Why use *A World Lit Only By Fire* with your history students?

by Thomas Quinn Marabello

I taught AP European History for over a decade and started requiring students to read some of *A World Lit Only By Fire: The Medieval Mind and The Renaissance, Portrait of an Age* by William Manchester, in addition to *The Prince* by Niccolo Machiavelli. I was first introduced to this book when taking a Western Civ course at a community college. I found it to be an easy read with lots of interesting details. My students also seemed to enjoy it and we had several Socratic Seminars to discuss major ideas, events and controversies from it. I believe it does a good job of explaining life and changes from the High Middle Ages into the Renaissance. Many historians dislike the book since the author didn’t use primary sources or offer much in terms of scholarly research. A *New York Times* bestseller, it was published in 1992 and is divided into 3 parts: “The Medieval Mind”, “The Shattering” and “One Man Alone.”

From The College Board AP European History Teachers’ Guide:

For those who are seeking to get a head start on your work in August, several books on the Renaissance serve as excellent introductions to the first major topic in our curriculum. William Manchester’s *A World Lit Only by Fire* is a racy, fascinating, and not always objective, but always readable, account of the Italian Renaissance. *Brunelleschi’s Dome* by Ross King is a more focused description of a single building project, illuminating both the engineering and the politics that led to the construction of the Florence cathedral. Dava Sobel’s *Galileo’s Daughter* is based on the letters between the famous scientist and his illegitimate daughter and sheds light on the intellectual climate of the Renaissance and the status of women. Two famous works produced in the Renaissance itself and with which we will deal briefly in class are Machiavelli’s *The Prince* and Thomas More’s *Utopia*. Since both are fairly short, you might consider delving into them.

Notes on Part 1 – “The Medieval Mind” from *A World Lit Only By Fire* by William Manchester

The Middle Ages

- Still widely known as the Dark Ages but no longer called that by historians (negative value judgment)
- We don’t know much about this era
- Intellectual life didn’t exist in Europe
- Dominated by famines, plagues, recurring pandemics
- Bricklaying was a lost art
- People lived in communal homes
- Lots of everyday violence
- Became devout Christians – converting them wasn’t easy
- Christian Church became the wealthiest European landowner
• Pagan sacrifice of humans was replaced by the Christian symbolic Mass
• Evolution of titles like duke, early, baron – Europe’s new aristocracy
• Hereditary Monarchy was a medieval innovation
• Split in Christendom for almost 40 years – Avignon papacy
• Augustinian view: wrote *The City of God* which shaped & defined the medieval mind – said Rome was being punished for old, continuing sins which were lascivious (lude, lustful) acts by the people & corruption by politicians
• Possibility of skepticism didn’t exist
• Anyone who didn’t belong to the church was cast out of this life & the next
• You didn’t question the church which was God & like all of God’s works, was perfect & incapable of reform
• Most significant dimensions of the medieval mind were invisible & silent: medieval man’s lack of ego, no sense of self, virtually impossible to find your way home if war took you away
• No newspapers, magazines
• People didn’t read & couldn’t understand Latin
• No awareness of time
• Germany & Italy were late to joining the new Europe – disputes over succession delayed creating a central authority
• No significant inventions except the waterwheel & windmill

**3 Essential Elements of the “Medieval Mind” (one possible set):**

1. People weren’t educated or literate
2. People were converted to Christianity but continued some pagan beliefs & practices
3. People lacked a sense of self, time & place
Seminar questions are written questions centered on a specific reading selection or topic. The purpose of seminar questions is to make students think critically about what they read. With the development of seminar questions, students will learn to think globally (“outside of the box”) and will better understand the need to place content in context.

Seminar questions are divided into 3 categories: an opening question, core questions, and a closing question. Understanding the purpose and construction of each type of question is of paramount importance in this course and is a useful analytical skill that can be applied when you read text in other classes.

**OPENING QUESTION:** 1 question

- A broad generalization that directs into the “big idea” exhibited in the reading
- Elicits raw material for discussion
- Introduces and explores topics, ideas and themes of the reading or text
- Usually a HOW? or WHY? Question
- **DOES NOT** relate specifically by name to the text being studied

**CORE QUESTIONS:** 5 questions with answers in complete sentences

- Content specific
- Examines central points of the text and isn’t focused on only a few parts of the reading
- Can interpret a passage or quote from the text
- Can explore a question
- Most often a HOW? or WHY? Question
- Core questions are answered with textual evidence from the selected reading
- Include citation for quotes or when drawing specifically from a source (author and page # in parentheses). Ex. (Manchester 27).

**CLOSING QUESTION:** 1 question

- Establishes relevance
- Connects content (themes or main ideas) of the reading to the real world

**WRITING SEMINAR QUESTIONS:**

1. Write about history in the past tense.
2. Opening and closing questions are **never** answered in writing; they are used in seminar discussion for “pondering.”
3. A core question is similar to a mini-essay with a topic sentence that is derived from the question; the answer to the question explains the how? and why?
4. Core questions must contain textual references (author, page #) if it is just from one reading or source.
5. Questions must be typed, double-spaced and uploaded to Google Classroom before class on the day of the seminar.

Name ______________________________________  Period _______
Seminar on *A World Lit Only By Fire* by William Manchester *pg. 31-110*

**Seminar Written Preparation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage/Grade</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>30 points</strong> A+</td>
<td>Seminar questions includes an opening, 5 core questions and a closing question. All questions are relevant to the reading and properly constructed. Questions show higher level reflection, thinking and come from across the entire assigned reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>27 points</strong> A-</td>
<td>As above, but may be missing some textual support or connection between analysis and text may not be fully clear in some cases. Some questions need improving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>25 points</strong> B</td>
<td>Evidences a good faith effort to construct seminar questions; some questions may not be properly constructed or are too simplistic/don't reflect topics from across the assigned reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>24 points</strong> B-</td>
<td>Some seminar questions are too basic or simplistic and/or too focused on one or two areas of the reading. May need more evidence in responses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>21 points</strong> C</td>
<td>Seminar questions are vague, too simplistic and/or don't show enough reflection and thoughtful analysis from the reading. May not have enough questions. See the teacher for guidance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>18 points</strong> D</td>
<td>Incomplete assignment/missing evidence and not enough questions. See the teacher for guidance before the next seminar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>0 points</strong> E</td>
<td>Does not submit any written preparation.</td>
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**Seminar Participation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage/Grade</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>20 points</strong> A</td>
<td>Fully participates in the seminar by making more than one constructive comment that is supported by textual evidence and fully explained. Advances the discussion. Spoke at least 3 times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>17 points</strong> B</td>
<td>Participates in the seminar by making a constructive comment that may be fully explained. Spoke at least 2 times.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Points</td>
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<td>15</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>D</td>
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<td>E</td>
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TOTAL SCORE: ________

50 points
We will have one last Seminar to finish our reading and focus on Part II in *A World Lit Only By Fire*. If you’ve been reading Part II as was recommended, you shouldn’t have as much to do in terms of preparation. To narrow down what we will discuss since this is a significant number of pages, below are some names and topics to consider using when thinking of seminar questions (you do not need to use all of them). A reminder that the opening and closing questions should reflect the main themes from the last part of the reading in Part II (page 111 to the end). Our focus will be on the latter Renaissance and the Reformation. Review the feedback and suggestions I gave you for writing good seminar questions from the first seminar we had on the book.

- Thomas More
- Desiderius Erasums
- Germany and its issues with the church
- Johann Tetzel
- Pope Leo X
- Martin Luther
- Frederick of Saxony (also known as Frederick the Wise)
- Candidates for and election of a new Holy Roman emperor
- Emperor Charles V
- Followers of Luther
- Diet of Worms
- “the greatest moment in the modern history of man”
- John Calvin
- Huldrych Zwingli
- Geneva and Calvinism
- Pope Clement VII
- Catholic Church’s response to the Reformation
- King Henry VIII
- Cardinal Thomas Wolsey
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- DOES NOT relate specifically by name to the text being studied

**CORE QUESTIONS:** 8 questions*

- Content specific
- Examines central points of the text
- Can interpret a passage, event, idea, movement or quote from the text
- Can explore a question
- Most often a HOW? or WHY? Question

*I am giving you a break! Because you’ve been working hard and doing a lot of reading and writing for this class, I am only requiring you submit seminar questions (opening, core and closing). You do not need to include an answer or response for core questions this time! You may want to include page # references though. Since I am cutting you some slack here, I expect to see thought-provoking questions based on your analysis and understanding of the reading! Please review the questions from our first seminar on this book and my suggestions for how to improve or write better seminar questions.

**CLOSING QUESTION:** 1 question

- Establishes relevance
- Connection of content of the text to the real world/present day

**WRITING SEMINAR QUESTIONS:**

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