

AMAZON'S BEST CHILDREN'S HISTORY BOOKS

'I Survived No. 11: I Survived the Great Chicago Fire, 1871' — "The 'I Survived' series gives kids a real and gripping, 'you are there' feeling as tragic events in history, such as the subject of this 11th book, 'I Survived The Great Chicago Fire, 1871,' are recounted by a fictional boy who lived to tell the tale," Wilson said. "Other books in the series include events as varied as the destruction of Pompeii to the attacks of September 11." Fiction, ages 7-10.

Why Kids Are Reading History for Fun

BY KATIA HETTER, CNN

UPDATED 12:29 PM ET, TUE AUGUST 4, 2015

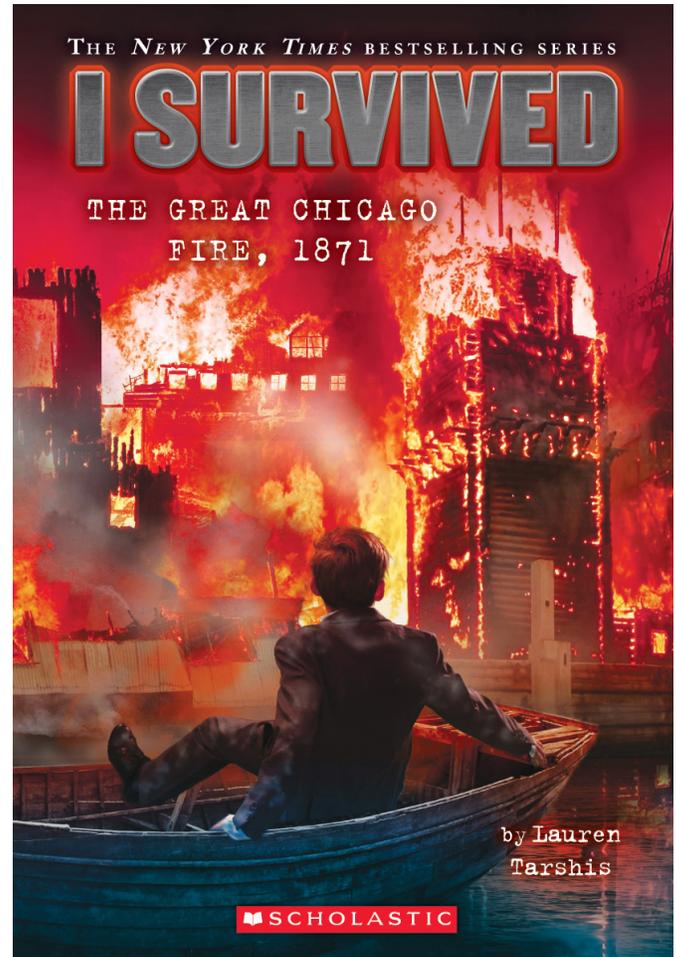
(CNN) Celia Ghezzi is just 8 years old, but she already knows plenty about Harriet Tubman, Helen Keller and other important historical figures.

That's because she's been devouring the "Who Was?" series of historical books for children.

"I like them so much because you learn about the individual person," said Celia, a third-grader in Decatur, Georgia.

Jeremy Oppenzato of Brooklyn, New York, loved learning about knights and castles in Magic Tree House Fact Tracker No. 2, a nonfiction companion to the Magic Tree House historical fiction book "The Knight at Dawn."

"All the cool stuff that happened in the past, I think



is fascinating," said Jeremy, age 7. "Like how kings had the protected castle wall and moat and drawbridge. ... I learned how knights got past moats."

My own 7-year-old is transfixed by "I Am Rosa Parks," Brad Meltzer's book about Parks as a little girl standing up to bullies and growing into a person who helped change the world.

Summer slump? There's no such thing among these new fans of history.

Whether it's the Roman Empire or Chinese history, the U.S Civil War, the history of scientific discovery or more recent civil rights battles, the new wave of children's historical nonfiction is attracting a younger audience to read more about real events.

WHY IS HISTORY GETTING POPULAR?

The popularity is thanks, in part, to the much-maligned Common Core, which was introduced in 2009.

No, really. The Common Core, a set of English language arts/literacy and mathematics goals for students at each grade level, has come under intense criticism from parents and teachers alike for its sometimes confusing implementation and odd (to grownups) ways of solving math problems.

But there's a bright spot, and that's the Common Core's focus on nonfiction. One core goal is getting younger children to read and understand books about history, science and real life, called informational texts in "core" language.

Years of reading fiction -- which often has more dialogue and less complicated sentence structure than nonfiction -- have left middle and high school students ill-prepared to read the texts necessary to research and write longer term papers, says Kathleen Odean, an expert on Common Core nonfiction and young adult literature.

"Historical fiction has always been popular, but Common Core kicked it (and historical nonfiction) to the forefront," said Seira Wilson, a senior books editor at Amazon.com. "In the last year or so, it's really ramped up, with the 'Who Was?' books and 'Where Is?' series. Also, Brad Meltzer's 'I Am' biography series ... have been hugely popular for us."

Although Amazon won't release sales figures, publishers say the genre's growth is phenomenal.

The "Who Was?" series and its spinoffs have sold 20 million copies since the series debuted in 2002, and sales have increased nearly 500% from 2009 to 2014, its publisher said. Meltzer's "Ordinary People" series, which launched in January 2014, has nearly 600,000 copies in print, according to its publisher.

Mary Pope Osborne's "Magic Tree House" series has sold 130 million books since its debut in 1992 and has been translated into 33 languages in over 30 international markets, according to its publisher. The series includes 53 historical fiction titles and 32 nonfiction 'Fact Tracker' companions.

Leah Oppenzato, Jeremy's mom and a seventh-grade humanities teacher, is delighted by the trend of history books in the 5- to 10-year-old range.

"It's great that both series -- 'Who Was?' and 'Magic Tree House' -- teach about history in an engaging way," she said. "Too often, kids are turned off by nonfiction, including biographies, because the writing is dry and boring. I see this with my seventh-graders. These books for younger kids might help kids actually not develop that 'boring!' reaction to begin with."

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Children can get excited about history if you show them the excitement and uncertainty and danger around something like the Declaration of Independence, says "Who Was?" series creator Jane O'Connor, a vice president and editor at large at Grosset & Dunlap, a Penguin Young Readers imprint.

"You see that not everything comes to us as a given, that people like Marie Curie had to discover things," O'Connor said. "We keep those kids wanting to find out what happens on the next page. Real life is interesting and true."

O'Connor launched the series after seeing a need for engaging books for children starting to read "big" 100-page books for book reports. These children needed illustrations and background for historical events they were learning for the first time.

The wild, cartoonish covers for "Who Was?" and its spinoffs were her idea, inspired by caricatures that sometimes ran in the Sunday New York Times Book Review.

"The idea behind the covers was, they would tell you they these weren't just dry textbooks," said O'Connor, who has written several of the 100 books in the series herself.

A KID JUST LIKE THEM

Meltzer, who writes adult political thrillers and hosts "Brad Meltzer's Decoded" on the History Channel, also saw a need for a different type of children's book.

Concerned that his children might see reality TV

stars or sports figures as heroes, Meltzer wanted them to look up to Rosa Parks, Amelia Earhart and Jackie Robinson and realize that ordinary children could become extraordinary people.

"None of them are perfect, and no one is born a hero," Meltzer said. "These people are born just like you and me. It's just a question of what you do with your life."

In his "Ordinary People Change the World" series, Meltzer starts with Rosa Parks and other heroes as children, using the illustrations of Christopher Eliopoulos to appeal to a younger set. Those illustrations are key to capturing the attention of younger readers, he said.

Rosa Parks' story shows her standing up to a bully at age 10, and the last two pages of each book have pictures of her as a real person.

"My younger son was being bullied in school, and he came home complaining about it," Meltzer said. "My older son said, 'You need to be like Rosa Parks.'"

'READING IS NOT THEIR PASSION'

What about those children in every classroom who aren't excited about reading?

Lauren Tarshis found that they liked reading about volcanoes, hurricanes and other real-life events when she published those types of nonfiction stories in *Storyworks*, a classroom magazine she edits for third- and fourth-graders.

That's why she started writing "I Survived" historical fiction for Scholastic, telling about the destruction of Pompeii in A.D. 79, the Chicago Fire of 1871, Hurricane Katrina and even the September 11 attacks through the eyes of children as main characters. The child who was a Roman slave or a slave during the Civil War is fictional, but the details of their lives and events are true to the history of the time.

Tarshis encourages teachers to use her books to get children interested in multidimensional units about geography, geology, meteorology, history, poetry and more.

"It's been a wonderful surprise that kids of all types are fascinated by history, and they do like fast-paced

plots and topics that are gripping," she said. "I get thronged by these fabulous little boys who have great ideas about a certain battle or detail in my books. And many of them springboard from my book into further research on their own."

Her series has more than 13 million copies in print since its June 2010 launch, and sales have grown an average of 25% on each successive book, Scholastic says.

LIFE-CHANGING BOOKS

Beloved "Magic Tree House" series author Osborne may well be the dean of the genre.

Osborne has been writing about fictional siblings Jack and Annie since 1992, taking them back in time to help Aristotle, George Washington and Florence Nightingale do great things.

When Osborne's husband, Will, suggested that she write the nonfiction 'Fact Tracker' companion books, she persuaded him to write the first eight books starting in 2000. When he moved on to writing a Magic Tree House musical, her sister Natalie Pope Boyce took over writing the last 24 nonfiction 'Fact Trackers.'

When Boyce started writing, she had no great expectations that the books would sell as well as the fiction did. But she found that nonfiction can be as exciting to kids as fiction and more important to tell them the truth about the real world.

"The world is infinitely interesting, and we have an orientation to the world that shows our appreciation. We write about history and science with correct information -- and love and joy."

Children love the truth, and the power of introducing them to a love of the real world of history, science, nature and animals cannot be underestimated, says Osborne.

"My first readers are now in their 20s, and they come up to me and tell me, 'I went into this field because I learned I loved history or information or science or animals' in my books."