

Our Story

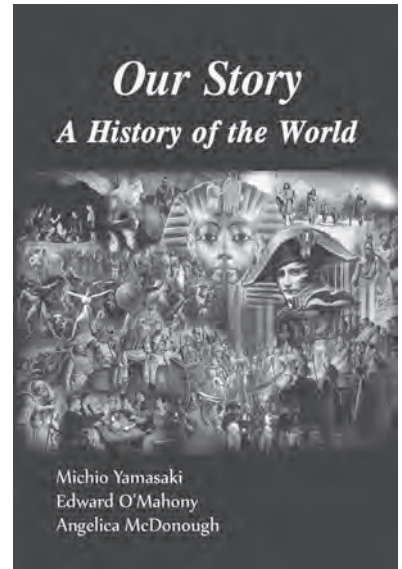
A History of the World

An EAA Interview with coauthors Michio Yamasaki, Edward O'Mahony, and Angelica McDonough

Editor's Introduction: Erroneous predictions of the textbook's demise have occurred for decades, but textbooks remain a major pedagogical tool, even though they are often ineffectual. This excerpt from a 2004 world history textbook study is still, for the most part, accurate today:

World history textbooks have abandoned narrative for a broken format of competing instructional activities. American Textbook Council reviewers repeatedly objected to anti-historical devices designed to spur the interest of students that reflect, in fact, editorial degradation of history. As author and critic Dana Mack observed of Houghton Mifflin/McDougal Littell's widely adopted high school world history textbook, Patterns of Interaction: "The 'edutainment' stamp is everywhere present, from the profusion of cartoon drawings to the profligate sidebars which often feature mere trivia. What results is a picture and activity book, not a history book."

Exceptions to this generalization are rare but exist: In the interview that follows, learn about a middle school textbook, *Our Story: A History of the World* by Mitch Yamasaki, Edward O'Mahony, and Angelica McDonough, that constitutes a glowing exception. Because of COVID-19, illness, and other factors outside the authors' control, the textbook has received little attention, hence this interview.



MICHIO "MITCH" YAMASAKI is a Professor at Chaminade University in Honolulu, Hawai'i, where he has taught history for thirty-four years. Yamasaki has twice chaired the Hawai'i Council for the Humanities. He has also served as a Trustee of the National Council for History Education, Chair of the Teaching Committee for the Organization of American Historians, and on the Executive Board of National History Day. His publications include *We Shall Overcome, Some Day: America's Civil Rights Movement*, *The Vietnam War: How the United States became Involved*, and *Movin' On: The Great Migration North*.



Maryland. O'Mahony also teaches European History as an Online Adjunct Lecturer at Chaminade University in Hawai'i. Apart from the textbook *Our Story*, he has published articles in a number of journals, most notably *Education About Asia* and *The Irish Sword*.



also the cheerleading coach. In her free time, she likes to write short stories and travel.

Lucien Ellington: *Professor Yamazaki, what initially attracted me to this textbook after reading two chapters ("Ancient China," "Ancient Rome") was a reaction that the book, in the best sense of the term, is an age-appropriate "story": a combination of rich content crafted for middle school students: Your reactions?*

Michio Yamasaki: We humans are ongoing stories. That is why we are drawn to stories, especially to those that we can relate to. After reading our book, students will have a better understanding of how events in history occur and why. Our book is written for middle school students, but not only for them. An adult can pick it up, be engaged by it, and learn from it.

Lucien: *While interacting with middle school teachers at two recent East Asia institutes featuring two speakers doing comparative presentations on the Roman and Han empires, in the ensuing discussion I read aloud two excerpts from the text for participants and solicited their opinions:*

*Chapter 7 "Ancient Rome"
Nero (r. 54-68 CE)*

Nero was his wife's son by a previous marriage. Nero was still a teenager when he became emperor. For the first few years, he was content to let his mother and the commander of the Praetorian Guard run the government. After five years, however, he got tired of being told what to do. So, he murdered his own mother.

*Chapter 5 "Ancient China"
Landowners and Eunuchs*

Later Han Emperors relied on Powerful landowning families. They provided officials for their governments. But an ambitious minister could be tempted to overthrow the emperor and establish his own dynasty. This is why the emperors turned to eunuchs. Eunuchs were originally assigned to guard the emperors' harem. Their physical status made them "safe" to be around the emperor's women. The fact they could not produce children also meant they posed no threat to his royal lineage. Living close to empresses and the emperor's favorite concubines, eunuchs exerted great influence on government policies and decisions.



Emperor Wu Di, the most famous of all Han rulers.
Source: [Wikimedia Commons at https://tinyurl.com/yckuhpje](https://tinyurl.com/yckuhpje). See *Our Story*, Chapter 5, "Ancient China."



Plaster cast of Emperor Nero (r. 54-68 CE).
Source: [Wikimedia Commons at https://tinyurl.com/3bewv38](https://tinyurl.com/3bewv38).
See *Our Story*, Chapter 7, "Ancient Rome."

Lucien continued: *It is impossible to understand the Roman Empire without a focus on familial intermarriage often causing turmoil or even murder, or understanding the role of eunuchs, concubines, and empresses in destabilizing the Han Empire.*

Middle school teachers in our institute appreciated this specific prose, prose they reported missing in many of their own textbooks. Several other examples from your textbook that are commendable for their clarity and specificity excerpted from the aforementioned chapters include:

"All bureaucrats produce documents and China was no exception"; Wealthy Romans feasted upon such delicacies as snails boiled in milk, peacock

brains, and roasted mice"; "Later, Rich Roman women would wear clothing made from Indian cotton or Chinese silk. Rich plebeians who had made money through business or other means lived in a manner similar to the patricians."

What influenced you as authors to incorporate specific examples like the ones I cite that are often are not included in typical middle school textbooks?

Edward O'Mahony: I think the answer to this question can be found in the title of our book: *Our Story*. History is really a series of stories involving the lives of a multitude of individuals all interacting with each other over time. Like any good story, you need background information about the individual and his or her environment in order to understand people's actions and beliefs. Just as importantly, children (and many adults) respond better to

a story than to a dry list of facts and are more likely to remember the key events and concepts that you want them to learn. The story of "Horatio at the Bridge," where one Roman soldier held off an army while his comrades cut down the bridge behind him, is far more effective in teaching Roman values than anything else I can think of. In my experience as a teacher, it can also lead to wonderful discussions about concepts such as patriotism and loyalty.

In regard to typical middle school textbooks, I share Dr. Yamasaki's opinion that they are terrible. I believe many publishing companies do not draw a distinction between simplifying the language, which is necessary to enable middle school students to understand the text, and simplifying (or "dumbing down") the information being provided. In my view, part of the reason why many textbooks have sidebars and graphics (which add to the expense of the books) is to distract from the text, which is often boring and insipid. In our book, we tried to write something that we felt students would be interested in, precisely because it included stories and details that they would not normally get in a textbook. I would draw an analogy here with the *Harry Potter* or *Percy Jackson* novels, which are full of details and yet popular because they tell a story. The images, which I discuss later were used to support the text, rather than take attention away from it.

Just as importantly, and this ties in with what I was saying earlier, students actually want facts and details. In many cases, the information they are studying is completely new to them. They want the details so that they can understand the information and learn it. It gives them a sense of accomplishment and pride when they can actually discuss a subject using specific evidence. In many textbooks, the accounts are simply far too general for the students to remember anything of consequence. This is why so many students find history boring. It is because the materials they are given are boring. And this is doing a terrible disservice both to the profession and to the students themselves. We live in a globalized society where we need to know and understand other cultures, and yet the average textbook does everything possible to destroy that natural curiosity that most students have.

Angelica McDonough: While teaching both middle and high school students, I found that they struggled relating to the content that were being presented in class. They often wonder the value of learning something that happened in the past when they have bigger issues to tackle in their everyday lives. In addition, how do we compete with the latest news on Twitter or the interesting video on TikTok? Every day, as soon as that bell rings, present subject matter in a way that grabs their attention. This doesn't necessarily mean that one utilize current slang terms or examples, but it helps to frame the content in a way that young students can understand. My favorite example to use is that of likening the "war of attrition" of World War I to the repeated attempts to convince a parent to give permission to hang out with friends through consistent requests (which, by the way, my students remind me do not always work).

Lucien: *Time did not permit me to read the entire textbook, but I examined visuals in every chapter and scanned narrative around images. The photographs and paintings in your textbook are among the most striking I've ever seen in a world history text, and more important, they appear to effectively complement the narrative of each chapter. The captions are often attention-getting, and the number of your sidebars are modest but highly effective. For example, the images in chapter 1, "A Brief History of Prehistory," include photographs of plants and animals integrated with paintings of prehistoric humans. Jared Diamond's provocative assertion that agriculture was "the worst mistake in the history of the human race" will make for some interesting discussions about the lives of early humans.*

How were your images selected? Did you have a preconceived notion of using different visuals than typical textbooks, or were your choices more intuitive?

Most history textbooks cover too many subjects and hardly get beneath the surface on any of them. —Michio Yamasaki



"Eating bad mushrooms." From *Our Story*, Chapter 1, "A Brief History of Prehistory." The image caption from the chapter reads: *Every time you travel to a new place, you have to find out which nuts, berries, and mushrooms are safe to eat. How would you know? You find out when your friend comes down with a bad stomachache after eating poisonous mushrooms.* Source: Illustration by Walter Takeda.

Michio: I chose images that help to convey the story I am trying to tell. Such images don't really need subtitles because the words and images are both telling the same story. If I couldn't find such an image in Wiki Commons, I asked my colleague Walter Takeda, an art professor at my university, to draw what I was talking about.

Edward: In my case, there were three main reasons certain images were selected. The first criterion was they needed to be freely available, either through Wiki Commons or through donations. (This was because we were trying to keep the cost of the book as low as possible.) The second reason was the most important. I wanted to use images from the time period whenever possible in order to bring the story to life. A bust or

portrait of an individual provides readers with a visual image they can relate to when reading about a person's life. This enables readers to establish an emotional connection with that individual and makes that person more real and interesting. The final reason is that I wanted to expose readers to the art and culture of the societies we were covering. Once again, this helps readers gain a better understanding of an ancient society by seeing how people portrayed themselves at the time. Ultimately, it is really all about humanizing people from the past so that modern readers can develop a sense of empathy or understanding for them.

Angelica: Many images that I used were chosen from the public domain and meant to be used as visuals for specific subject matter in the book. However, my favorite images are those that are illustrations by Walter Takeda. He was my art history professor at Chaminade, and for him to read our work and choose the illustrations to include was such an honor. I am so thankful to have been included in a project such as this with two of my most influential professors at Chaminade.

Lucien: *Most, if not all, parents know that a twelve-year-old is "wired" differently than his or her sixteen-year-old counterpart. Was it simply coincidence on your part that you struck the right tone with this age group in writing an interesting textbook at their level, or was this by design? Did you directly interact with middle school teachers before or while composing the textbook?*

Michio: Most history textbooks cover too many subjects and hardly get beneath the surface on any of them. Students coming to our textbook have bad experiences with previous textbooks. Nevertheless, I want them to start reading and continue to read our textbook. I tried to accomplish this by writing short paragraphs (usually three or four sentences each). This way, before their minds drift away, young readers are on to a new paragraph or new subtopic. Steven Darian, the wonderful editor at Linus Learning, guided us in this process.

Edward: For this, I give a lot of credit to Steven Darian. He was a remarkable editor. He gave us all detailed advice on how to structure the writing so that it was easy for a middle school student to understand. It also helped that I had two children who were in middle school when I



Image 4: Amaterasu, Shintō goddess of the sun, emerges from the Heavenly Rock Cave. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/ms7ydayj>. See *Our Story*, Chapter 15, "Japan."

It also helped that I had two children who were in middle school when I was writing my chapters. They became my guinea pigs. —Edward O'Mahony



A painting of the House of Wisdom, a major public intellectual center from the Islamic Golden Age of the eighth through fourteenth centuries. Al-Kazwimiri, the great mathematician and leader of the House of Wisdom, created the Arabic numeral widely used today.

Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/355pxxp>. See *Our Story*, Chapter 11, "Islamic Civilization."

was writing my chapters. They became my guinea pigs. If they liked what I wrote and did not complain about having to read it, I knew that I had struck the right tone. Finally, and this relates to the second question, I based a lot of it on my own experiences as a teacher. Even though I teach primarily high school students, most of those students love hearing stories, which is why I incorporated so many of them into my writing.

Angelica: Middle school students have notoriously short attention spans! My colleagues and I often said that teaching middle school is similar to preparing to perform in a show onstage—if they aren't interested, the message becomes unclear and the audience is lost. Limiting the amount of information given to students and focusing on being concise during lecture is key to keeping them entertained. When writing, I tried my best to imagine how I'd use the book in my own classroom and how my colleagues might as well. I also tried to present some of my drafts to students or other teachers to hear their thoughts, which certainly was a big help.

Lucien: *Angelica, please share with us how you incorporated elements of your own book in teaching?*

Angelica: Although I currently teach United States history, I worked on this book while teaching world history to seventh-grade students. I found that the work itself helped not just my writing, but my teaching as well! North Carolina focuses heavily on literacy, especially for the North Carolina Final Exam for Social Studies, which is essentially a reading test. Balancing preparation for those tests with planning engaging lessons ultimately helped my writing. Many of the examples that I utilized in the book were ones that I used in class and vice versa. The research that I had to complete for the book also improved my teaching. I write many leveled passages for my students to read, and even now, my high school students may be assigned a short passage for their bell work at the start of class.

Lucien: *Although your textbook, as is the case with most middle school texts and, in the US, a significant number of state standards, concludes in the sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries, depending upon the chapter, what are perennial lessons about history you hope might leave a deep and lifelong impressions for young readers?*

Edward: I think there are two lessons that I would like readers to take away from this book. The first is that facts matter. Opinions may change, and that is a good thing, but facts are what help ground us in reality. Secondly, history is ultimately about people, and how they responded to the circumstances of their age. By studying their lives, we can gain a much deeper understanding of our own lives and actions. No one is perfect, and even the greatest people in the past made mistakes. This does not take away from their achievements, which should be honored and celebrated. But it is a reminder that we are all human.

On a related note, I would like to add that for many students what they learn in middle and high school about world history is their only contact with the subject. It is unfortunately clear from various surveys

Middle school students have notoriously short attention spans! . . . Limiting the amount of information given to students and focusing on being concise during lecture is key to keeping them entertained.

—Angelica McDonough

that most Americans do not know much about the outside world, which means they did not really learn anything about the subject in school. And yet we are economically, politically, and militarily inextricably bound with countries all over the Earth. It is impossible for Americans to make good decisions about how we should be interacting with the rest of the world if we do not know anything about people who live elsewhere. For me, this was one of the main reasons why I worked on this book. I wanted to try to instill a sense of wonder and interest in the subject that would remain with students for the rest of their lives.

Angelica: World history is a huge content area to cover, filled with countless stories both big and small. Much of my work for this book dealt with Mesopotamia, Africa, and the Americas. In the case of the Americas, this content might not be covered in class due to its placement in the curriculum or its neglect on standardized tests. My hope is that students can see the rich history that every region has experienced and find a story, person, community, or anything that can activate an interest in history and make it come alive.

Lucien: Edward, Michio, and Angelica, thanks for the interview! ♦

Our Story: A History of the World

BY MICHIO YAMASAKI, EDWARD O'MAHONY, AND
ANGELICA McDONOUGH

NEW YORK: RYLAN BOOKS, 2020

382 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1607978824, PAPERBACK

The seventeen textbook chapters feature material required by the majority of US middle school history and geography state standards including Asia-related content.

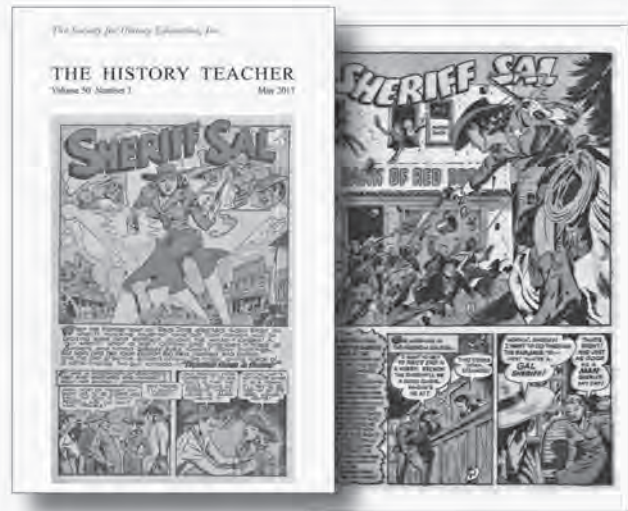
For more information including how to order a copy of the text, visit store.rylanbooks.com.

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