



FROM HISTORY TO HISTORICAL FICTION  
*A Brief Guide for Academic Historians*

## THREE BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR TURNING YOUR DEEP KNOWLEDGE INTO DEEPLY ENGAGING HISTORICAL FICTION

You know a lot. You've spent years acquiring knowledge, exploring archives and sources, and sharing what you know with history students. But something tells you there could be many more people out there who would be inspired by, learn from, or just be entertained by stories from history that are so familiar to you. Maybe you've even toyed with the idea of turning some of what you know into historical fiction, had an idea or two you thought might work.

Of course, you're smart enough to know that writing fiction requires a completely different approach than writing a peer-reviewed paper—as I learned about twenty years ago. I was an academic music historian (PhD Yale, 1999) who became a historical novelist because I was passionate about a particular idea from my research, and thought it would make a great story.

And I've never looked back. With over a dozen published historical novels and numerous awards and glowing reviews to my name, I've figured out a few things about how to adapt pure history into a novel that will keep readers turning the pages—and honor the facts you know and love.

(A note: If you're absolutely adamant that you cannot change a single iota of historical material, can't shift things around slightly to make a better story, then writing historical fiction is probably not for you!)

If your mind is open to doing what it takes, this brief guide serves as an introduction to some key concepts that could start you on your way. If you're interested in getting some 1:1 help with your fledgling novel, I'd be happy to have an exploratory conversation with you about it. Just contact me at [susanne@susanne-dunlap.com](mailto:susanne@susanne-dunlap.com).

**First principle:**  
*Create a protagonist your reader will root for.*

**Decide whether your protagonist will be historical or fictional.**

Either option can work. Just be aware that a well-known historical figure might tempt you to overload your story with history—a sure way to hamper narrative drive. It's also harder to find a story arc that will work when you're dealing with a real person's life. One strategy is to choose a lesser-known historical figure who is adjacent to someone famous. That can give you more leeway to craft the story. The most freedom of all comes with creating a fictional protagonist who could have existed in the world of your story.

**Give them a clear want.**

Make it something they can't easily get, with many seemingly insurmountable obstacles in their way. You're going to have to put your protagonist through hell, historical or otherwise. Identifying this want is a good way to figure out which slice of your historical protagonist's life you're going to focus on, or how your fictional protagonist will relate to the famous historical characters.

## **Make the stakes as high as possible.**

The stakes don't have to be life or death, but they should be something that keeps a reader on the edge of their metaphorical seat—and the stakes should (obviously) be believable in the context of the historical setting. An example: In *The Personal Librarian* by Marie Benedict and Victoria Christopher Murray, the stakes for Belle Da Costa Greene to keep her race a secret are the potential ruin not just of her, but of her entire family. That is particular to the era in which the story is set.

## **Give your protagonist a misbelief.**

Your protagonist's idea of what's possible or desirable might be based on an idea they have that is simply wrong, or wrongheaded. Their decisions will be affected by this misbelief, and the reader will wring their hands as they read and anticipate the disastrous results—and cheer when the protagonist finally sees how wrong they were.

## **Make sure there's an arc of change.**

A protagonist who's the same at the end of a novel, who doesn't undergo some profound change (internal or external) is not a very engaging protagonist. Here too, profound doesn't have to mean big. Profound in the universe of the story you're telling—realizing they're worthy of love, or that their own actions have caused harm and they want to atone, for instance.

**Second principle:**  
*Let go of your need to be an expert.*

**Your reader doesn't have to know  
how much you know.**

The trick of writing absorbing historical fiction is to allow a reader to become fully immersed in that different time. That means being sure to include only the historical information that's pertinent to your story. No info dumps, no digressions into a point of history that's fascinating, but outside the trajectory of your story.

**Always remember it's fiction.  
Historical is the adjective.**

As I said on the first page, crafting an effective story out of fiction *will* involve a degree of invention on your part. Simply putting words into a historical figure's mouth lands you in the realm of fiction. And you will start digging into emotions, motivations, and other things that aren't necessarily ensconced in the historical record—because without them, your story will be dry and uninteresting. So make peace with the idea of using your imagination as well as your knowledge.

**Third principle:**  
*Trust your imagination—and your reader.*

**In fiction, the story is the boss.**

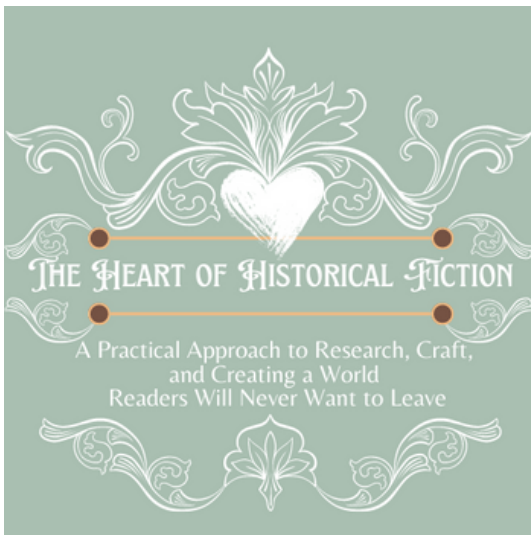
This leads on from the previous principle, but it deserves emphasizing because it can be really hard to accept. You will no doubt find yourself delving into areas of research that are not in your expertise—and that's fine. You know how to do the research, which sources to trust, how to dig down deeper and find a particular nugget of information. Those areas that are not in your wheelhouse can also help you avoid leaning too heavily into research at the expense of story. Let the demands of the story guide you. Take risks!

**Readers love historical notes**

Your big advantage as an academic is that you'll have the opportunity to write a really fascinating historical note about your novel. Here's where you can explain what's real and what's historical, talk about anything you changed and why, and indulge in educating your reader by giving them your sources and suggestions for further reading. These notes can also be material for interviews and blog posts.

## A Special Offer for You!

If you'd like some more targeted help incorporating these principles (and more) into your specific story, I invite you to sign up for my self-paced online course, *The Heart of Historical Fiction!*



This course includes some basic information about research—which as academics you probably don't need. But it also covers sub-genres and what readers expect from them, exercises related to creating a protagonist and structuring your story, and useful organizational tools that integrate research and your story in a way that keeps everything at hand as you write.

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