

Research, write, publish and promote historical fiction using digital tools.

Writing Historical Fiction: Advice for the Digital Age

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Writing Historical Fiction: Digital Age Advice

*With tips on using web tools for researching, writing, revising,
publishing and promoting your work*



By Marilyn Weymouth Seguin

Author of eleven historical books for young adults

Writing Historical Fiction: Digital Age Advice

**With tips on using web tools for researching, writing, revising, publishing
and promoting your work**

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Books by Marilyn Weymouth Seguin

Introduction

What is historical fiction anyway?

Historical fiction. Hmm. It would seem to be an oxymoron. History is factual. Fiction, on the other hand, is a figment of a writer's imagination. So how can a piece of writing be both true and imaginary the same time? And what obligation does the writer of historical fiction have to her reader to help the reader sort out the difference?

In his excellent book *The Art and Craft of Writing Historical Fiction*, James Alexander Thom reminds us that fiction is not the opposite of fact. Rather, fiction means “created by imagination.” I think of historical fiction as a blend of fact and fiction, a genre in which the made up story is driven by historical fact. A good historical novel needs to be, first and foremost, a good story. A good historical novel needs an authentic time, place and people, yet the writer can still be comfortably creative without being incorrect with the historical framework. That's a lot to ask from a writer.

I've been writing and publishing historical fiction for almost 20 years—in both print and audio format. I've also been teaching college writing courses for more than 25 years, and for many years I felt like a fraud in the writing classroom. My students and I plodded through textbooks concerned with issues such as *point of view*, and *voice* and *character development* and *theme*. My students struggled to write according to the prescribed process they were reading about in the chapters that I had, after all, assigned them to read. Then I realized that I myself did not write in the way described in these textbooks, so why was I expecting my students to do so? For example, the textbooks were telling my students to *write what you know*. But I wasn't doing that at all—I was writing about what I could find out. Big difference from writing what I know. The textbook authors were also telling my students to write in a linear way—get an idea, make an outline, draft, revise, proofread. I wasn't going about it in that way, though. I find writing to be more of a circular thing—and so do many of my writer friends.

This book offers an alternative to the traditional advice given to writers about producing, publishing and promoting a historical novel—or any piece of writing for that matter. Although it is aimed at writers of historical fiction, I hope that this book offers insight to readers of the genre as well.

How can technology help you research and write historical fiction?

Writing anything in the digital age can be a challenge—not because of the computer itself, but because of what it connects us too. Remember, the Internet didn't even exist until 1988. Think about it! There were no such things as wikis or blogs or search engines to connect us to the information we were seeking. There were no social

networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter to connect us to other folks from whom we might learn. And think about what technology has made possible for writers:

- We can do much of our research without even leaving home, including getting access to primary source material such as letters and diaries and photographs.
- We can find and connect to people who have the answers to our questions through blogs, social networks and email.
- We have access to resources that help improve our writing at all stages, including mind-mapping tools, spelling and grammar checks, and readability tools.
- We can publish instantly in electronic, audio, video and/or print formats.
- We can promote our work and connect with our readers through blogs, websites and social media.

This book features dozens of ideas on how you can use digital tools and resources as you research, write, publish and promote your work of historical fiction—or any other genre in which you write for that matter. Technology tips are interspersed throughout each chapter, and Chapter Nine gives additional digital resources specifically for writers of historical fiction. So let's get started.

Technology tip: This interesting quiz was designed to show teachers how to use historical fiction in their curriculum, but writers can discover a lot about the genre by taking it as well. Take the quiz at: http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0073378569/student_view0/chapter10/multiple_choice_quiz.html

Chapter 1

Find Your Focus

When I talk to the readers of my books, whether face to face or online, the question I'm most often asked is "Where do you find ideas for your books?" My answer is always the same. "I don't find ideas. I find characters. The characters then find ideas and that's what I write about." It's the truth and it is a good way to describe one approach (mine) to writing historical fiction.

One of my book ideas was sparked by a family trip to the battlefield of Antietam. The locale and the events of this famous Civil War confrontation intrigued me as I traipsed through the battlefield. But remember, I like to begin with a character rather than an event, so when I got home, I went to the library of a university known as a rich repository for Civil War books, and I physically searched through hundreds of books looking for a character. Because I write mainly for children and young adults, I was particularly interested in finding a diary or memoir of a young soldier—or else the mention of such a person in someone else's memoir. In my mind's eye, I was seeking a boy, say 18 or 19 years old, through whom I could tell my story. As I browsed the memoir section, I came across the memoir of Emma Thompson, who as a young girl, disguised herself as a boy and joined a Michigan regiment that saw action at Antietam. Perfect! Thus came the idea for *Where Duty Calls*. That's been pretty much my approach to all my novels—find the character, and then tell his or her story in its historical context. That is what I mean by "focus." But what I've described is just MY focus.

Not every writer of historical fiction focuses on authentic characters, however. Some authors make up fictional characters they then use as lenses to tell of historical events and locales. Author Sandra Dallas uses fictional characters to tell her charming story about quilting in Civil War rural America in *Alice's Tulips*. Still other writers create historical fiction entirely out of their imaginations. In the *Red Badge of Courage*, for example, the young protagonist Henry Fleming is a fictional character used by author Stephen Crane to tell the hard truths of the battle of Chancellorsville (not so named in the book, but that is what critics conjecture). The writer, by the way, neither fought nor witnessed a Civil War battle. The book and its characters were apparently entirely a product of Crane's imagination.

How can you determine your own focus? Your answers to the following questions may give a clue as to how to begin a historical fiction project. Do you need real people to spark your muse? Would you rather make up fictional characters to act out authentic historical events? Or, is a historical setting alone enough to spark your imagination?

Technology tip: How might authors of historical fiction determine a focus for their stories? You'll want to read as much of the genre as you can in order to discover the answer to this question. This website for cataloguing authors and their works of historical fiction lists recent historical fiction bestsellers and can be searched by timeline: www.histfiction.net Not sure about the quality of the historical fiction you are reading?

View the “Evaluating Historical Fiction” guidelines I give my college students at <http://softchalkconnect.com/lesson/serve/JWuhxMV2YtoKqN/html>.

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