

AUTHOR NEWSLETTER

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THE ROLE OF RESEARCH IN HISTORICAL FICTION

If you want to write novels set in the past, you need to research the past so you can paint an accurate picture of the times, right?

It sounds simple enough, but there are differing viewpoints. Some authors believe that since their work is fiction, they have a literary license to create a less than accurate past to more neatly fold into their story. After all, they're not writing a boring history textbook. They're writing entertainment that just happens to take place in the past.

Other authors believe it is heresy not to provide the reader with an accurate picture of the times: towns and governments, politics, beliefs, visual setting, manner of speaking, and on and on. Many readers of historical fiction will protest inaccurate renditions of the past and write bad reviews for novels that deviate from what they believe is true history.

Like seemingly everything else in life, it's not that simple. And there is no "happy medium." The level of research varies with the nature and intention of the project. Some works need little research, while others require a lot and could fail if that research is not done.

For instance, The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead sounds like a novel about the methods used during the civil war era to help runaway slaves find freedom in the north. That is not actually the case.

The novel won the Pulitzer Prize as well as numerous other awards. But, as it turned out, the "underground railroad" depicted in the novel did not exist in real life. It was, essentially, an impossibility.

I prefer to read books without reading about them beforehand. I want them to be fresh, to surprise me. This one did. The Underground Railroad was a great book, but I questioned its authenticity early on when it depicted skyscrapers and public housing in the south during the slavery era. It became apparent that this was more Historical Fantasy than Historical Fiction.

In this case, research played a minimal role. Since the times and technology were entirely out of sync, historical accuracy was "out the window." (Most likely from the window of the first skyscraper, which did not exist until twenty years after the civil war. 😊)

Colson Whitehead is one of the few people who could have pulled this off. At the other end of the scale, there are a lot of novels set in both the present and the past, such as many of the works

by Dan Brown. These require a substantial amount of research to not only validate the premise in the novels but also to come up with the concept of the novel in the first place. Dan Brown has researched his themes thoroughly. While he has taken a little heat from historical purists, it is minor. His record speaks for itself.

For most historical novels, the author would be wise to follow Dan Brown's path and pay more attention to historical accuracy. But, as in all things, up to a point.

There are times when being historically accurate can mislead or confuse a reader. For instance, our speech has changed over time. I remember as a very young boy working the soda fountain at the Howard Johnson's in Montgomery, Alabama. A group of people from New England came in. I tried to take their order but could not understand what they were saying. And they could not understand my "LA" accent. After several failed attempts, I had no choice but to ask the manager for help. I forget where he was from, but it was far enough north so that he could understand both dialects. (That was longer ago than I like to admit!)

Now, in the era of instant communication, accents and regional phrasing are becoming a thing of the past. We talk more and more like the voices we hear on TV and in movies.

But back when news traveled at the speed of an ornery donkey, the sayings people used and the way they phrased their speech could confuse the readers of today. So a writer has to be careful not to be too accurate by including these misleading phrases.

At the same time, the author doesn't want to use modern phrases in historical work. It would be laughed at to have someone from the seventeenth century say, "That's like awesome, Dude!" It is, indeed, a little like walking a tight rope.

One of the tools I used when writing Conecuh was a list of civil war era sayings. Since colloquialisms tended to vary by region, there were actually two lists, one for the South and one for the North. I scattered some of these phrases throughout the book to give it a more authentic feel, but only those sayings that would be easily deciphered. Many of the sayings in the list would have made no sense to today's readers without footnotes and explanations. (Frankly, I don't like footnotes in fiction. They disrupt the flow of the story.) I did not use anything I felt might be unrecognizable.

Political views and the political atmosphere of centuries past can also be confused by modern readers. Motivations and beliefs from centuries ago sometimes don't make sense to today's audience. We have a higher level of technology and education, which allows us a better understanding of the world around us. Because of this, we are less inclined to fall prey to baseless superstition.

One example is the bravery and daring of the Confederate soldier. These men and, in some cases, women, would take extraordinary chances. They were less inclined to retreat, sometimes lining up and charging in the face of hopeless odds. But it was not necessarily because the southern soldier was braver.

Most in the South, particularly those from the “deep South,” were Calvinistic in their religious beliefs. They believed in predestination, that God would take them to heaven when He was ready for them and not before. They felt that no man on Earth could cause a man’s death unless God had pre-willed it. So it didn’t matter whether they charged into hopeless odds or not. If God wanted to take their soul that day, He would do so whether the soldier charged forward or ran away and hid. Thus, for the most part, the southern soldier let out a rebel yell and charged full speed into swarms of musket balls and grapeshot. Without some background, this type of “bravery” might seem to be pure stupidity to a modern reader.

There is also a danger of being too accurate in that you start to sound like that boring history book. Historical accuracy is undoubtedly important, but don’t let the story suffer because of it.

Another danger is that the author spends so much time performing research they “forget” to actually write the novel.

So the level of accuracy depends on the nature of the project. If you are purposely inaccurate, as in a fantasy piece, there is little research to be done. But this type of work is a bit like treading on thin ice. Be sure that’s what you want to do. Otherwise, it is best to be historically accurate, but not so much that the book becomes boring or confusing. Some things have to be explained in modern-day terms to avoid misunderstanding.

Some writers recommend writing the story first then handling historical accuracy in the editing process. While that may work for them, it does not work for me. I find that many of the historical details I discover in the research process can and sometimes do affect the plot. I perform research during the creation of the idea and continually throughout the writing.

For Conecuh, my cousin, Sherry Garner, and her daughter, Robin Robinson, performed hundreds of hours of research about Caleb Garner as they believed he was a relative at the time. (That turned out not to be the case, but that’s another story.) They made all their research available to me, even mailing me library books. (Said books were hopelessly late being returned. 😊)

During the writing of the novel, I spent approximately two hundred additional hours performing my own research. The internet is a wonderful tool. It’s great to be able to have my novel and historical documents side-by-side on the screen. My goal, however, was only to be accurate with the details of the story I was writing, and not to include historical details that had nothing to do with my story. I did not want to write a history textbook!

When you see the railroad routes, fares, and arrival/departure times for southern railroads in Conecuh, these are accurate. I had Hill and Swayze’s 1862 comprehensive railroad and boat guide in one window as I developed and wrote the book in another. It cost only a few hours of research to keep from making up bogus routes and times. I was willing to invest that time as I felt this was an area where accuracy mattered, especially since I was tracking the actual travels of Caleb Garner during the war.

Caleb disappeared at the end of the war, and history has left us blind as to what happened to him. While my version of his story is fiction, particularly the ending, I wanted my novel to be historically accurate because it, quite possibly, could have happened as I depicted.



BOOK SIGNING – PRATTVILLE, ALABAMA

We had a great time at the book signing in Adrienne’s Bar in downtown Prattville, Alabama. It was good to see a lot of family and friends again, as well as meet some new friends. A motorcycle “gang” of over a hundred riders made a surprise visit to the bar, and I enjoyed talking with several of them. And selling a few books to them as well. 😊

In the adjacent picture I was discussing one of my novels with Hank Immler. My cousin, Sherry, took the picture and joked about Hank giving me a heart attack. Not the case. Hank isn’t that scary. 😊 I was simply explaining my “heartfelt” thoughts on one of my novels.

By the way, if you’re ever in downtown Prattville, Alabama, stop by Adrienne’s Bar. It’s a fun place owned by my cousin Adrienne Sanderson Edwards and her husband, Darri. Good people.



POUNDING THE KEYS – THE GREAT BRAIN ROBBERY

[Pounding The Keys is a regular feature about my current novel in progress.]



In The Joystick Murders, I introduced Master Detective Drake Blast from the year 2042. Drake works for the combined Washington D.C. Metro Police Force/United Nations Capital Security Service. He has two bosses and often finds himself in two roles, city detective and international spy. With high-level training, a keen mind, an eye for detail, and some good old American dumb luck, he managed to survive a harrowing adventure that brought him to the brink of death in The Joystick Murders. Now he’s back.

Science Fiction has been installing computer chips in human brains for many decades. Medical science is starting to catch up. We have already installed electronics in people’s brains to help

the blind see and help the deaf hear. Far more will be coming, and coming sooner than most people realize.

Some scientists believe we will essentially be cyborgs by the year 2050, our human brains enhanced with AI chips that make us the next step in evolution. While I believe that date may be a bit too soon, the initial steps have already been taken. Implant chips will be commonplace in the not too distant future.

These chips are valuable. So what's to keep a thief from cutting your head open and stealing them? Welcome to [The Great Brain Robbery!](#) But is it simple robbery? Or is something more sinister afoot?

Book Two in the Drake Blast series is well underway as the initial draft is nearing the halfway mark. (It was delayed by several months because of our recent move, but writing has resumed!) The plot is essentially complete, lacking only a few details that will flesh out as I watch the story develop. (I basically see a movie in my mind as I write. And, yes, I often have to hit the pause, rewind, and rerecord buttons. 😊) Release is now scheduled for February/March 2020.

If you'd like to take a peek at The Great Brain Robbery, the Preface is attached.

JUST FOR FUN

What do you call a non-fiction vampire?

A real pain in the neck.

BLAST FROM THE PAST

[In each issue for the first year of my newsletter, I will feature one of my published novels, at random, and discuss where the idea came from, how it developed, and why I wanted to write it.]



Two of my favorite movies of all time are Kelly's Heroes and It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World. While A Bloody Wonderful War is in a similar vein, the idea did not originate from the movies. The idea actually came from an old "hippy" poster during the Vietnam era. The poster read, "Suppose they gave a war and nobody came." (The line was adapted from a poem by Carl Sandberg.)

I thought, *What if they gave a war and people did come, but there was so much government red tape nobody had time to fight, so nobody got killed?* The idea was intriguing and A Bloody Wonderful War was born, although that title would not come until years later. The working title was World War III, Article V, Subarticle 6Z, Chapter 36, Paragraph.... Well, you get the idea.

It would be almost two decades before the first words made it to paper. My brother, Kim, and I started writing the novel together in the eighties. We made notes for the entire plot and wrote the first six or eight chapters, but we discovered that writing was hard work. Besides, it wasn't sounding as good on paper as it was in our heads. The project fizzled.

After another almost two decades, some ideas popped into my head. Actually, I never stopped thinking about it, but it was in a pretty dark and murky corner of my brain. Too many other stories were floating around for this story to stand out. When it did stand up and announce its new plot, I listened. I also decided to use a different format, a screenplay. This time the project was adorned with its new shortened title, completed, and submitted to several literary agents. While it got some attention from the agents (I got several encouraging letters), none of them pulled the cork all the way under.

After going back and reading the screenplay a year or so later, I realized the story was a little too much in the Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad, World vein. Entertainment had changed. Rewriting from scratch was a daunting task, so the manuscript went into the proverbial dresser drawer.

Another decade passed. (Don't add all those decades up!) The story gelled into something quite different. The basic premise was the same, but, over a few short weeks, the storyline changed. New characters came forth as I watched in my mind's eye. When it finished laying itself out before me, I loved it! I had to write it. But breaking in with a screenplay is such a longshot I decided to go back to the original idea of writing a novel.

Well over a thousand hours of work later, my fourth novel was finished. I was happy with it, but what, exactly, had I created? While *A Bloody Wonderful War* takes place in a world very different from the one in which you and I live, it does not fit neatly into any genre. It has today's level of technology, so it is not science fiction or historical fiction. It has no dragons or magic or knights with swords, so it is not traditional fantasy. It is a mongrel, a cross between comedy, action/adventure, treasure hunt, a tiny bit urban fantasy, and military/war but a war unlike any other. And there is a touch of romance thrown in for good measure. What do you do with such a hybrid beast?



Readers have become more specific over the decades. They prefer specific genres more than ever before. As a result, since *A Bloody Wonderful War* cannot be pigeon-holed, it remains my lowest selling novel and has the fewest reviews of any of my novels. Still, it may well be my favorite. It was a lot of fun to write!

[SIDE NOTE: Several friends urged me to turn my novels into audiobooks. They said they listened to audiobooks when commuting or traveling. I decided to try it. Perhaps I selected the wrong novel, but I chose *A Bloody Wonderful War*. It remains the only novel for which I have

done an audiobook. Why? Recording an audiobook is a long, grueling process. It is also extremely expensive. Because the market is much smaller, the sales have not been sufficient to justify the effort or expense. But I'm not locking the door. I am open to recording a different novel if things change.]

A Bloody Wonderful War

236 Pages

Formats:

eBook \$2.99

Paperback \$12.95

Audiobook \$17.46 on Amazon

Available for free to Kindle Unlimited subscribers

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B079K984JM>

Average Ratings:

3 Amazon ratings – ***** 5.0 out of 5 stars

3 Goodreads ratings – ***** 5.0 out of 5 stars

Editorial Reviews:

Reader's Favorite – ***** 5.0 out of 5 stars

“From the first pages of A Bloody Wonderful War, I found myself looking forward to what was coming next. The unique band of outlandish characters was superbly developed. The dialogue was great. This book is not easy to put down. I highly recommend it.”

RECENT REVIEWS – THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE SUBLIME

[This section covers the reviews/ratings of my novels posted since August 1, 2019. While the response to each of my novels has been very gratifying, not all reviews fall into the Good or Sublime categories. Readers have many different viewpoints, tastes, and opinions. I respect that and, as a personal rule, do not comment on any specific review other than to thank the reader for taking the time to post a review for one of my novels.]

Tennessee Yankee

Amazon Review by Henry S. Kinsler

October 11, 2019

*****5 out of 5 stars

A very good book. I could hardly put it down after I started reading it. Good from the beginning to end.

Goodreads Review by Cheryl Ballard

August 5, 2019

*** 3 out of 5 stars

[Author note: This review is a little bit of a spoiler for those who have not read the book yet.]

Good Historical Fiction about the Civil War and its aftermath. A Tennessee boy of privilege leaves his plantation to travel North as the war begins. He leaves family and the girl he loves. He reluctantly becomes a Union Soldier as he cannot in good conscience fight for the Confederacy. Returning home years later his Father reveals secrets that change his life forever. He leaves the plantation when his Father passes away and heads to the West as he feels like he doesn't feel like a Southerner and needs to start a new life where no one knows his past.

Goodreads Rating by Linda Rollins
September 23, 2019
**** 4 out of 5 stars

Killing Rhinos

Goodreads Review by Ziggy Nixon
August 25, 2019
** 2 out of 5 stars

"It was ok" is more than a fair description of my reading experience, particularly as goodreads takes 3 star reviews and makes them into weighted recommendations for further reading. The story itself has potential overall, but the writing level (below YA) and handling of the plot are amateurish at best. To be blunt: I have no interest whatsoever to read similar stories.

[Author Note: I did not include the full review as it is quite long. It is available on Goodreads if you wish to read it.]

Concuh

Amazon Review by LeeAnn
August 3, 2019
***** 5 out of 5 stars

One of my distant relatives mentioned this book, so, being the history buff that I am, I had to read it, and I was not disappointed. This story kept me reading all the way to the end, and kept me surprised all the way to the end as well.

Amazon Review by Carl
October 22, 2019
***** 5 out of 5 stars

A very good read. The story really kept my interest. I did not want the book to end. – If you like story's about the civil war and the hardships it brought to north and south alike, this is a great read.

Goodreads Rating by Lesa Moore
September 17, 2019
***** 5 out of 5 stars

Thank you for reading my newsletter. I greatly appreciate each and every one of you.

PLEASE PASS THIS NEWSLETTER ALONG TO FRIENDS AND FAMILY

If you would like to receive my newsletters, please send your name and email address to either:
herb@tennesseeyankeenovel.com or herbhughes1994@att.net. Remember to add these addresses to your safe
senders list to avoid them going into your Junk Email folder.

If you no longer wish to receive my emails, please reply with STOP in the subject line or the message body
and you will be promptly removed from my mailing list.

Thank you,
Herb Hughes