

Five Top Tips On Writing Historical Fiction

Historical fiction has an ancient pedigree; it is, quite literally, the stuff of legend. Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth century 'history' of King Arthur in his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, for example, is much more fiction than fact, while subsequent revisions by Wace, Layamon, Sir Thomas Malory, and Edmund Spenser push the legend further into the realm of historical romance, if not fantasy. Then there are Thomas Nashe's Elizabethan tales of Chivalry, historical dramas (most notably Shakespeare's), and 'accounts' of historical events, such as Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, which purports to be an eyewitness testimony but is largely fictitious. Finally, the historical novel as we know it really begins with Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley*, a story of the ill-fated Jacobite rebellion of 1745 published in 1814. And the rest, as they say, is history, with the genre remaining popular and critically acclaimed across fiction, film and TV costume drama. And there's little sign of it ever losing its fascination, as we eternally ask the question:

What was it like to live in another time?

Writing historical fiction offers a unique set of challenges. How far should you let the historical record dictate your own plot? Should you dramatise famous historical figures, or should your central characters be fictional? How do you build a vanished world in the pages of your book? It is a task that requires meticulous research, but at the same time you must avoid what Scott described as the 'dragging in of unnecessary historical details.' But whether you're a seasoned authorial time traveller, or are contemplating your first plunge into that Somme mud or a medieval plague pit, the Tudor Court, Regency London or that diary fragment by an obscure relative, here are my five top tips to help you get started or to refine an ongoing project.

1. Find the Story in the History

Although any historian, myself included, will tell you that history is a story, it's important to remember that historical fiction is *not* history. Even 'history' is not 'history'. There is *the past*, that other country, time and all that, but it is even less knowable than our present. (Just think of the range of opinions about a specific event in mainstream and social media.) It is a chaos of events and interpretations, and as the historian Hayden White has said, it is the task of the historian to 'charge events with a comprehensible plot structure.' Facts are mostly immutable, but interpretations are not; Napoleon once remarked that, 'What is history but a fable agreed upon?' and he was right. But there are rules, and both popular and academic historians are bound by that which is recorded, evidenced and verifiable, and most importantly by a very strict chronology. Historical novelists are not.

Putting it into practice

Exercise one: Explore a well-known historical event from several different point-of-view characters, like witness testimonies. Try writing a few short monologues.

Exercise two: Write a dialogue between two people discussing a great historical event. Try to convey the details to the reader through dialogue, avoiding any direct mention of the event itself.

The difference is *drama*. (This is not to say that history is never dramatic, but that's a different point.) Unless you're writing speculative/alternative history or historical fantasy, when you can cut the mooring line with the historical record entirely, you are going to have to pay your respects to Dame History. That said, you also owe your dues to the gods of Tragedy and Comedy. You're storytellers, not historians. Well, you're both, but let's not introduce this level of mysticism so early in the argument. This means you must focus on character and dialogue, action and setting, plot, pace and narrative structure, just as much as the actual history.

The historical novelist constructs a dramatic narrative inspired by historical 'fact' (such as it is), but they should not feel constrained by it. Your job to pace and structure an engaging narrative, and to keep the reader turning those pages, ideally

to the extent that they are reluctant to put your book down to sleep, work or buy food. So, if you've got a historical novel in mind that's not just a fiction set in the past (more on this later), but is based on historical events, you need to find the story in the history. The history in the history is something else, and if you get too hung up on accuracy over story you can end up with a dramatic failure, satisfying only the pedantic minority of readers who are outraged by any deviation from the true story.

The trick is to analyse the raw material as a novelist rather than a historian. There's a certain amount of preparation involved because you do need to know your subject. (Sorry, pantsers; some planning required.) Remember, you're adapting the history, not reproducing it; to adapt is to modify, to transpose the source material from one medium (non-fiction) to another (fiction). The original source is the starting point not the destination. You must *adapt* in the sense of changing and adjusting to suit the new textual environment. You are producing an original work based on this material. To do this well you must, of course, honour its spirit, but not every brute fact. The same would be true if you were adapting a novel into a screenplay. If it helps, think of 'dramatic license'.

Study hard and make the knowledge your own but treat your historical research exactly as you would a series of fictional events you've come up with for a story. Try writing your own historical chronology, so you can see the key dates, places, people and events you want to write about in a linear form. A list of bullet points will do, just to get it clear in your head. Look at this in terms of settings, characters, action, episodes and potential scenes. Work out what the story is about, and who it is about – who's the obvious protagonist. Identify all the key players and try to understand them – their core drives and motivations, their successes, their failures and their tragedies. It's just the same as creating a fictional character, only you already have their biography, you don't need to invent. The common feature of the real-life character and the fictional as far as the novelist is concerned is their *essence*. For example:

- Where do they come from?
- What do they want? Why, and what will they do to get it?
- Who or what's in their way?
- Who do they love; who do they hate?

- What do they believe in?
- What are they like?

Once you've figured all this out, you can start using these people as literary characters in your novel.

Having chosen your through line – your main storyline – and protagonist, you can plan your novel. Accept that anything, however interesting, that doesn't serve your main character(s) will have to go. You probably don't have the space, and if you do beware introducing unwieldy subplots and additional characters that confuse or derail the primary narrative arc. Similarly, fictionalise as required and without guilt – cutting, moving and adding scenes and original dialogue (most of which you'll almost certainly have to invent anyway) to make for engaging and fluid prose. Find a balance with the true story. Don't make stuff up for the sake of it, but don't be a slave to the facts either, aside from those major events, when battles were won and lost, people died, and ships sank. These are the fixed points in time you must work around – more on this later.

In short, history is history and novels are novels, including historical novels. There are simply different forms of narrative. As Lady Clarinda rightly observes in Peacock's glorious social satire, *Crotchet Castle*, 'History is but a tiresome thing in itself, it becomes more agreeable the more romance is mixed up with it.'

2. Do Your Homework

To write credible and non-trivial historical fiction you need to train yourself to be a historical researcher, otherwise your novel will be riven with unintentional inaccuracy and anachronism. It's notable, in fact how many successful historical novelists have some sort of background in academia. Philippa Gregory and Sarah Waters, for example, both hold Ph.Ds.

Whatever your period, you will have a realm of primary and secondary reference sources available to you, and internet archives and the growing sophistication and specialisation of online encyclopaedias means that you can access and cross-reference information instantly that only a few years ago would've required a field trip to the British Library or the National Archive. Primary sources are those created

in or very close to the time of the original event, or during the lifetime of your subject. They can be unique documents – I’ve worked with handwritten, unpublished Victorian letters, for example – or they may have been mass-produced.

- Memoirs and diaries.
- Letters.
- Official and public documents, such as *Hansard*, the *Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, reports of parliamentary committees, and parish records.
- Newspapers and magazines.
- Published or recorded first-hand accounts and interviews. (If you’re writing about Victorians, social investigation is a tremendous source.)
- Contemporary fiction and drama.
- Works of art.
- Maps.
- Photographs.
- Sound recordings.
- Film and video.

The further back your chosen period, the fewer primary sources there will be. Everything before the end of the nineteenth century will be text-based or original artwork. After that, you have to deal with an explosion of photography, recordings, film and broadcast media. And on that note, an important part of the research process is knowing when to stop. Otherwise you’ll never write the novel. Look for what you need. You’re not doing a doctorate.

Secondary sources are created after the primary sources, the former often written to evaluate the latter. These will include:

- Published academic and popular histories.
- Entries in encyclopaedias.
- Academic articles.
- Biographies.
- Documentaries.

- Historical fiction.
- Film, TV and drama based on historical events.
- Representational or interpretive art produced after the fact.
- Online resources – websites, blogs, podcasts, print archives and so on...

Bear in mind that any source will always have some sort of bias of ideas and interpret accordingly. As long as you know what you're looking for, the internet makes locating a rare source much easier than it used to be. The Internet Archive, for example, is a tremendous source of eighteenth and nineteenth century publications, while Hathi Trust has thousands of digitised periodicals, many of which can be accessed for free. Subscription newspaper archives are also a gift that keeps in giving, as are the 'ancestry' websites.

Putting it into practice

Exercise: To practise applying research to fiction, try retelling a newspaper story as a short story and evaluate the literary devices you used and the changes you made: How did you interpret and use the facts of the original article? How did your choice of point of view affect these? Which facts were indispensable, and which were irrelevant? How did your fictional account differ from the original newspaper story?

3. Choose Your Form of Narrative

Pretty much any sort of historical novel, regardless of period or sub-genre (mystery, military, family saga or whatever), can usually be divided into one of the following types. (The labels are my own):

The Defamiliar historical novel explores ordinary, fictional lives within a particular era. They may be affected by major historical events, but have no control over them, rather like most of us; the models for this type of novel being those of Scott and Tolstoy. (I'm borrowing the term from the Formalist critic Victor Shklovsky, who believed that literary narrative should 'estrangle' or 'defamiliarise' the everyday world). If you're writing one of these – my favourite remains Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* – then you need to know your period for the purposes of setting and manners but otherwise you're writing fiction.

The Historical Romance depicts famous people – often royals – and/or events. The novels can range from bodice-ripping and melodramatic to sophisticated literary character studies like those by Hilary Mantel.

The Cultural Retrieval is similar to the romance, only the subject is relatively unknown, for example *The Other Boleyn Girl* by Philippa Gregory.

Each of these forms, of course, can be hybridised so that fictional characters interact with real historical figures. Pat Barker did this flawlessly in her *Regeneration* Trilogy, inventing a shell-shocked lower middle-class officer called Billy Prior who she placed in hospital with Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. (There was also cultural retrieval in the form of the pioneering British psychiatrist Dr William Rivers.)

Following on from the above, having now decided on period, subject, and overall approach, you might also want to think about point of view options, which are very rich in historical fiction. There are, for example, fake memoirs and found manuscripts like Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*, George MacDonald Fraser's *Flashman* novels, and *Shark Alley* by yours truly. Or you could fragment the narrative, as A.S. Byatt did in *Possession*, telling the story through different documents in different points of view (also a gothic device – see *Dracula*). *Possession* also dramatises the role of the researcher, being a parallel narrative telling the story of two academics whose relationship begins to mirror that of the two Victorian poets they are researching.

Putting it into practice

Exercise one: Start assembling a list of historical figures that interest you and which you might want to write about. Do some basic historical research (Google). Find out what your characters looked like, how they dressed, how they might have talked, and their general personality.

Exercise two: Start roughing out plot lines based on real events in which your characters played a part.

4. Recreate Your World

Remember you're world-building as much as storytelling, so when researching keep your eye out always for quirky cultural details and interesting facts about the way people talked, dressed, worked and acted, what they ate, what they believed, and *why*. Look at prevalent social issues, attitudes and values, significant historical events and cultural icons. In historical fiction, like science fiction and fantasy, readers expect a well-planned, authentic and credible *mise-en-scène*. That said, avoid information dumping, the historical novelist's version of purple prose.

Thackeray sent this up wonderfully in his first novel *Catherine*:

'In the name of St. Clement Danes', said the master, 'give way, my men!' and, thrusting forward his halberd (seven feet long, richly decorated with velvet and brass nails, and having the city arms, argent, a cross gules, and in the first quarter a dagger displayed of the second), he thrust the tinkleman's boat away from his own.

Be aware of anachronism as well. It bugs the heck out of informed readers. You can, however, use it tactically (and subtly) in dialogue to build a link between a character from the past and a modern reader. If you make the speech patterns too authentic, for example, it could become impenetrable and kill pace and drama. That does not mean, however, that redcoats and pirates routinely use 'OK' in conversation. Aim for some sort of middle way which suggests 'Victorian' or 'Tudor' or 'Roman' or whatever, without resorting to pastiche or professorial accuracy. Like most things in writing, it's more of an art than a science.

Normal rules of setting and description remain. Remember the real secret of original and authentic description is observation; a novelist notices the hidden, those small details that others miss in the real world, the vanished world and the world of their text. Try to write tight, vivid descriptions that do just enough to trigger recognition in the mind of your reader, and nothing more. If in doubt, remember Dr Johnson: 'Read over your compositions, and wherever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out!'

Putting it into practice

Exercise one: Write a view from a window in your preferred time and place. Record small details – include scents and sounds, textures and colours. Make topographical and architectural observations and add any interesting facts or cultural details about the place and the time. Speculate on some of the lives led here. Listen to the history.

Exercise two: Try writing as an open third person narrative voice, and then again from the point of view of the observer.

5. Embrace Historical Determinism

If you are writing about well-known historical figures or events, your reader already knows the story. Anne Boleyn is going to be beheaded, Elizabeth I will never marry, Guy Fawkes isn't going to blow up Parliament; Napoleon is going to lose at Waterloo, the *Hindenberg* is going to burn, and the *Titanic* is going to sink.

This should not be a barrier to writing. In fact, your story has already been blocked out for you; all you have to do is interpret, adapt and plot. If it does bother you that your readers already know the ending, you can get around this with fictional characters (Defamiliarisation), or historical characters and events that only professional historians are likely to have even heard of (Cultural Retrieval). Or you might prefer 'speculative' or 'alternative' historical fiction, changing key events like Alan Moore in *Watchmen*, in which America wins Vietnam, Nixon is re-elected, and there really are vigilante crime fighters.

Most importantly, focus on character development and drama. As Hilary Mantel has said, 'In every scene, even the quiet ones, I try to create turning points, multiple turning points. So the reader knows how it's going to turn out, but the reader's expectation of how and why is constantly challenged.'

When Aristotle sat down to watch Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* he already knew that Oedipus was going to marry Jocasta and end up blind and exiled, as did the rest of the audience. Did they pretend to act surprised at the end? No! The central tenet of tragedy is *inevitability*; This is why prophecy plays such a big part in Classical drama. Thus, according to Aristotle in his *Poetics*, the purpose of any dramatic plot is to show the protagonist's moral defect (the *hamartia*), his or her recognition of its

existence (the *anagnorisis*), and the consequences of its existence (the *peripeteia*). This is the point of all Shakespeare's History Plays. Apply this theory to any decent historical novel that covers famous people and events – and you should be reading these to study different techniques anyway – and you'll see it in action. In short, it worked for Shakespeare and it can work for you.

Putting it into practice

Exercise: Go back to your historical plotlines above. Would any work as tragedies? How would you do it? Write a brief treatment (about half a page) outlining your protagonist's fatal flaw, their anagnorisis and peripeteia. Will fortune-tellers be involved?

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To conclude then, history is a vast repository of gripping stories waiting to be discovered and told. It is really all that we are, as individuals and a species; as James Baldwin said, 'People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.' It is also, as Alan Bennett wrote in *The History Boys*, 'One bloody thing after another,' but, as his eccentric schoolteacher Hector goes on to explain: 'The best moments in reading are when you come across something – a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things – which you had thought special and particular to you. Now here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours.'

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