan's Song

Historical Fiction/Nonfiction

Deanna French

Black Potatoes and *Nory Ryan's Song* were two emotion provoking novels. I loved both of them and felt very drawn in to each story. *Black Potatoes* was a pleasant surprise. I was not sure how much I'd enjoy the narrative since it is a nonfiction novel about the Irish potato blight, but it was so much more than that. I believe the accuracy amplified the story even more. I read *Nory Ryan's Song* after my nonfiction selection, because of that I felt I had more background and therefore had a greater understanding of the conditions Nory and her family faced from the very beginning. With that being said, Giff does a good job at bringing several of the conditions to light throughout the story. There are many parallel components between the two selections, which I feel gives strength to the accuracy of the nonfiction piece, there is more than one piece of literature reflecting the same information. *Black Potatoes* is like a wheel, it is a comprehensive narrative that educates the reader about life in Ireland, the farmer/laborer's dependency upon the potato, the blight and devastation it caused, faith, disease and the aid, or lack thereof, and more. It is about life and relationships; those who read it will be able to relate to the human component in it. *Nory Ryan's Song* is like a spoke of the wheel, where Giff focuses on a specific family and in doing so, ties the factual components of the famine into her story. I am glad I had the broad educated view prior to reading the fiction selection, but since each novel told such a great story, I believe I would have still enjoyed them if I had read them in reverse. Giff nails the criteria by which we evaluate historical fiction. I couldn't help but think of how blessed we are and then think of those less fortunate. Bartoletti addresses this and provides direction for those interested in helping out those in need (Bartoletti, p. 180).

The dust cover, bibliography and source section provide the reader with many resources the author consulted prior to writing this narrative, this adds to the accuracy and authenticity component by which we evaluate a nonfiction book (Bartoletti, p. 176-181). Regarding the use of up to date information, Bartoletti provides current information about the cause of the black potatoes. It is now known that *Phytophthora infestans*, a fungus, was responsible for the blight; scientists believe the fungus was in fertilizer which was spread on the potato crops (Bartoletti, 36-38). At the time of the blight, scientists felt it was from wet rot, according to Bartoletti. Nory Ryan's family believed it was the work of the sidhe (Giff, p. 55). The Irish famine presented a complex situation, as described in *Black Potatoes*, which involved mainly the British and Irish. It is hard to say if all view points are presented, some, mainly the British, may argue that Britain's efforts reduced the devastation, but from my view point, there was not enough information presented to add any weight to that argument. Certainly they helped, Bartoletti addresses this through the British prime minister's efforts as well contacting Queen Victoria. Britain wanted the Irish to make do and stand on their own; however, it angered me to read of landlords taking away the means for them to do so. I believe the facts presented in *Black Potato* show that the aid given was inadequate and it was untimely. I am of the belief if those capable of extending aid had done so in a timely and humane manner, the Irish would have not suffered to the extent that they did. I was infuriated when I read of the evictions, no matter the circumstances (Bartoletti, p. 106; Giff, p. 4). Landlords seized livestock to export when the Irish were starving to death (Bartoletti, p. 55-56; Giff, p. 92-101). In the beginning of the famine, when the starving people still had enough energy, there were riots, thus addressing the desperation families were feeling (Bartoletti, p. 57; Giff, p. 78). Many of the parallels are provided in text and illustration in *Black Potatoes*, several scenes depict the starving, their weak frames, and skin and bones (Bartoletti, p. 62, 66, 69, 82, 105). It was Giff's narrative and character development of Nory, Patch and Anna that brought me to tears over and over, my heart

broke, I held my little one and felt the emotions Nory felt for her little brother (Giff p. 106-107, 132-134).

The stories are written with great style and development, each building upon the events as the crisis of the Famine worsens. *Black Potatoes* especially progresses in a very organized fashion, which would have been difficult to work out due to the many events working together. I enjoyed the little bit of Irish language in the text and the glossary to accompany it, I'm thankful it was not too much as that may have been distracting. I appreciated the author's translations of names, Margaret Donovan is easier to read than Maigrhead Ni Dhonnabhain (Bartoletti, p. 180). While I liked the map and time line in *Black Potatoes*, I would have preferred it to be in the front of the book. The illustrations in *Black Potatoes* provided me with a better understanding of a scalp, what a steerage section of a boat looked like, and the sadness of a devastated village (Bartoletti, p. 112, 127, 169). I also appreciated the historical art as a means of educating the people living during the famine years, the art speaks volumes. While there were no illustrations in *Nory Ryan's Song*, I thought the photograph on the dust cover made Nory's character more real, I liked that. These novels were so well done; many age groups would benefit from reading them, perhaps then more people would look for places they can lend a helping hand.

Bibliography

Bartoletti, Susan Campbell. (2001). *Black potatoes: the story of the great Irish famine, 1845-1850*. New York: Houghton Mifflin. [multiple illustrators]

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Kiefer, B. Z. (2010). *Charlotte Huck's Children's Literature*. New York: McGraw-Hill. [Illustrated by Raphael Lopez]