

Historical Fiction: A Safe but Fun Way to Travel through Time

Creative Writing Assignment Sheet

Introduction

Short stories and novels based on historic persons, places, and events—often referred to as historical fiction—can give readers the next best thing to riding in a time machine. When the author pays attention to detail and makes the narrative as authentic as possible, readers can get a glimpse of what life was like in ancient Egypt or Victorian England. With some careful research and a good measure of imagination, creative writers can transport their readers to places and times that will not only inform but entertain. Perhaps this is why historical fiction is so popular today. People like to peer into the past and imagine what the world was like way back then and be reminded that human nature has not changed much in thousands of years.

Directions

Your assignment is to write a short story of between 1,000 and 1,500 words that focuses on a specific time in history no more recent than 1950. Avoid prehistory because so little is known about how life was lived before written records were kept. You should base your story on careful research so that readers get a true sense of the setting, customs, lifestyle, social strata, dress, and economy.

Write your story in first or third person based on a realistic historic setting. You may choose your own plot type: romance, mystery, adventure, comedy, family drama, whatever you like. The plot may revolve around an actual event like the Battle of Gettysburg or the invention of the printing press, or it may focus on everyday life in a historic setting. Your story may include actual historic figures like Genghis Khan or Carrie A. Nation, but this is not necessary. All of your characters may be fictional, or all of them may be historic, or you may use a mixture as long as the interactions between these characters are true to what historians know of the historic figures. You should try to depict in your story what time travelers would experience if they were suddenly transported back to the Irish famine or the Gold Rush.

Pre-writing

1. Review the list of suggested topics brainstormed by the class or those on the list distributed by your teacher. Check any that look interesting to you.
2. Do some preliminary research on several of the topics to see what aspects of the historic background may become elements in your story. Look for interesting customs, laws, natural forces at work, political intrigues, tools and technology common in that era, clothing, forms of transportation, music, sports, and so forth.
3. Narrow the focus of your research to one topic, and test drive it with some free writing. Begin with a character, historic or fictional, facing some type of conflict that is consistent with the historic records that you have studied. Use the situation/conflict/crisis/resolution plot structure to create the narrative.
4. If your free writing generates a good storyline and some interesting characters, begin embellishing the story with historic details to give it texture and authenticity.
5. Read the story aloud to test it for a smooth narrative “flow” and fill any gaps in the narrative.
6. Keep going, and soon you will have a first draft to try out on a preliminary audience (your teacher and/or classmates).

E. Examples of Historical Fiction from Previous Issues of Writers' Ink

“The Call” by Joel Cheshier WI2004 - first prize senior fiction - set in Palestine during Crusades
“Finding a Lost Love” by Holly Day WI2004 - third prize senior fiction - set in Medieval France
“The Clermont Dream” by Hannah Cheshier WI2002 - romance about Robert Clermont
“High Lonesome” by Matthew Hansen WI2000 - 1800s in the American West
“Fight for Freedom” by MaLesa Guinn WI1998 - WWII setting about Holocaust

F. Suggested Topics for Short Stories Based on History

1. The daughter of a chamber maid in the Palace of Versailles overhears a plot to assassinate King Louis XVI and reports it to her mother.
2. A cabin boy aboard the U.S.S. Constitution learns a hard lesson about war when the ship encounters the British frigate, Java, off the coast of Brazil.
3. A 16-year-old in Julia Gordon Lowe's first Girl Scouts group remembers her first encounter with the famed founder.
4. Florence Nightingale recalls an incident that influenced her to refuse Lord Houghton's marriage proposal and tell her parents she wanted to become a nurse.
5. A young Lutheran pastor preaches against the anti-Jewish policies of the Third Reich and gets arrested by the Gestapo and sent to Dachau.
6. A Japanese-American family is uprooted from their home in San Francisco and sent to live at the Jerome Relocation Center near Dermott, Arkansas, in November of 1942.
7. A young Aztec warrior remembers the day in 1519 when Cortez marched his troops into Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec Empire.
8. Benjamin, the youngest son of an Israelite patriarch named Jacob, recounts being arrested by Joseph, the Pharaoh's second in command, when he and his brothers go to Egypt to buy food during a drought in their homeland.
9. Edith Carow remembers the first time she met Theodore Roosevelt and the events leading up to their marriage in London in December of 1886.
10. Queen Victoria consults with her military leaders on the advisability of going to war and at the same time deals with household and family problems.
11. While teaching his son to hunt, an Australian aborigine sees his first white man.
12. A teenage girl accompanies her mother, a pioneer midwife, on a long trek through the Maine wilderness in the 1830s to deliver a baby.
13. When his father is injured, a 14-year-old and his younger brother try to keep the family sawmill running in the rural Arkansas of the 1930s.
14. An inexperienced French lieutenant follows Napoleon into his first real battle.
15. An apprentice stone mason helps build the Temple of Jupiter in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon.
16. A Zen gardener in Imperial Japan solves the mystery of a vandalized pagoda.
17. In the 1840s, a teenage girl and her younger brother are abducted from their village in Cameroon, sold into slavery, and shipped to America.
18. An American missionary to China is arrested when the Communists take over in the 1930s.
19. In the 1880s, a wealthy Indian merchant adopts a street urchin in Bombay and trains him to run errands.
20. When her parents die of the bubonic plague in Italy in the 14th century, a strong-willed girl is sent to live in a convent where she leads a quiet rebellion against the harsh rules of the Mother Superior.
21. A gifted machinist goes to work in Thomas Edison's famous lab at Menlo Park and learns a lesson about hard work.
22. A 19th century Masai boy is eager to prove his manhood, but he cannot bring himself to kill a lion even when he has the great cat at spear's point.

Internet Resources

1. Red Inkworks - an excellent set of links to other web sites arranged according to historic eras http://www.redinkworks.com/historical_fiction.htm
2. Of Ages Past - The On-line Magazine for Historical Fiction <http://www.angelfire.com/il/ofagespast/index.html>
3. Historical Fiction Bibliography Arranged Chronologically <http://www.fcps.k12.va.us/FranklinMS/research/hisfic.htm>
4. "A Research Primer for Historical Fiction Writers" by Erika Dreifus <http://www.writing-world.com/fiction/histres.shtml>