

Historical Fiction

Historical fiction is a genre of fiction whose story is set in the past, before the period in which the author and reader live. Most of Charles Dickens's novels are set in Victorian England, but he lived in the world he wrote about, so these works do not qualify as historical fiction. But if you, living in the 21st century, decided to write a story set in Victorian England, you would be writing historical fiction.

Writing historical fiction requires finding a balance between fact and fiction. Be prepared to conduct a certain amount of research; readers will be looking for a degree of accuracy in your account of settings and events. It's up to you, though, how much emphasis you place on the historical aspect of your story relative to character development. Boris Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago*, for example, is primarily focused on history, specifically the details of the Russian revolution and its impact on the average citizen, writes Persia Woolley in *How to Write and Sell Historical Fiction*. On the other hand, writes Woolley, Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone With the Wind* is more character-driven, told from the viewpoint of Scarlett O'Hara, whose selfishness and determination to get what she wants are more central to the story than the Civil War going on around her.

DETAILS OF EVERYDAY LIFE AND DIALOGUE

Although your story may be about major historical figures or events, you will also need to look into some mundane areas of research. You will need to find out about average, everyday life during the period in which your story is set. How did people make a living? What did they eat and drink? What did they wear? What was the main mode of transportation?

Woolley points out that, in modern times, "[w]e are so used to controlling climate and light for farm animals as well as ourselves, it comes as a shock to realize how much we've tampered with nature's basic rhythms." In other words, don't forget how different our modern lives are from lives in previous historical periods. People in past generations did not have many of our technological advances, so were more strongly affected by such factors as nature, climate, and travel times.

You will need to maintain some illusion of historical authenticity in the dialogue as well. In historical fiction, as in other genres of fiction, the dialogue should seem to reflect the time period. Use letters and diaries of the period to find the rhythms and expressions typical of the time. Reading novels from the period is another way of getting the flavour of the language.

Some historical fiction uses a real figure as the main character. For example, Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy* is about Michelangelo and his painting of the Sistine Chapel; Joyce Carol Oates's *Blonde* is about Marilyn Monroe; and

Wayne Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* is about the larger-than-life Joey Smallwood, a controversial politician and the first premier of Newfoundland after Confederation. Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* has fictionalized main characters but is inspired by the real historical figure Francis Pegahmagabow, an Ojibwa who fought heroically in the First World War. These novels differ from biographies in the **artistic licence** their authors take with the interpretation of some events. Artistic licence is the artist's liberty to change facts for aesthetic reasons.

You find artistic licence in historical fiction that uses an invented protagonist, who tends to be placed close to real figures and actual historical events, yet removed enough to maintain autonomy and an independent fate. Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is based on the real life and times of the famous Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer, but the story's narrator, a young girl named Griet, is fictional. The novel shows how fiction can grow out of fact: Griet's character and story were inspired by Vermeer's famous portrait of an unknown girl. Inspired by the mystery, Chevalier gave the girl a name and character, and speculated that she was at some point a part of Vermeer's life. In a sense, the novel is based on the question, "What if?"—that is, "What if the beautiful girl in the painting was one of Vermeer's servants?" or "What if the intensity of the girl's gaze tells a story about her feelings for the artist?"

Try to identify the details in the following passage, which describes Griet's observation of Vermeer at work, that help to make her character and world believable:

I had never seen a painting made from the beginning. I thought that you painted what you saw, using the colors you saw.

He taught me.

He began the painting of the baker's daughter with a layer of pale grey on the white canvas. Then he made reddish-brown marks all over it to indicate where the girl and the table and pitcher and window and map would go. After that I thought he would begin to paint what he saw—a girl's face, a blue skirt, a yellow and black bodice, a brown map, a silver pitcher and basin, a white wall. Instead he painted patches of color—black where her skirt would be, ocher for the bodice and the map on the wall, red for the pitcher and the basin it sat in, another grey for the wall. They were the wrong colors—none was the color of the thing itself. He spent a long time on these false colors, as I called them.

Another type of historical fiction is concerned with fictionalizing certain myths. Such works might draw on Arthurian legends or on stories about the ancient city of Troy.

For all types of historical fiction, the writer must recognize that the storytelling is more important than the history. He or she is not writing non-fiction. What draws the history buff to writing fiction is a love of storytelling and character.

Consequently, historical novels and short stories, no less than other kinds of stories, need to have well-rounded characters, escalating conflicts, and interesting obstacles.