



From The Desk Of

March 23, 1994

[REDACTED]

Mr. Brian Lamb
C-Span
400 Capital Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20001

Dear Brian:

My wife and I hate to miss any of your Booknote programs.

I hereby recommend an author for you to interview: Joy Hakim, author of "A History of US."

Her 10 books on American History are great reading for adults as well as for kids. She makes the usually dull history books come alive, as evidenced by the three enclosures, and by my own reading of the stories she tells about people and events

Joy is a personable character so would provide an interesting interview on your excellent program.

Ms. Joy Hakim

[REDACTED]
Virginia Beach, Va. 23451
[REDACTED]

Sincerely,



Va Beach, VA 23451-2206

Where We Stand

By Albert Shanker, President
American Federation of Teachers

A History Lesson

Children often complain that history is nothing but a bunch of boring facts, which they learn, write down on a test and then forget as soon as the test is over. "What's the point?" they ask.

Now, I can't see anything wrong with learning that Vasco Nunez de Balboa crossed the Isthmus of Panama and "discovered" the Pacific Ocean. But it's true that these facts are not especially interesting, or memorable, unless you know some of the story behind them—for instance, that Balboa and his men slogged through the steamy jungles of Panama and found another ocean where Europeans had no idea there was one. (They thought they'd already crossed the ocean separating Europe from China.)

History is an exciting story—and often not a pleasant one—about the real-life adventures of heroes, villains and people who are a little bit of both. Unfortunately, most children would never know that because the history textbooks they read are not written by story tellers, and the texts are so crammed with details that it's hard to follow what's going on—or to care about it in the least.

Joy Hakim, a former teacher and journalist, understands these problems, and she's written a new ten-volume history of the U.S., called *The History of Us*, for children ages 8 to 13. Hakim's history is wonderfully vivid and engaging, but it is more. Kids who read these books will get a grounding in U.S. history and the often difficult process by which we became a nation. They will also find out a lot about how to think about and understand the past.

Hakim's first volume, *The First Americans*, which is the only one published thus far, begins with the appearance of the original settlers—the ones who crossed the Bering Straits while woolly mammoths still roamed what would become the U.S. (We were all, Hakim remarks, once immigrants.) After talking about the peoples who inhabited this country before the Europeans appeared, she goes on to tell the grim but fascinating story of how the Europeans conquered the Americas.

Hakim is terrific at making a historical situation present to the imagination. Here's how she describes Cortez's wonder and admiration for the Aztec capital—which he was soon to destroy:

As he nears the city he rubs his eyes. He can hardly believe what he sees. Tenochtitlan is more beautiful than any city on earth, he says. It is an island, five miles square, surrounded by a glistening lake [that] . . . shines turquoise in the morning sun. Houses and public buildings are chalk-white or earth-red. Some are gilded, as if made of the gold the Spaniards covet.

Hakim does not flinch from presenting some of the most troubling things about our early history—like the brutal fact that the conquerors of the Americas enslaved the people they found living here, and, when these people died off or wouldn't work, imported African slaves to take their place. In the past, historians—especially those writing for children—would have glossed over all this. These days, some people say that this troubling record shows the rottenness of our whole civilization—from the beginning. Hakim is neither squeamish nor politically correct. She presents historical facts as something for readers to think and talk about—and learn from:

Slavery was common everywhere then, and it didn't seem wrong to many people; not to the Portuguese or the Arabs or the Dutch or the Spaniards or the Africans—who were all involved in selling human beings as slaves. . . .

In America the Aztec Indians practiced blood sacrifices; the Iroquois tortured their captives; the Mound Builders kept slaves. They didn't think that was wrong either.

How could people behave that way? Were they different from us? Not really. Slavery, torture, and religious intolerance have been around for a long time. It is always easy to do and think as everybody else does.

Many good, or partly good people, as Hakim points out, have done terrible things to others—usually in the belief that they were doing good. Does this absolve them from the results of their acts? Hakim does not say it does, but she does tell her readers that one of the uses of history is to enable the present to learn from the mistakes of the past.

The First Americans, volume I of *The History of Us*, is available from Oxford University Press, 20001 Evans Rd., Cary, NC 27513 for \$7.95, plus \$2 shipping and handling (credit card orders, 800-451-7556). Excerpts of two later volumes were published in the *American Educator*, Fall 1990. For a reprint, write Box A, AFT.



History is an exciting story about the real adventures of heroes, villains and people who are a little bit of both. But most children never find that out.

News from

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

200 Madison Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10016

(212) 679-7300

PRAISE FOR A HISTORY OF US

"Joy Hakim seems to have accomplished a miracle -- interesting kids in history. I can find nothing to criticize, and much to praise."

--James McPherson, Author
Battle Cry of Freedom

"We owe Joy Hakim a great debt of gratitude. These books have the potential to change the way [we] experience our country's history. And who knows, maybe some day soon we may even catch a kid sneaking one of them under the covers at night."

--Elizabeth McPike, Editor
American Educator Magazine

"A HISTORY OF US really involves young people in the story"

--Bob Edwards, Host of 'Morning Edition',
National Public Radio

"I really liked your book. I liked it so much I read the rest of the book on my own! That should mean a lot [sic] to you because I don't read much."

--Ned W.
5th grade student

"I had intended to scan the material...but when I started reading A HISTORY OF US I couldn't stop. [The] writing is fascinating, and I'm confident [it is] the most interesting history young people are getting these days."

--Ernest L. Boyer
President, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

"It is a fine piece of work...It really respects children, as the best children's literature does....I am convinced that the response to these particularly warm, entertaining, yet challenging books will be large, and what is more, will have important national results."

--Bernard A. Weisberger
Author, The Impact of Our Past: A History of the United States, From Sea to Shining Sea and Many People, One Nation

"A HISTORY OF US sets just the right tone, sustains interest, examines what history is and what it is not, and is a book of real substance that speaks directly to children."

--Jean Fritz
Author, The Double Life of Pocahontas and What's the Big Idea, Ben Franklin?

-- more --

What educators say about A HISTORY OF US

"I like this series a lot. It uses examples to illustrate concepts of history that really allow kids to see historical events in the present tense."

--Phyllis Clarke
4th grade teacher at
Heatherwood Elementary
in Boulder, Colorado

"These books are instant classics...highly recommended for the reading enjoyment of all Americans, young and old."

--George Coggan, 5th grade
teacher at East Elementary in
Punta Gorda, Florida

"Hakim's history is wonderfully vivid and engaging, but it is more. Kids who read these books will get a grounding in U.S. history and the often difficult process by which we became a nation. They will also find out a lot about how to think about and understand the past."

--Albert Shanker
President of the American
Federation of Teachers

"What a treat it would be for American youngsters to be able to read a fifth grade history textbook like this."

--Chester Finn
Director of the Education
Excellence Network