

The best book that I read in seventh grade:

Sometimes when you're looking for a new book to read, it helps to remember the name of authors whose books you've already enjoyed. When, while scanning the library shelves during a lunch period, I couldn't find a book that looked interesting to me, I attacked the card catalogue instead. I remembered that John D. Fitzgerald was my favorite author in fifth grade (with his *Great Brain* series), so I looked up his name in the card catalogue. I was surprised to see he had written a few books that weren't about the *Great Brain*.

Brave Buffalo Fighter was the first piece of historical fiction that I ever truly enjoyed. True enough, John D. Fitzgerald's *Great Brain* books took place in the 1800's in Utah, but they didn't feel like historical books when I read them; they were about interesting people who just happened to live in the past, not about events that you'd study in history. Brave Buffalo Fighter centered around two topics we'd studied in history class: westward expansion and Native American culture.

In 1860, Susan Parker and her family (including her brother Jerry) leave the comforts of Saint Joseph, Missouri, and head west in a covered wagon. It's an exciting, historically accurate story based on an actual diary that the author discovered and decided to expand into a whole novel.

The story focuses mostly on Jerry, who transforms from boy to man as the wagon train deals with the dangers of traveling west. The wagon train is warned and are frightened of "Indian attacks" throughout the novel, but when Jerry is seen bravely fighting an out-of-control buffalo during a hunt, the Native Americans honor the blonde boy with a name of respect: *Waditaka Tatanka Kisisohitika* (Brave Buffalo Fighter). Jerry learns to respect and is respected by the very culture the entire wagon train fears.

I can't spoil the ending of the book for you, but I will tell you that it was the first book that made me ball up my fists and cry. I remember I had to put the book down and walk around the house for a while just to calm down from what happened. I've had other books that affected me emotionally since, but this was the first time I genuinely had a *catharsis* from a story I was reading.

A few years after reading this book, I watched (and loved) a mini-series on TV called Centennial; it was based on a historical novel by James Michner, and part of the story was about westward expansion. When I watched this TV movie, I was surprised to discover how much I already knew about traveling in covered wagon from the novel I had read back in seventh grade. Historical fiction can be awesome!

