

WRITING HISTORICAL FICTION

Everyone believes that writing, no matter the subject, is easy. That is until they come to put pen to paper. Regardless of what you write there is one important element that you should never forget and that is doing your research. This applies, no more so, than when writing historical fiction. For even though we use the word fiction, the other word historical means you still have to ensure your facts are accurate and authentic. How can you expect lovers of historical fiction to not only love your book, but to take you seriously as an historical fictional writer if you do not get the facts right. And that includes, not just the settings, the dress, the action but the language as well. In order to assist you, here are a few tips to ensure you have accuracy and authenticity in your writing.

1. Having fun with the research.

Whilst it goes without saying that one should always have fun, I must stress that you need to do your homework when researching your chosen era. Use your local library by borrowing some good reference books. Ensure you become comfortable in your chosen time period. Try to understand both the larger scope of the period, while examining the aspects of that daily life. In other words live, eat and breath the era as this will help you create an authentic backdrop for your novel.

2. Always let your characters engage with the historical details.

You could say that this is the ‘show don’t tell’ truism writers are told about all the time. You shouldn’t be dumping a bunch of facts on the poor readers, instead let your characters interact with the details by using all their senses and abilities of that era. They need to be able to smell the rubbish dumped onto the cobblestone streets. To have to squint in the fading light of the tallow candles. And to feel the tingling sensation as the physician places a leech on their bare skin. All these are elements of an historical era that may, or may not, come into your storyline.

3. Allowing characters to question and explore.

When writing letting your characters understand their place in society is a must. They have to be able to question and explore their environment. By doing this it will help your characters reveal the larger political, social, and cultural context of the time you are writing about. What were the expectations for women? For sailors? For criminals? For the homeless? How did people from different parts of society interact with one another? Did they? Try and put yourself in their place. Use your imagination and think how you would behave, interact, respond to certain situations. But remember you will be looking at this with the eyes of a twenty-first century human being.

4. Using the internet wisely, will inspire and inform.

Strangely, the internet can be a researcher’s best friend, especially for the armchair time traveller. Do you need to know how long it would take you to walk from Tower Bridge to the Palace? Use the walking feature on Google Maps or Mapquest. Need to see the inside of the Hagia Sophia - the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of the Divine Wisdom? Well, you can check out the dozens of tourist videos on YouTube. While sometimes you will be amazed at what the Internet can’t answer, the

Internet is still a treasure trove of interactive maps, images, videos, and historical documents, which can all be both informative, and inspiring.

5. The internet can be bad, bad, bad for historical research.

There is an opposite side to number 4. And unfortunately, that is that the Internet is also full of flawed information, lies, plagiarised material, and a lot of half-truths. (Should we not look at you, Wikipedia! I do check it out now and then, but very cautiously). Do ensure you check all ‘The facts’ against at least two sources wherever possible. If a story or definition is repeated nearly verbatim in more than one source, there’s a good chance it has simply been copied from information already out there without the poster verifying the accuracy of the subject. Sadly, this is how a lot of bad information gets passed along and taken as ‘true’ when it really isn’t. But that’s modern technology for you. So again I repeat get down to your local library. After all, they’ve been collecting print books since 1662!

6. Don’t worry about the detail. Just, let your story tell itself.

Whilst you should always try and strive for accuracy, there comes a time when it’s necessary to just make your best-informed guess, and then move on. Getting your story down on paper is all important. Once the writing is done and you come to the editing you may find yourself changing things, having done some more research. But, if you have to fudge something, well, that’s what the ‘historical notes’ at the end of your novel are for! Use them.

7. Love the process.

It doesn’t matter how many times you edit as, I can assure you, there will always be those readers who will still find any errors, no matter how small. And, they’ll let you know about them. Whether those errors happened in the editing process or not is irrelevant. (Several of mine did. Easy solution was to gel a number of scenes together, and Bob’s your Uncle – problem solved. A perfect recipe for timeline and geography mistakes). You can triple-check facts, hire copy editors and proof-readers. You can scrutinize every word for inconsistencies and mistakes. And yet I guarantee, that something will still slip through the net. At that point, you just have to shrug your shoulders, thank your readers and move on.

Oh, of course, you can always wait awhile and then reissue it with a new updated cover as edition number 2. But why bother. You should by this time have written the next 2 or 3, maybe number 4. Writing is a learning journey. Just as when we were growing up and learning to write in school we made mistakes but we learnt from them. We’re still learning. It makes the journey much more interesting. Always have fun with your writing. That’s all that really matters. I certainly do.