

Researching Historical Fiction—Advice for the Time Traveling Writer

By Herb Williams-Dalgart

The French joined Britain in declaring war on Germany on September 3, 1939 after they invaded Poland.

In 1942, the U.S lowered the draft age to 18, changing the lives of millions of young men forever.

These are historical facts that serve as the inciting incidents in my most recent stories, *The French Girl's War* and *Jingle Boys*, each set during World War II.

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Whether writing the fictionalized stories of modern day protagonists or those living in a different time, writers seek to convey truths of the human condition through their stories. Readers, in turn, seek authenticity, inspiration, and entertainment in those stories.

Writers of historical fiction have an extra burden beyond those of the contemporary fiction writer. They may not have lived during the times in which their stories are set, and so lending an authenticity to their stories, their characters, and their settings may prove challenging. To deal with that challenge, the historical fiction writer turns to research.

As someone who worked for a research company for nearly two decades, I know too well the stigma that research often carries—it's dry, boring, procedural, detailed, and laborious. However, as a writer of historical fiction I can offer a different perspective—it can be fun and just as fulfilling, inspiring, creative, and enriching as writing itself. In fact, I have incorporated the research process so fully into my writing process, I no longer distinguish the two.

It's my goal in this short article to share some perspectives, tips, and tools with the historical fiction writer that I have found useful in my own writing.

Why the Past?

Before you set out to write historical fiction, you should know why you're doing it. Is your story one that can (or should) take place in the past? Is there something about the period you've chosen for your story that is central to your story? Is there a trigger or event in history that launches your protagonist? Is the time and place of your tale a force within the story versus simply being a setting for it?

Remember, readers of historical fiction are not reading a story "about World War II" or "about the Civil War." Those are history books. Historical fiction is about characters in human situations that take place in the context of those times. With that in mind, you should remember your research is about your *characters*. Writing about those participating in a specific and actual historical event or about a historical figure like a political leader will require more research, and perhaps formal permissions or access to personal, historical artifacts from real people or their families—not always necessary when your tale and characters are fictional. For the fiction writer, your goal is simple:

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The Details

As with non-historical fiction, our characters need to have real dimension as do the places in which they interact. We want our characters to engage in their authentic language, interact with their locations, and experience the realities of their world. Whether our protagonists are participating in historical events like battles, interacting with historical figures like Presidents, using historical products like hair tonic from 1939, or using historical transportation like trolleys rolling down the streets of Brooklyn, 1943, we have an obligation to know what we're talking about, lest our inaccuracies become distractions from the human truths we hope to dramatize. We have to know the details of these realities before we can honestly, accurately, comfortably, or effectively write about them and before we know how that world impacts our characters.

To support every scene on every page, we want to know what people ate, how they dressed, how they spoke, what worried them, how they got around, where they went, what they did for money, what they did for fun, what music they listened to, how much things cost, how their world smelled, sounded, looked, felt. Such facts capture elements of both time and place, and are critical to forming a fully realized context and setting. Just as the world in which we live impacts our daily lives, so does the historical world impact our historically-based fictional characters. Put simply, your readers want and deserve rich details of setting; these are the ingredients of the dish you're serving.

Incidentally, these details are the same for non-historical fiction. But readers of historical fiction often seek out the genre specifically because they want and expect those details. They want to feel transported to the era of your story; and you want that, too, so they can understand your characters' feelings, thoughts, choices, and experiences.

Knowing a lot of writers, I understand the temptation is to write your story first and fix it later. With historical fiction, this is a critical mistake. You'd be "fixing" your entire work. Research is part of the thread you use to weave your tale, and it can't be fixed, inserted, or extracted. It must be part of everything. To build a solid piece of historical fiction, you need a solid foundation of information.

That's not to say you should complete your research in its entirety before you begin writing properly. Rather, you should have a good start—enough to comfortably write to the necessary detail—and then give yourself permission to dig and learn more and more as you go. You'll find yourself fact-checking and seeking answers as you go.

And so, the scavenger hunt begins.

Time Travel Resources

There are four primary resources I use to inform my historical research:

- 1) **Historical experiences & accounts** – while I’m old enough to have a connection to some amount of history, I was not alive in the era of my most recent works. Sometimes I may choose to draw from the personal experience of others. There are folks in my life who do recall the 1940s (though sadly fewer and fewer remain). Others recall stories told to them by parents or grandparents. These individual recollections can be very helpful, personal, and inspiring, albeit fleeting, and can provide excellent source material for your work.

Many personal, historical experiences are captured in biographies, autobiographies, diaries, written and recorded accounts of lives lived in other time periods and photographs you can review. Barnes & Noble, and other local bookstores (those that remain), frequently have photo books and historical books on sale. These are great for getting a glimpse of times long gone, if for no other reason than to inspire your imagination.

- 2) **The Internet** – while the saying is true, “You can’t believe everything you read on the Internet,” it does remain a great resource for videos, documentaries, archives, collections of photographs, old audio/radio recordings, declassified government documents, genealogical treasures, and places to order or borrow resource materials. It also has a singular advantage over other research options: you can sit in one place, spending nearly nothing to learn from it.

While search engines start out one step removed from personal accounts of eras past, you can connect to these personal details directly, making the Internet an incredibly powerful resource for writers. Tourism sites are great. Museum sites are great. Sites for historical societies, genealogy research, or libraries—all terrific. Well-worded Google searches often lead to secondary searches and you can find yourself running down an exciting rabbit hole of information.

Before you dive into the ‘net, make a list of things you need.

That’s both the good news and the bad news.

My only advice when drinking from this fire hose: remember your mission. Before you dive into the ‘net, make a list of things you need. When searching for, say, popular foods of 1940, you may find yourself clicking away into audio archives of

radio programs from the same era. That’s okay. Just be sure it’s on the list or you’ll be wasting your time. And don’t be afraid to update your list. Part of the excitement of research is discovery. You may not have thought you needed to learn about radio programs, but once you do learn about them, you may decide to add them to your list and, more importantly, to your story.

Bookmark your favorite web pages since you’re likely to return. Export and save your bookmarks elsewhere so you don’t lose them if your system crashes. These bookmarks may flag frequent destinations throughout your writing process and it’s important to protect them! I’ve included a handful of great sites at the end of this article that may help get you started.

And one final warning—don’t use the Internet as an excuse to avoid writing. Facebook and Twitter are easy links and only a click away from your research. Stay with it. Grab and go. I try to alternate between research days and writing days. You may want to find your own

system. Both typing and researching count as “writing” when you are a writer of historical fiction.

- 3) **Travel** – while you may be writing about a time, it’s important to remember you’re also writing about a place. In my first novel, *The French Girl’s War*, I was writing about my protagonist in World War II, but I was also writing about my protagonist in France. In my current novel, *Jingle Boys*, I’m still writing about a protagonist in World War II, but this time I’m in Brooklyn, England, and Italy. While it may be a hit to the budget, you may wish to consider actually visiting the primary locations of your story.

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A trip to France isn’t exactly low-budget research, but I can tell you it was worth every penny when I went there during my writing of *The French Girl’s War*. While it provided a great family vacation, it also delivered visceral, sensory information about France that I could not have gotten in any other way. In candor, I’ve visited France five times in my life, each before the publishing my novel, but most trips were taken before I ever thought about writing the story of my book and before I thought about the trip as research. One of my trips was a jaunt I added to a business trip. Nevertheless, each trip built both a love and an understanding of the French locations I visited. I’m told these experiences translated well to my fiction—surely better than if I was to have made it all up out of thin air—so my investment may have paid off.

Through a physical visit, I was able to taste the foods, see the buildings, travel the roads, smell the air, hear the language, the birds, the traffic, and the rumbling rivers—all experiences which found their way into my story and which I doubt would have been effectively conveyed if I lacked those experiences. While I couldn’t visit 1939 France, 2008 France surely got me closer to my story than staying in my home office in Orange County, California.

Advising you to travel may be unwelcome news when we often write on a budget, but a serious commitment sometimes requires a serious investment.

Similarly, during one of my recent trips to New York, I was able to stay in Brooklyn (one location in my next novel). I took the subway, ate the foods, visited Coney Island, strolled the streets while dodging rats on trash day, and more. I now have the visceral experiences I know my protagonists would likely have had in New York, even 70 years ago.

Advising you to travel may be unwelcome news when we often write on a budget, but a serious commitment sometimes requires a serious investment. I’d even go as far as to say, if

you aren’t willing to invest in it, perhaps you should reconsider writing about it. I think it’s that important. Still, I know some great books have been written about places without the author paying a real visit to them. In the end, the choice is yours, but I’ve never heard a writer say they regretted learning more about the subject of their work and, in my experience, it always lends a deeper authenticity in their writing.

John Keats wrote, “Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced” and Albert Einstein said, “The only source of knowledge is experience.” As a writer, I happen to agree with them

both. The more personal our experience can be, the more “true” or “real” our work can become.

Sorry, wallet! Half of time travel is travel. Ask your accountant for some advice since you may be able to write off at least part of your trip on your taxes.

- 4) **Allies & Experts** – I frequently comment that writing is not a solitary endeavor, at least not for me. While my writing may occur between me and my keyboard, my writing *process* often requires allies. Whether calling on readers, a writer’s critique group, an assistant, a loved one, a mentor, an editor, an expert, or a curator, most writers have learned (sometimes the hard way) that we need help.

In advance of one trip to New York, I set up an appointment with an archival librarian at the Brooklyn Public Library. This library service was entirely free, yet was one of the most valuable parts of my trip. The library had a separate collection of Brooklyn memorabilia with literature, maps, restaurant menus, photographs, advertisements, and clippings, all from the 1940s and other eras. They had plenty more, but I found my 2-hour visit ended up lasting 8 hours. What I couldn’t read or note, I photocopied. When I couldn’t find something specific, my librarian friend brought MORE material! For a mere twenty-five bucks in photocopy fees and eight hours of my time, I had research results I could never have achieved from my desk in California, even armed with the Internet. And, my new Brooklyn Public Library friend, Ben, invited me to contact him in the future if I found I needed anything else. What a great resource and a fantastic ally!

I found I needed additional information about the draft, military field communications, uniforms, and more—and the Internet delivered names and email addresses of experts to whom I reached out. And guess what? They replied. For free.

Through such resources at museums, libraries, historical societies, and historical locations, we might find a depth of information from people whose entire lives have been dedicated to the very thing about which we hope to learn.

In the end, historical fiction is often intended to transport your readers, to inform, entertain, and inspire them, and in so doing hopefully expose them to your own thoughts on the human condition. Many readers of the genre seek that wonderful feeling of “being there”; this is a feeling only an effective historical fiction writer can provide. But beware—with those readers’ desires come a level of expectation. They want you to get it right, and they want to feel the truth of your words.

With the right resources, patience, personal motivation, and investment, time travel is possible and your work will be better for it!

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Here are a handful of research links that I find useful:

Historical dictionary of American Slang
<http://www.alphadictionary.com/slang/>

1940's food and grocery prices
<http://www.thepeoplehistory.com/40sfood.html>

British History (multiple links)
<http://www.timetravel-britain.com/links/index.shtml>

Lisa's Nostalgia Café
<http://nostalgia cafe.proboards.com/>

The History Channel
<http://www.history.com/>

The New York Public Library
<http://www.nypl.org/>

The BBC History Link
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/0/>

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