CRASH COURSE
IN HISTORICAL FICTION

NovelList
LibraryReads
Panelists

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librarians across the country love.

libraryreads.org
• Introduction
• Categories and subgenres
• Trends and recent titles
• Books we’re excited about
• Let’s talk!
As a genre, historical fiction has intrinsic tensions that affect how individuals may define it, and what different readers want from it.
Historical fiction = Realistic fiction... set in the past

REALISTIC FICTION
• Resembles real life. Plausible events.
• Fictional characters react similarly to real people.

HISTORICAL FICTION

HISTORY
• Presented as a factually accurate record of past events (possibly firsthand).
• Supported by research, physical evidence.
“If a historian's job is to **reconstruct and interpret the past accurately and truthfully**, the job of the historical fiction writer is to **deceive the reader**, into believing the false world created in a novel or a story is a **real** world.”

Bruce Holsinger, Linden Kent Memorial Professor of English

*Plagues, Witches, and War: The Worlds of Historical Fiction – Defining the genre.*
• How much is “real” vs. “made up”?  
• *Whose* story is real?  
  (narratives and counter-narratives)  
• How far back before “the past” = “historical”?  

W H A T
REALISTIC fiction set in the past

Set “before the author’s lifetime or experience. Thus, novels about World War II might be considered Historical Fiction if the author were born after 1945, but Jane Austen’s comedies of manners are not Historical Fiction, as she writes about the times in which she lived.”
~ Joyce Saricks

**Characteristics** (excerpted)
Accurate historical detail: geography, customs, beliefs, culture, society, habits, characters and events. Language and style → may use of archaic language -- some readers love it, others find it distracting.

Waverley or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since
by Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832)

- Published anonymously in 1814, among the first historical fiction novels in the Western tradition.
- Sets precedent for 60 years in the past = “historical.”
REALISTIC fiction set in the past

Romance of the Three Kingdoms

- Written in 14th-century China
- Attributed to Luo Guanzhong
- Set in 169-280 CE, during the turbulent final years China’s Han dynasty

“In East Asia, Romance is on par with the works of Shakespeare... in the same way that people in Britain grow up studying Hamlet and Macbeth.”
~ Kaori Shoji

“War as wisdom and gore” (November 6, 2008). The Japan Times.
Historical Fiction: What’s the appeal?

Stories woven around real people and/or events
- Biographical fiction
- Starring famous figures
- Inspired by real events

Popular narrative structures, themes
- Epistolary novels
- Parallel narratives
- Family sagas
- Strong sense of place
- Immigrant experiences

These are all appeal terms you can use in NovelList to refine your historical fiction searches!
Search by TIME PERIODS in NoveList!

- Ancient Egypt
- Tudor period
- American Civil War era
- Victorian era
- Regency period
- Georgian era

... as well as by century!
Single-era historical fiction

Stone Age
American Civil War Era
14th Century
Tudor Period
19th Century
19th Century
### Multi-era historical fiction

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<tr>
<td>17th Century</td>
<td>Annie Proulx - <em>Barkskins</em></td>
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<td>21st Century</td>
<td>Edward Rutherfurd - <em>London</em></td>
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<td>3rd Century - Elizabethan</td>
<td>Ken Follett - <em>The Pillars of the Earth</em></td>
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<td>12th Century - Medieval Period</td>
<td>Iain Pears - <em>The Dream of Scipio</em></td>
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<td>World War II</td>
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Finding diverse and #OwnVoices titles in NoveList!

“[A]uthors of own voices stories draw on their personal experiences as part of a marginalized group to depict their fictional characters’ journeys,” and this may provide “welcome reassurance to readers... unaccustomed to seeing people like themselves at the [narrative] center... or of seeing aspects of their own lives depicted with authenticity and nuance.” ~ Gillian Speace, NoveList
Historical Novel Society:

“To be deemed historical... a novel must have been written at least fifty years after the events described, or have been written by someone who was not alive at the time of those events (who therefore approaches them only by research).”

HNS also recognizes a variety of “genre blends”

• Historical fantasy, mysteries, romances
• Time-slip novels, alt-history, steampunk, weird westerns, etc.
Genre Blends: Historical Fiction Plus...

Not all historical fiction fits into the neat literary fiction or adventure fiction categories we commonly understand as historical fiction, but can mix with fantasy, science fiction, mystery, and romance.
Historical Romance

Beverly Jenkins, Cat Sebastian, and Jeannie Lin are just some of the popular authors in historical romance.
Historical Mysteries

A whodunit set in the past that pays close attention to historical details. Popular settings can be any period from Ancient Rome to the Disco Era.
Historical Fantasy

Most commonly one thinks of Diana Gabaldon and George R.R. Martin, but there is quite a few popular historical fantasy titles to recommend.
Alternative Histories

Go back in time, change some outcomes, for better or worse, alternative histories explore the what if or might have been otherwise.
Trends & Current Titles
Victoriana/Steam Punk

Whether fantasy or more straightforward, a Victorian era setting is a continuing trend in historical fiction.
Graphic Historical Fiction

More of a hopeful trend. While still growing as a genre blend, more and more historical fiction in graphic novel format are being produced.
What’s streaming...

Many of our favorite historical fiction titles are making to PBS, Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, HBO, and Britbox.
Beyond the Tudors, the Middle Ages, and the Confederacy
World War II Historical Fiction

- Very strong focus on subversive **female protagonists** continues. Inspired by real historical women. Spy narratives.


**NEW THEMES!***

- Love in wartime
- Life in wartime

*not exclusive to WWII historical fiction, but anticipate it will apply to many “love stories.”
Emerging settings / looking back to WW?

Russian Revolution and Civil War (1917-1921)

From the internationally best-selling author of *Between Love and Honor* comes a tale based on the true story of the Mata Hari of Russia, featuring a beautiful aristocrat fighting for survival during the deadly Russian Revolution.

20th century

Sponsored by the poet Pablo Neruda to flee the violence of the Spanish Civil War, a pregnant widow and an army doctor unite in an arranged marriage, only to be swept up by the early days of World War II.
Hollywood Glamour (1910s-1950s)
Family sagas going strong!
Historical Fiction Starter Pack

Representative of genre
Well-reviewed
Wide appeal
Stand-alone or series starter
Wolf Hall
by Hilary Mantel

• Court intrigue
• Sympathetic characters
• Intricately plotted, sweeping
• Atmospheric; Melancholy; Reflective
• Meticulous attention to period detail
The Nickel Boys
by Colson Whitehead (2019)

- Inspired by real events
- Complex, courageous characters
- Issue-oriented, Own voices
- Disturbing, sobering
- Gritty!
- Stylistically complex
Pachinko
by Min Jin Lee (2007)

• Family sagas
• Character-driven, large cast of characters
• Moving, reflective in tone
• Compelling
• A dense, immersive read
The Only Woman in the Room by Marie Benedict (2010)

• Biographical fiction
• Strong female protagonist
• Dramatic storyline
• Blends all the WWII era trends!
  Hollywood glamour + spy fiction with an unforgettable, brilliant protagonist
Conjure Women
by Afia Atakora (2017)

• Character-driven
• Intricately plotted, nonlinear
• Own voices
• Heartwrenching
• Descriptive, dialect-filled
Books we’re excited about!
Kim – Top 5 TBR*

*Plus one that’s on Michael’s list, too – stay tuned 😊
Michael’s Recent Favorites
Books Michael can’t wait to read

Let’s Talk! Q&A

Michael Santangelo
Deputy Director of Collection Management, BookOps, NY

Kim Burton
Readers’ Advisory Librarian, NovelList
Thank you
Learn more at
ebscohost.com/novelist & libraryreads.org
Finding Historical Fiction in NovelList
NoveList Resources
What is historical fiction?

What "counts" as historical fiction can vary. At its broadest, it includes literary works, biographical fiction, alternate history, historical fantasy, historical romance, historical mysteries, time-trip novels, and multi-period offerings, whether they be multigenerational sagas or novellas with at least one historical storyline that runs alongside contemporary plotting. It also includes novels about events that were contemporaneous to the author but have since become historical with the passage of time. The Historical Novel Society includes all these works in its definition and acknowledges the "historical" aspect as anything set at least 50 years in the past.

What happens in a historical fiction novel?

Absolutely anything can happen, as long as it happens in the past. This one enormous genre is an umbrella for a variety of subgenres. Historical romances are distinguished by their emphasis on bringing protagonists together for timeless, historical settings is a sub-genre of historical fiction that has developed in the 1980s, and the historical comedy is a sub-genre where historical ambiance can be pronounced or taken a back seat to the comic-solving plotlines. Alternate histories (novels attempting to answer the question of what IF with regard to foundational historical events (e.g. what if the Nazis had won WWII?) are rare. Today, such questions would offer a story that involves a modern-day protagonist somehow ending up in the past, surviving in an unfamiliar world. Multigenerational sagas follow a family down through the ages, often through multiple centuries and cultures. There is also the book-ends multi-period approach—a modern-day protagonist digs into the past to solve a mystery, while a parallel historical storyline explores the events the modern protagonist is researching. Biographical novels fictionalize the life of a real historical person.

Why do people like historical fiction?

In a word: setting. Historical fiction is often judged on how faithfully it is to its period, how well it evokes the past, how readers seek adventure in what they identify as a more exciting age, others a refuge in what they perceive to be simpler, slower times, while still others find perspective in the hardships and brutality of earlier periods when people lived very differently from today. The setting also provides a backdrop upon which to explore themes like love, marriage, family, and the like. Readers can learn about earlier times and how people lived in them. To be effective, historical fiction requires careful research, authentically recreating the setting and time as they pertain to the story, so that it can offer the same immersion to their readers. Anachronisms—from technology to cultural mores to character attitudes—can pull readers out of period, and the point is to keep them absorbed in an earlier time.

Key titles

The other Boleyn girl
Philippa Gregory

This 2001 standalone biographical novel about Anne Boleyn’s lesser known sister, Mary, provides an insider’s perspective on the Tudor court of Henry VIII. It reviewed the genre of historical fiction, in rejecting its popularity and transforming it into what is today the Tudor Trilogy. Tudor Novels (Philippa Gregory).