Week 5: Troubleshooting Plot: Addressing genre-specific Challenges

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Sample material

HISTORICAL FICTION

The writer of historical fiction faces the same world-building and research challenges as the writer of speculative fiction, but faces some additional ones besides. Fidelity to the historical record is a live issue. When is it okay to change the facts? When will your readers be too outraged to keep reading? Or (more insidiously), what if your readers don't know the difference, and assume that your fiction is a 'true' representation of the way things really were?

Some historical novelists, such as Ronald Wright (*The Gold Eaters*), resist the notion of the historical novelist bearing ethical responsibility. Their work is found in the bookstore under "fiction" rather than "non-fiction"; that, for such writers, is the beginning and the end of their moral duty to concepts like "truth" and "accuracy".

But we can't deny that writers have always faced criticism for messing with the historical record. Consider the case of Wayne Johnson's *Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, which imagines a very fictional lover for the very real historical figure, the first premier of Newfoundland, Joey Smallwood. Some Newfoundlanders took exception to this fictional imposition on a real man's life; this sentiment was neatly summed up by a Globe and Mail headline from Wednesday, August 13, 2011: "Wayne Johnston's Colony of Outraged Readers".

One way of looking at the issue of "truth" in historical fiction is to imagine a spectrum. At one end are works like Thomas Trofimuk's *Waiting for Columbus*, where Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain meet in a Starbucks to discuss her financing of his voyages. Here, the "truths" the writer is striving for are emotional rather than literal; his "Columbus" is indeed on a journey, but a psychological rather than a physical one.

At the other end of the spectrum are writers like Sarah Dunant, who are painstaking in their research. Where she is revisionist (consider her portrait of the unfailingly sweet and mild teenager Lucrezia Borgia in Blood and Beauty), she roots her

characterizations in the possible. There is nothing inconsistent between her young Lucrezia and the murderer known to history.

The vast majority of historical novelists will find themselves in a murky in-between space where famous events are fixed (Ghengis Khan's battles), tiny events are inevitably fabricated (Ghengis Khan's breakfasts), and it's the events in between where the writer will ply her art. Ghengis Khan fathered hundreds of children; but what is known of his wives or lovers? Did he have a favourite horse? What in his childhood drove him to conquer Asia? It's in these sorts of questions that the historical novelist will find her meat.

In short, so long as you know where on this spectrum you're working and why you've chosen that place, you should be able to set ethical concerns aside and focus on the story you want to tell. Confidence in your aesthetic decisions, here, and the ability to thoughtfully justify them, is key.

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