



DUNDAS  
MUSEUM &  
ARCHIVES

# DISCO

*“I learn!”*

**FOR ALL GRADES**

**Mystery, Romance and Adventure in the Valley: Historical Fiction in Dundas**

*This education module complements writing programs in Junior, Intermediate and Senior.*

*William was growing anxious. Without warning, the train had pulled over to a siding and come to a grinding halt. Something was very wrong. On his lap he held the engagement gift more tightly. It was a cold Christmas Night and Mary was expecting him. “The perfect occasion,” he thought, “to ask her to be my wife.” Beyond the window of the coach, large flakes of snow fell in eerie silence. Then, in an instant, William was violently thrown from his seat amid the deafening thunder of an explosion. The cacophony of steel crashing into steel and splintering wood surrounded him.*



**On display at the DMA: the mirror engagement gift carried by the *real* William**



While the love story of Mary and William is fiction, it is set in the context of a real Dundas disaster: Christmas Night, 1934, when the *Maple Leaf Flyer*, running express from Detroit to Toronto, crashed into a

Canadian National *Christmas Special* stopped on a siding near the Dundas Train Station with mechanical problems. Fifteen people were killed; dozens were injured. And there really was a young man on the train carrying an engagement gift; a decorative mirror that is displayed at the museum.



**Jack and Rose: fictitious romance set in historical disaster.**

Some of the most popular books and films enjoyed by young people are, in fact, historical fiction. Everyone knows the tragic love story of Jack and Rose that unfolds on the ill-fated ship in the movie *Titanic*. Musicals like *West Side Story* and *Les Misérables* present us with fictitious characters and plots set in the historical truths of New York

City street gang wars and the French Revolution. Indeed, Ebenezer Scrooge learns compassion for the poor who are victims of England’s Industrial Revolution in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*.



The history of the Town of Dundas is no less rich in colour and texture as a backdrop for fiction as the short passage above demonstrates.

Why not bring your creative writing students in to The Dundas Museum and Archives for an up-close-and-personal encounter with the events, characters, artifacts and archives that make up the fabric of our exciting history. There are some powerfully potent provocations here!



**Imagine a young settler boy lies about his age to join The Queen's Rangers. He comes face to face with Governor John Graves Simcoe and saves his life in battle...**

*Mystery, Romance and Adventure in the Valley: Historical Fiction in Dundas* is a two-

part program; the first takes place right in your classroom with a lesson implemented by DMA Director of Education, Professor Picone. As an author and retired English teacher who has conducted writing workshops for educators all over Canada, Professor Picone brings a great deal of experience and expertise to this writing program.

During this pre-visit lesson, your class will discuss important elements of short fiction: setting, plot, dynamic and static characters, narrative voice, the use of dialogue, and such devices as a McGuffin. Some stylistic aspects of writing will also be addressed, especially the importance of vivid imagery. In many cases, this will be a good review for classes who have

already studied fiction in their Language Arts or English curriculum. Students will be left with a piece of short historical fiction to read in preparation for their visit to the museum.

Once at the DMA, Professor Picone will lead a discussion about the piece of historical fiction your class has read in preparation for the program, and, through a process of inquiry, establish characteristics of good *historical* fiction.

Then, engaging with real artifacts from an historical event, and working in small groups, your students will build the outline of a story: setting characters and plot. This activity will familiarize your students with possible brainstorming strategies, especially creating a “web” of ideas.



**The Dundas Driving Park used to be a race track for horses. A horse is injured and to be put down? A child loves it to a championship?**



**Ignoring warnings, you sneak into the ruins of the Old Darnley Mill on Crooks Hollow Road. Suddenly...**



**William Lyon Mackenzie is a fugitive! You stumble across his hideout - a cave on the side of the escarpment!**

Finally, Professor Picone will guide your students – *clip boards and pencils at the ready* - through the galleries and archives to get them started on their own piece of historical fiction: What are different time periods in Dundas’ history that might serve as a good setting? Or what about a specific location from the past that’s now disappeared?

An old mill or factory? An inn for travellers?

Who are some real figures from the past that might join fictitious characters in your story?

Richard Hatt? Anne Morden? Peter

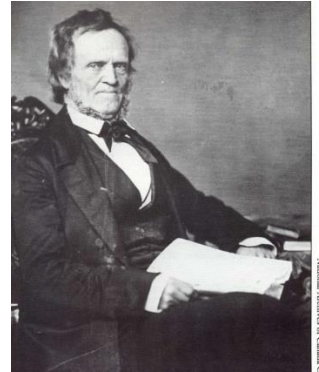
Desjardins? John Bertram? Is there a real Dundas disaster that might figure into the plot? The Great Western Railway train from Toronto that crashed through the bridge spanning the Desjardins Canal on March 12, 1857? The fire of 1881 that destroyed almost a whole block of King Street?

As a follow-up activity back in your classroom, Professor Picone would be only too happy to come and talk with your students about effective strategies to revise and polish a first draft into the best piece of writing it can be.

The final product is a fantastic collection of historical fiction about the Valley Town that can be shared with friends and family!

PS - “What’s a McGuffin?” you might well ask. Well, that’s just one of the literary devices your students will learn about as part of this program in writing historical fiction. Any artifact can be a McGuffin.

***This education program complements all writing curriculum from grades 4 to 12.***



**Will you turn him in?  
Or help him to escape?**