



Getting up to Speed in...Historical Fiction

Here's what Historical Fiction is:

These are novels set in the past, before the author's lifetime and experience. Through its serious respect for historical accuracy and details of time, place, and character, Historical Fiction enhances a reader's knowledge of past events, lives, and customs. The goal of Historical Fiction is to bring history to life in novel form.

Here's what happens in Historical Fiction:

Since many readers turn to Historical Fiction to understand history from the inside, from the perspectives of individuals caught up in events from the past, accuracy is key. These novels take readers back to a clearly constructed time and place, peopled with characters who act appropriately for their time. Novels may center on characters, both real and fictional, or they may explore important historical events.

Here's why people like Historical Fiction:

Many readers choose Historical Fiction for its insights into events and people from the past. Interested in more than dry facts and dates, they turn to Historical Fiction to explore characters and facts in story form, to place people and events in a larger perspective in ways that are more entertaining, involving, and expansive than straight history. Fans of the genre know that since these are big books, rich in details, they move at a slower pace than titles in other genres.

Here are key titles to read:

- With the publication of *The Clan of the Cave Bear* set in Ice Age Europe, Jean Auel whetted Historical Fiction fans' appetite for the details of the prehistoric world — it's landscape and characters.
- Dorothy Dunnett's *Lymond Chronicles* epitomize elegantly written Historical novels filled with adventure — not to mention literature, art, important historical figures, exotic settings, and romance. *The Game of Kings* is the first.
- James Michener was the benchmark for the genre. His thoroughly researched novels explored a location from its earliest days, focusing on characters and landscape as well as historical events. *The Source* tells of an archeological excavation in Israel, with each layer unearthed revealing the story of that time.
- Mary Renault's classical historical dramas combine myth and history with compelling storytelling to reveal the ancient world. In *The Last of the Wine* she portrays Greece at the time of Socrates.
- Michael Shaara's evocative and moving account of the battle of Gettysburg, *The Killer Angels*, combines military strategy with very human characters as he explores the thoughts and emotions of men on both sides of the Civil War, friends and brothers from foot soldiers to generals. He offers a clear look at that moment in history as well as at the tensions tearing the country apart.



Here are key authors to know:

- **Edward Rutherfurd**, with his carefully researched historical novels of places, including geography, character, and events, has assumed the mantle of James Michener. His novels chronicle generations in the lives of towns (*Sarum*) and countries (*Russka*).
- **Philippa Gregory's** character-centered Historical novels are noted for their accuracy, compelling stories, and lesser-known protagonists who offer a fascinating perspective on historical events.
- **Cecelia Holland's** well-researched Historical novels present an unromanticized picture of the past. Set in the United States and around the world, the prolific Holland's novels feature fascinating characters, both real and fictional, as well as culture clashes.
- In both her Historical novels and Historical Mysteries, **Sharon Kay Penman** explores the personalities, social customs, and historical events in Medieval England, creating elegantly written and richly told stories.
- **Jeff Shaara**, following in his father Michael's footsteps, has explored American military history from the Revolutionary War to World War II. His novels center on the people who made history and examine them with insight and care, while also offering historical details, especially military.

Here's how to talk with Historical Fiction fans:

- Ask readers first to talk about what they enjoy and then follow up with questions about whether they want more in that time, place, or style. Listen for indications of a preference for the broad scope of history versus a more narrowly focused time and place, as well as for clues to a preference for real historical figures as protagonists or as secondary characters.
- Some readers have a distinct preference for a particular country, time, or character. Others have countries, times, and characters they do not want to read about. Occasionally describing the latter is easier and can lead to useful suggestions.

And a few more tips:

- Many fans of this genre are probably not that interested in time travel or alternative history. They want their books grounded in accurate historical details.
- Many readers also enjoy suggestions of narrative nonfiction and biography to complement their novels. Others enjoy exploring the customs, transportation (all those Regency England conveyances!), fashion, and more in nonfiction companions.
- Fans appreciate books with maps and genealogies, which provide many details. Historical notes at the end of novels are also prized and are especially useful for students.
- Previously, the genre was primarily limited to North American and English settings. The coverage is now world wide, with a wide range of countries and time periods explored.
- For those who do enjoy other genres, Historical Fiction overlaps with a number of popular genres, primarily Mystery, Romance, and Adventure. Increasingly Fantasy plays a role, as Alternative Histories, such as Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, draws heavily on historical details to create a world of Historical Fantasy. In addition, creatures from Fantasy and Horror — vampires in Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian* — increasingly appear in blends of Historical Fiction with other genres.



- While there are no awards designed specifically for Historical Fiction, look for awards in other genres geared towards books with historical settings. These may include the *Spur Awards* and the *Western Heritage Awards* in the Western genre, some of the *RITA Awards* in Romance and the *WILLA Literary Award* for a novel written by a woman and set in the American West.

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