

Amazon.com review for *Story of the World Volume 1*

★★★★☆ **Engaging, but little distinction between legends and history** May 7, 2003
Reviewer: **Robert Griffin** (St Louis, MO USA)

We used this book for 1st grade history this year. As we approach the end of the school year, I find I have mixed feelings about the book. On the one hand, it definitely has kid appeal. It *is* a book of stories, and employs a conversational style. My daughter always enjoyed it. There is some non-Western history (India, China, and to a chapter each on ancient Africa and the Americas), which is important for a more well-rounded study of the period. And perhaps, the biggest factor in its favor, there aren't many books out there like it, yet. I was a classics major in college, and have studied this period, its languages, literature, history and culture in moderate detail. I have often found myself correcting the book or pointing out what is established fact and what is simply a story. This has resulted in a lot of interesting discussions, but I wouldn't feel comfortable with my daughter reading this book independently, as it would easily engender a fragmentary understanding at best or foster strange misconceptions at worst.

Despite my background, please don't think that I expect more from this book (or my student!) than is reasonable. This is after all, first grade, and the aim is simply to introduce the student to the period in a logical, engaging fashion. Unfortunately, the book only succeeds in the latter department.

The book would have done well to better define history as a study. While a certain amount of legendary material is necessary for the period under consideration, it's important for the student to know the difference between legends about real people and things we know for certain about those people. In addition, there is mythological material which is more appropriate in a literary or religious context. There are a few Bible stories, Siddhartha (Buddha), Jesus and several Greek myths are presented. While these stories and figures have bearing on history and are culturally significant, I think their handling is ultimately confusing to the student since they are not presented in a strict historical context. Jesus' resurrection is related in the same matter of fact tone as the rest of the book. Nowhere does the author state whether or not he really came back to life. His death is attributed to the fears of the Romans ("If the Jewish people had a king of their own, they wouldn't want to obey Augustus Caesar any more.") This nonsensical statement makes it sound like a competition between the two great figures, when in fact Augustus had already been dead for 19 years, and the then current emperor Tiberius couldn't have cared less about what happened in a troublesome backwater province, so long as the tax levies flowed back to Rome. The book often shifts between historical and legendary points of view without alerting the reader to the change. This is a serious defect in a book whose audience members are just starting to be able to effectively differentiate between fantasy and reality. I'm not saying these figures and beliefs should not be presented, but facts and legends must be teased apart by the parent for the student, lest misconceptions take root. If you are not well acquainted with history, you may fall prey to a few misconceptions yourself!

The book does not employ the chronological approach recommended in Bauer's other book, *The Well-Trained Mind*. The text jumps back and forth across centuries, even millennia. The late Babylonian empire is followed by the Minoan civilization of Crete, a backward jump of 1500 years. This happens a lot. The chapters can be read out of sequence with some difficulty

(what we did), but it would have been better if the information were presented in a more logical sequence.

The book omits important details and peoples. There is nothing about the Celts, except in passing in one section on the Gallic Wars and another on the British rebellion during the early Roman empire. Pretty short shrift for a people who ranged across most of Europe for a millennium or two and whose culture has had such a deep and lasting influence. In the chapter on Alexander, Aristotle's tutelage of Alexander is not mentioned, nor is the burning of Persepolis. A previous chapter devotes space to this royal Persian city, why not follow through and connect the dots?

Vaguely inaccurate statements such as these are staples of the text: "Alexander's army was the best in the world." Well, really, Alexander's army had a great general, a revolutionary strategist. The Persian army he defeated was arguably "greater," but they were defeated by Alexander's boldness and cunning. "Alexander was the greatest king of ancient times." Well, he only ruled for 12 years, he was on campaign that entire time, and so didn't do much in the way of administering his new empire, writing law or other "kingly" work. He was arguably the greatest general of ancient times. I think a 7 year old can understand these distinctions. Thus it seems at times as if the text is unnecessarily simplified. Certainly the author could have substituted "greatest general" for "greatest king" and described the army as the "smartest" or "fastest," either of which would have been more accurate and more revealing.

So while the book has been enjoyable, it's also been very aggravating, and I'm frankly surprised by the lack of careful editing/fact-checking, given the author's views on education.