Your Historical Novel Protagonist

Workbook

This workbook contains questions and exercises to help you build out a protagonist who has what it takes to power your historical novel. The goal is to make your reader care about them from the first page, give them the kind of stakes that keep readers turning the pages, and make them true to the period yet appealing to a modern reader.

Although many of the ingredients that go into creating a great protagonist could apply to any genre of fiction, there are special considerations in historical fiction that add another dimension to this most important choice in your book.

These exercises are in a specific order on purpose. However, if you’re the kind of person who likes to hop around, who doesn’t like to feel railroaded into a particular process, feel free.

PART ONE

**The Basics**

**What kind of a historical novel are you writing? Why did you choose that genre?**

Some choices:

* Biographical
* Romance
* Mystery
* Thriller
* Women’s fiction
* Literary
* YA
* Middle Grade

**Are there any genre conventions you’ll need to be mindful of—in addition to the historical aspects?**

**Who will read your book? What is their attitude toward history and historical fiction?**

Do you anticipate knowledgeable readers, or are your readers looking more for entertainment, or their preferred genre in a historical setting?

**Historical or Fictional?**

Which have you chosen, and why? How will your protagonist satisfy your particular reader?

What is one thing that will make your reader care about your protagonist? Why?

Why do YOU care about your protagonist?

What does your protagonist care about?

What is your protagonist’s source of conflict? How is it embedded in the historical period?

What is the first thing your protagonist is going to do on the page? How do they start the action in a way that places the reader securely in the time period?

PART TWO

**Digging Deeper**

**What is the time period over which your story takes place? Why? Have you decided, or are you still thinking?**

**What are the stakes? Think deeply: how can you amp up the stakes throughout your story in a way that affects the protagonist, that creates a sense of urgency that will keep readers turning the pages?**

For instance, something that starts out feeling important but not vital suddenly becomes a matte of life or death due to external circumstances. E.g., your protagonist doesn’t take sides on something, which alienates them from their family, but then a conflict breaks out and they risk being an enemy to both sides.

**Think of three different scenes that could open your story—either at the same general moment, or in different potential starting points. Which one feels best to you? Which one reveals your protagonist best?**

Scene 1:

Scene 2:

Scene 3:

**Have you decided when and how your story will end?**

**Decided or not, think of three possible ending scenes.**

Scene 1:

Scene 2:

Scene 3:

Which of the scenes tracks back to the opening best, and how? Which one most clearly reveals your protagonist’s character arc?

**Identify the Transformation**

What does your protagonist want so badly they’ll walk through fire to get it?

How is their want related to the historical period?

What forces of opposition are standing in their way of achieving their want, and how is it related to the historical period? Don’t be satisfied with just one. Keep throwing those obstacles in.

Name three possible opposing forces:

How will (or has) your protagonist changed by the end of the story? Is the change positive or negative?

Does your protagonist have a misbelief that’s affecting their actions and decisions?

Is your protagonist’s internal want or need in conflict with their external want or need?

What action to overcome obstacles would be inconsistent with your protagonist’s character?

What action to overcome obstacles would be consistent with your protagonist’s character?