

# Historical fiction? Or historical lies?

**When my son was ten he pointed out that it's embarrassing sitting in a picture theatre while your mum mutters: 'They can't throw tomatoes! It's only 1253! Tomatoes haven't been brought to Europe yet!'**

What? People don't WANT to know that the roses in *Pride and Prejudice* weren't bred till the 1960's? That the herbs in *The Clan of the Cave Bear* series hadn't arrived in Europe in prehistoric times?

Oh.

Okay, it's a bit fanatical when you're watching a video with your husband to keep yelling 'Those aren't pickpockets! There aren't any bloody pockets to pick! The phrase should be 'cut purse!''\*

What really matters is whether the reader - or the viewer - gets a genuine feel for the era. And this, of course, is what's hardest to do - to create a world with the true smell and touch of the past.

The past is an extraordinary adventure - and an irresistible background. When you read an historical novel you're back in Queen Elizabeth's court, or ancient Egypt. But only if the writer has done their work, and not relied on cliches, or just added a few lepers and privies to modern characters and their relationships.

**All of us make mistakes. But there are times when historical mistakes become historical lies.**

It was the movie *The Dish* that really started me wondering.

*The Dish* shows how the first images of man walking on the moon were downloaded from the Parkes Observatory.

But that extraordinary footage was really sent through Honeysuckle Creek, outside Canberra, not from Parkes.

*The Dish* is a good movie. It gives some of the excitement and wonder of those days. But it isn't true. It's fiction - as the movie makers kept pointing out every time anyone protested. But now their fiction has become history, accepted as fact even by the Sydney Observatory.

## So how much does truth matter when you're writing historical fiction?

The question led me to what would become *Macbeth and Son*. *Macbeth and Son* is about a modern boy who inadvertently cheats in an entrance exam. Luke dreams about an ancient hero king, so unlike his TV star stepfather.

But the king is called Macbeth...and Luke slowly learns that the play that he is studying in school is a lie.

Shakespeare based his play on English histories, written by men who didn't understand the Scottish system of elected kingships. But Shakespeare made his Macbeth even worse. He added witches, a mad queen, and a heroic Banquo to get money and a license to perform from King James.

But the play is glorious. So many hundred years later, does the lie matter? Does Luke's lie matter, if it makes his mother happy? If good comes from lies, are they justified?

Will it really matter, in 100 years time, if someone writes about how John Howard single-handedly fought off the invading New Zealanders on the beaches of Surfers Paradise?

Does truth matter?

**I think it does. Civilisation is based on trust. Every time a lie is accepted, we trust each other a little less.**

We're in an age of spin. Politicians tell the public what sounds best, not what's true. Advertisements routinely steer us away from the truth. And with historical fiction ... well, at one end there are the deliberate lies, to make a better story or, if you're Shakespeare, to please a king. And at the other end there are the mistakes because the writer didn't care enough to research.

Good historical fiction wriggles between the cracks of history. There's nothing in *Somewhere Around the Corner*, or *Hitler's Daughter*, or *Tom Appleby Convict Boy*, or *The Goat That Sailed the World*, that conflicts with any historical record I've been able to find. (Except in my nightmares at 4am.)

You can't write good historical fiction just from history books. I write history books too. But they only tell part of the story. Few history books explain what people ate for breakfast. What moved them? What were their dreams? These things change. (Read Peter Pan again, with its wonderful jingoism and sexism, to see how ideas change in three generations.)

History books fail in other ways, too. Few historians (sadly) admit that sometimes what they are writing about is a series of 'perhapses'. You need to go back to primary sources to write good historical fiction: books, diaries, letters, newspapers, songs, graffiti \*- whatever you can find written at the time you're writing about.

Is there any way of just playing around with history, without telling an historical lie- or spending years on the research? Of course. You don't have to be an historian to have fun with the past. Most fantasy books evoke a medieval world that never happened. Or change the names, and say you have 'based' the story on historical figures, instead of trying to write about real people. (Tom Appleby, *Convict Boy*.) Set your book in an another universe, one that tells us about ourselves, but never happened. The dreams of Camelot are the most stunning evocation of a time that never existed... but we wish it had. (If Shakespeare had called his hero 'Smith' no one would have mistaken his play for history.)

Is all the work worth it? Yes. Historical fiction is a window into the past. We owe a duty to remember the people as they were, whether we're talking about Cleopatra or your Great Grandma. Imagine waking up tomorrow, and not being able to remember who you are. We are what the past has made us. We need to know our past to understand ourselves. Fiction writers recreate that past even more than historians. What do you remember most clearly? The history lesson about World War 1, or the tragedy of the mates in the book 1915? The better the history, the better the book.

As for MacBeth and Son...does it work as a novel? As history? As a window to the past? Perhaps. These are the months of terror for any writer, as you wait to find out if it's worked.

\*(Luckily Bryan's a tolerant man. But even he won't let me watch historical reconstructions now. Not when he's in the house, anyway.)

\*\*There's a gorgeous school boy scribble in an exercise book from Queen Elizabeth the First's time: 'Roses are red, Lavender's green, God Bless Elizabeth, Our Glorious Queen.' Suddenly you realise that it wasn't all propaganda and being careful in case she had you hung drawn and quartered. Even a school boy loved her, or what she stood for.

I listened to Peter Dawson while I wrote *Somewhere Around the Corner*. It's set in 1933, when Peter Dawson- who was Australian- sang about the yeomen of England and how glorious it was in Devon. How can you write about a time without knowing what people sang about?

The latest project has been about the goat that sailed with Cook on the Endeavour. Cook took her home with him when they got back; the lords of the Admiralty made the goat an in-pensioner of Greenwich Hospital; the Royal College awarded her a silver collar, and the famous Dr. Johnson wrote her an epitaph in Latin. But there's only one reference to the goat in all the logs and diaries of the men on the Endeavour...and no reference at all to what they had for breakfast! Or even when the various watches ate. It took months of sifting through logs from other ships of the time just to build up a picture of daily life. But that background is as important to the story as the goat herself. (She was a wonderfully stropky one, who had already been around the world on another ship- and butted Tahitian royalty off the quarterdeck.)