

Writing History

At a workshop I gave recently someone asked what, from the writer's point of view, distinguished historical novels from other genre fiction.

My first instinct was to defend historical novels against being seen as genre fiction in the first place. Genre is a useful guide for publishers and booksellers, given that marketing a novel relies on knowing its readership and who to pitch it to. Genre fiction, though, is a term that is usually used to describe popular fiction; usually more commercial, plot-driven novels. Historical fiction doesn't neatly fit into either of these definitions of genre. Some historical novels are motivated by biographical or political documentation, some are gothic thrillers, others crime or ghost stories or romances. Some are mainstream, others considered 'literary', which is another publishing term for a novel that appeals to a certain type of reader. Hilary Mantel and Andrew Miller, for instance, are generally considered to be literary authors, and both have recently won major literary prizes for historical novels.

To return to what distinguishes an historical novel – beyond the obvious historical setting – it is, I think, the creation of a world that is relatively unfamiliar. But unlike dystopian, science fiction and fantasy novels, which can also be defined by setting, historical novelists trawl the vast archive of the past for ideas, characters, and drama. History yields every dramatic theme – murder, betrayal, love, passion, jealousy, secrecy and dynastic struggles, to name just a few. Whilst these grand narratives remain largely the same no matter what the era, the circumstances and details of life change, from century to century, beyond recognition. This is part of the draw; many readers of historical fiction like to be informed as much as they like to be told a story. Enter the historical novelist.

Since I was a child, historical stories engaged me more thoroughly than any other kind. They promised romance – not in the sense of romantic love, but the mystique and allure of the past. History was a place that I could visit like a time-traveler; full of exotic destinations and beautiful costumes and charismatic characters. Most importantly, the past captivated my imagination. If you are interested in writing, this engagement is critical. Write about what absorbs and fascinates you; set your stories in a land or a time that you want to explore, be it past, present or future. If you want to write historical stories then a preoccupation with the past is vital.

Another passion that particularly suits historical novelists is the love of research, otherwise known as nerdishness. You should be a nerd in the sense that you are studious to the point of being dull (don't worry, your imagination will provide all the action and excitement you're missing out on socially) because you have become a temporary expert on whatever era you are researching. Most historical writers soon learn to gage just how much information someone wants when they ask:

‘what are you writing about?’ Just because you are deeply fascinated with the secret nature of the agreement made between Harold Godwinson and William the Conqueror in 1064, that doesn’t mean your partner, family and friends will find it quite so riveting. On the other hand, noticing at what point their eyes glaze over might be useful in determining which aspects of your story aren’t quite as dramatic as you thought.

There is no great mystery in how to research, particularly not now that the internet is rewiring our brains. If someone had told me when I was researching my first novel that I would one day be able to type a word or phrase into a ‘search engine’ and find limitless material on Saxon footwear or Victorian haberdashery I would have been highly suspicious. Research is almost always part of the creative process; knowing the social history and political landscape of the world your characters inhabit not only informs their behaviour, relationships and emotions, it can also become an intrinsic part of your plot. If your fifteenth century characters believe in magic or are superstitious or have certain ideas about gender, then they will not have the same sensibility as someone who inhabits the world we know. Well, not usually...

In looking for ideas for an historical story there are many points of departure. I have often been inspired by objects; textiles and jewels in particular, and love a good historical mystery. There’s nothing like unfinished business or the ‘what if’ factor to set one’s imagination to work on a story. I also like to know the minutiae of the decor and the calendar events of the year because these things provide a structure for my imaginings. I read biographies of any historical characters (always more than one, since biographers can be biased) and, if possible, look at paintings and visit buildings from the period. I do everything I can to create, in my imagination, the physical world of my story, and then I wait for my characters to arrive and inhabit it.

If you like ruins, curios and yellowed pages, then chances are you have an historical story in you. Whatever your motivation, be warned that, once you start to time-travel, the world you return to will never look the same again.