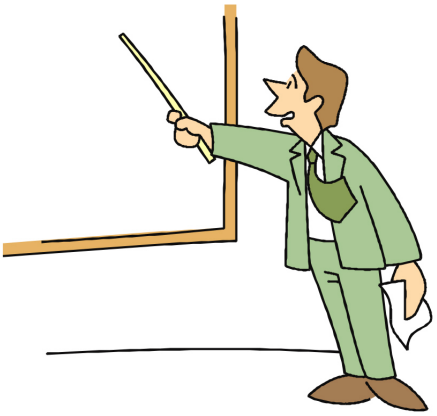

There's a wonderful old Sam Cooke song, "What a Wonderful World," also performed by Art Garfunkel among others. I love the opening lyrics:

Don't know much about history
Don't know much biology
Don't know much about a science book
Don't know much about the French I took

But I do know that I love you
And I know that if you love me, too
What a wonderful world this would be...

What I really appreciate about these thoughts is the embedded irony. Personally, I find history fascinating. But history as a school subject has long had the reputation, fair or otherwise, of being one of the most boring experiences that students can endure. As one victim put it, "The single most torturous class I've ever had to sit through. There really isn't too much to learn, only about 200 years worth, so many pointless and useless details are thrown in. I would rather gorge [sic] out my eyes with a spoon than take American History."

I'm a little sympathetic with this guy. The history classes I took in school were dreadful. Rigor mortis on a platter. None were worse than World History as taught to us defenseless ninth graders. Take a duller than a dishrag teacher speaking in a monotone voice, forcing us to memorize an endless series of dates, places, wars, generals, and treaties. Throw in banal "pop quizzes," with no open discussion, videos or visual aids, and you have a recipe for death by a thousand cuts. At one point I think the clock on the wall beaded up with perspiration, melted and

then dribbled down onto the floor.

Years later I took American History in college and found it tolerable. Something like discovering that blue cheese might not be so icky after all. As in 'hey, maybe I could even get to like this stuff.' Fast forward another 30 years and, lo and behold, history was looking well, interesting. Fascinating even. What could cause such a change?

Well for one thing, having freedom to read and follow up on areas of personal interest always matters. People like having choices (just check out any hair care product aisle in America). For another, just maybe I had matured enough to relate more easily to those who'd paid enormous personal prices to make a difference in the course of world events. And there are plenty of them out there with stories to be told that are hard to put down. Here are just a few that really got to me.

Let's start with Nathaniel Philbrick, author of "In the Heart of the Sea" and "Sea of Glory." Few naval historians can chart a more compelling course through true adventures on the high seas than Philbrick. A long time resident of Nantucket, Philbrick's dedication to meticulous research while telling tales of titanic human struggle and sacrifice is unsurpassed. "In the Heart of the Sea" sets its sights on the stomach churning whaling venture and sinking of the Essex, the actual ship that inspired Herman Melville's "Moby Dick." I defy anyone to read this tale and ever think the same way about whaling, whalers, or what it might mean to be completely severed from any normal creature comforts. Pillow mint anyone? No, not exactly.

"Sea of Glory" chronicles The U.S. Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842 under the egoistic, ambitious leadership of Lieutenant Charles Wilkes. Ever wonder how Antarctica was discovered and what lay there nearly 175 years ago? Or what it must have been like to try to survey the Columbia River or chart newly discovered islands across the Pacific? It's all here and plenty more and it's got the heft to maybe even change your life.

Here's another example of history as irresistible story telling: "Rocket Boys" by Homer "Sonny" Hickam. A memoir drenched in the American tradition of brains, hard work and adventure on a shoestring, this book shares Hickam's youth in the small mining town of Coalwood, WV right through his amazing career in aerospace. Sonny's first experiment in rocketry amounted to a flashlight tube and model airplane body used as a casing. The thrust was provided by flash powder from a dozen (ahem) cherry bombs. The rocket was a neat idea but it exploded and obliterated his mother's rose garden fence:

"Wooden splinters whistled past my ears. Big chunks of the fence arced into the sky. Burning debris fell with a clatter. A thunderous echo rumbled back from the surrounding hollows. Dogs up and down the valley barked and house lights came on, one by one. People came out and huddled on their front porches. Later, I would hear that a lot of them were wondering if the mine had blown up or maybe the Russians had attacked."

Homer was no ordinary boy. He was never inclined to fold up his tent after a setback, and there were plenty of those to contend with. From his early winning of a National Science Fair award with his boyhood pals to his exploits as a NASA engineer, Hickam was a force to be reckoned with.

Here's another barn burner, Robert Kurson's "Shadow Divers." Kurson's book documents the dog-with-a-bone tenacity of two American scuba divers, John Chatterton and Richie Kohler, who sought to discover the cause and identity of a sunken German submarine that went to the bottom of the Atlantic not far off the coast of... New Jersey. Despite all formal indications that they were chasing a ghost, a U-boat that couldn't possibly have been there, Chatterton and Kohler repeatedly tossed caution and marital stability to the wind and kept diving on the wreck.

Their saga, brilliantly told by Kurson, is one I had to read a second time to convince myself that I hadn't gone off the deep end myself and misunderstood the essence of all the hardship and perseverance embodied in a maritime adventure for the ages.

If we Americans are the beneficiaries and custodians of any riches, we certainly owe thanks to the many first rate historians who are also simply fantastic storytellers. Jon Meacham, author of a terrific biography of Jefferson, ("Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power") is one of them. Another is an author who continues to publish exquisitely written books: two time Pulitzer Prize winner David McCullough ("The Path Between the Seas," "Truman," "John Adams," "1776").

To any such list must be added one of my absolute personal favorites, the incomparable Laura Hillenbrand ("Seabiscuit: An American Legend," "Unbroken"). And for sports enthusiasts who relish an author's uncanny ability to enlighten readers about the cultural tapestry surrounding an icon's life, we have the amazing offerings of Jane Leavy ("Sandy Koufax: A lefty's Legacy," "The Last Boy: Mickey Mantle and the End of America's Childhood") and David Halberstam ("Summer of '49," "October 1964").

So, Mr. Cooke, your love song remains a classic and the lyrics are touching. We all know what you meant but as for the history part, probably your girlfriend wouldn't hold your knowledge and fascination against you. Nor, I suspect, would the rest of us.