

Megan Chance—Writing the Historical Novel

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When researching, it's important to know not just the historical timeline of events, but the lifestyles, philosophies and mores of the time, in order to develop realistic, rooted plots and characters with depth.

Use subtext—what people knew then can be tacitly juxtaposed with what we know now to create irony and tension.

Don't let your research be author-intrusive. Pick the telling details that bring your story alive, but don't slow it. Don't forget your objective: detail lends flavor, and you have an obligation to be accurate, but you are a storyteller, not a historian.

The most effective description is woven throughout narrative to create an overwhelming and subtle impression that is inescapable.

Your descriptions in narrative should reflect your character's beliefs and emotions.

Words and metaphors should be character-specific.

Don't give characters historical knowledge they can't have.

Make a character realistic for his time, but be careful about alienating the reader with philosophies and prejudices that keep a character from being sympathetic.

Remember that the perception of reality is often more true than reality itself.

Dialogue should: 1) Be a function of character; 2) Move story forward; 3) Communicate facts and info; 4) Reveal character; 5) Establish character relationships; 6) Make characters real, natural and spontaneous; 7) Reveal conflicts of story; 8) Comment on the action. For the illusion of historical accuracy, use words true to the period, along with style and syntax in a kind of "historical-ese" that may not be strictly accurate but readers expect.

Writing historically: 1) more passive writing (SPARINGLY); 2) Watch anachronisms—both in words you use and character; 3) Switch word order (try NOT putting "was" at the end of the sentence); 4) use more formal syntax, in terms of words, word order and grammar rules

Remember that you are creating an illusion, and the moment that you do something to pull the reader out, you have failed.