

# Historical Fiction: History or Fiction?

**Presenter: Chris Crowe and Dean Hughes**

*This is a transcript of a presentation given at the 2020 conference of the Latter-day Saint Publishing and Media Association (LDSPMA). You may not reproduce or publish this material without prior written consent from LDSPMA.*

**Chris Crowe:** The class only now. Yeah.

**Dean Hughes:** Hello.

It's great to get started here today. We've had a little trouble with our technology, but I think we've got it worked out. There's one problem I'm having is with the screen. It makes me look really old and you know I'm not. As best I can remember, I'm somewhere around 30 years old. So, don't take this as reality.

What you've just heard is fiction, not history. But today we're going to talk about historical fiction. I wanted to talk first for just a couple of minutes about why I like to write historical fiction. I love to read. Most writers do. And I like to learn, and so in order to write historical fiction, you have to learn. You have to read and do detective work to find things out. I love to find the details of the period of time I'm writing about, whether it's the prices of groceries or the clothing people wore—whatever I need to know in order to be really genuine in my history.

But I like even more to go back into that time and know what the people were like, and how they thought. And so I look for sources like editorials from newspapers of the period if I have a period that is recent enough. And just things like that helped me know how they actually thought rather than how I think they would have thought.

So it's all really fascinating. And as you get started writing, often you realize there are things you don't know that you need to know and that forces you to go back and do more of that same kind of detective work. So it's a kind of an adventure, and it's enlarging. You know more about other times, you start to put those periods together, and then start to understand more things that are really fun to know. So I'm going to go into screen sharing here, and I'm going to talk about some of the types of works that are out there (either movies or books) that purport to be historical, and yet, I think in some ways are limited in what they do, and not true historical fiction. I'm starting with this "based on an actual event." And you hear a lot of that, and yet often

what you see (and this tends to be especially in movies) is something that has very little to do with it. With that event.

It's often about some story that has been told, but you have to alter to make it interesting enough for movies. "Saving Private Ryan" was a movie that was a classic example of that. The history in one sense was great. Stephen Ambrose was the consultant and read and created a great deal of the history of the time in terms of what all looked like in D-day. But the story of Private Ryan was a complete invention. There was something kind of similar that happened, but not anything like what you see in the movie. So to me that's a distortion.

There are what we, what you might call fictionalized biographies where you take a— usually a famous person—you tell their story, but in doing it you put dialogue into their mouth and you try to fill out the picture in ways that, you know, that's provocative, but but a lot of times can be really distorting. "Lincoln" was, I think, a tremendous film. And I think Lincoln was presented in very believable ways. But anytime you do that, you are taking a chance. Sometimes, I'll put a character like Brigham Young in one of my novels. But when I do that, I only put him in as a minor character, and then I'm very careful to find a source for anything I have him say other than just, you know, regular small talk. I want to know that what I have him say is something that he really might have said.

I went too far there. No, I didn't.

Okay, fictionalized rendering of an actual event. And you see that it's approximately the same thing. But I love the old movie "All the President's Men," because I love to see that reconstruction of Woodward and Bernstein, how they tracked down all the information and everything. But, you know, Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford not exactly the representation of the people who were involved in that research. And so, by nature as soon as you put someone into that and then follow the event according to their dialogue in what they said, you're going to have... It's not going to be very close to history.

There are reinterpretations of events. Oliver Stone's movies often have done that—where you'll get the theory behind Kennedy's assassination, which is just that—it's a theory. And it's speculative and provocative and can be very entertaining as long as you remember that it isn't history. Fictionalized version of a scriptural story. These can be really useful, I think.

It's hard for us to imagine what it was like to live in New or Old Testament times or Book of Mormon times. And so when you see people in the clothing and just doing the things that they might have done at that time, if it's done well, it can be really helpful.

Mel Gibson's "The Passion of Christ" is an example though, where how controversial that became because some people hated the way that the crucifixion was portrayed and others absolutely loved it. And that's what you're up against. One of the things about Latter-day Saint readers is they really want things to be accurate. They like to learn history through fiction, but they don't want distortions. And so this has to be done really well to be done right.

Historical romances. They're very popular these days. And I think most of the historical romance writers are good about learning a good deal about the era they're writing in. I don't know too much about that, because I haven't really read that many historical romances, but I know they are loved by many. And I know that there's, you know, in literature you're always going to get formulas and and you have to accept that.

But many of them, I think, are very well done. The Regency period of English history is often chosen, not exactly sure why, but it's often chosen and used as the source for those novels. And so, as I say, the background can be very well done. And... if you like that sort of thing. The nonfiction account with fictional techniques.

James Michener got rich writing those—"Hawaii" and many other novels that he wrote—where you you're telling history and you don't pretend it's fiction, but you put scenes in that...

with people talking and so forth as a way to enhance the telling of the story so that you feel more like you're there. I love those kinds of books. But their history is somewhat less you know, less accurately portrayed and they then they might be. And once again, you just have to know what it is you're doing when you read those.

I think the best technique for historical fiction is to put fictional characters into an actual event. And then what you do is you tell that story as accurately as you can. You try to be really exacting in the in the details of the history. Then you plant a fictional character inside that history who can observe it and feel it. And and you get a chance to see the reactions of someone who might have lived at that time, but you're not taking the chance and distorting some actual person. Now that is a distortion to put a fictional character in that setting.

But the history is most likely to come through in a way that is real. It feels like real history and can be really quite accurate. Anthony Doerr's "All the Light We Cannot See" has been very popular lately. And it's that kind of thing where you have a good story, but you plant that story in the context of the actual events of World War Two and the things that are going on.

I think it's the most effective of the forms that I've been talking about. I think this is real historical fiction, but it does mean you have to be...that you have to make a genuine attempt to portray the history the way it, as far as you can research, that it did happen.

I don't like to change anything, if I can help it. And I love to get good details. When I wrote about World War Two, when I had my characters go to a movie in Salt Lake, I looked it up in the newspapers to see what movie was playing that week and then use that particular movie. Not just making something up. And so that's fun to do. It's fun to get it right. And I think it is very entertaining but it's also very educational to people who read it.

I want to spend what time I have left now talking about, just some hints about, doing research. First of all, people always ask me, "Where do you—how do you get all this stuff?" And for the most part, it's not that hard. There are lots of resources out there. One thing I think is a temptation: Let's say that I'm going to have a scene from from D-day in my novel. There's a tendency to want to go right to reading about the day and, you know, the Normandy Invasion. But I find that when I start on a period of time, I'm better off to go to a big history.

I started out with the rise and fall of the Third Reich. It's a massive tedious book to read, but it gave me a big picture. And then I read a war in the Pacific, about the Pacific War, so that you have a picture of the fullness of the war. And then you put into context the period that you want to talk about. I also like to get different views. There's a book called "War Without Mercy" that shows how deeply racism was involved in every aspect of World War Two—something that we don't, I think, think about as much as we might. And so all of those perspectives, the more books of different kinds you can read, the better.

This may be the most obvious thing in the world, but one of the things when people say, "Where do you find this stuff?"... a lot of times where you find it is in the bibliographies and the footnotes in that first book you read or in any book you read. Because they give you other sources that they've used, and you go to those sources if you can.

Now, sometimes the library... bookstores don't have that book. But I found that if you go on Amazon, many times books are available used and you can order them sometimes for a couple of dollars or other times it's \$150, but you feel like it's worth it for the thing you're writing. And so I pay that price to get it.

One of the things that is really useful if you're writing a Latter-day Saints history is to go to the church archives in the library... in the history library in Salt Lake. And one thing about it: the people there are very, very helpful. So if you don't know how to find these materials in the

archives, go with with a list of maybe journals, for instance, that you've heard of that you would like to read. And journals can be really helpful in getting little details and accurate perceptions of the time.

But if you go there, they could help you figure out how to find those. And then you go into a special room. They actually bring it, sometimes the actual journal, out to you. More often, it's a typed out copy of it. But they put it in your hand. You wear white gloves, and you feel like a real researcher when you're doing it. And you find these little tidbits that are so fascinating.

I like to read several versions of the same thing. If I'm reading about D-day, I don't want to read one book and base everything on that. The more books you read, the more sources read (not always books, but articles—whatever it is you're reading) the more you... the closer, you're going to get to having a real perspective where you understand the nuances of what went on in the history you're writing.

As I write, I find that I used to go back to my notes, and I take a lot of notes. and I mark up a lot of books and mark them in ways I hope I can find what I'm looking for. But one of the great things about Google is that you know, if I'm thinking, "I wonder what day of the week Christmas was on that year" that I'm writing about you can Google a calendar for that year just instantly, and you get your answer. And they're all kinds of things like that: dates and details and Wikipedia pages. And it used to be that a lot of that stuff was inaccurate, but I'm finding more and more that you can find really accurate information that way.

Now, you want to read widely, you want to enjoy the reading. But at some point, you have to stop reading. And that's always hard to, you know, because it's it's easier to read. Therefore it's tempting to just keep reading. But you do have to get started writing. Then you realize more things you need to know and you go after those things. It's an adventure, and it's really fun.

Well, okay, I'm going to tell you the truth. I'm 76. And by the time you see this, I'll be 77. And so that's history not fiction, but I like to combine history with fiction. And now I'm going to turn my time over to Chris Crowe.

**Chris Crowe:** Thanks, Dean. My name is Chris Crowe. And I have to say, I didn't know Dean was 30, but if he was 30, I'd be 12 or something. But I've known and admired and envied Dean since before I met him.

Way back when I just trying to figure out about writing (and I like historical fiction, obviously), it was impossible not to run into one of Dean's books. And he's had a wonderful career where

he's had a dual track of writing for the LDS audience, but also writing for a national audience too.

I think I was... I first encountered his books that he was writing for the national market, and I was hearing him talk about his research process. Pick up one of his books; it's obvious. You can tell he knows what he's writing about. He's not just fictionalizing things. He really has done his homework. And it's not easy to do that, but it's certainly satisfying. The process is satisfying, but the product is satisfying too.

I'm going to share my screen. I'm just going to hide behind PowerPoint for my presentation. So...And Deans knows a lot more about historical fiction than I do. But I teach young adult literature at BYU, and so I've kind of... my focus is so young adult literature, especially historical fiction, which is what I like. And so there's some great things. In one of Lincoln speeches to Congress, he talked about how it's impossible to escape history. And I think, yeah, that's true.

especially now. But sometimes the current events are so overwhelming if you think of the moment we're in right now... that how could we be spending our time thinking about history when we're confronted with so many heavy things right now? How can things not just be contemporary always? But I'll make a case for why history matters by looking at young adult books. And these aren't just all fiction, but they're fiction and nonfiction.

If we start in the year 2008 and if our... the gold standard is a Newbery Medal... that's the highest honor a book for kids can get, This is what we got in 2008. So the Newbery Medal and the two Newbery honors all were historical fiction or historical novels. And so that was remarkable. But if we look at since then, The books that have won Newbery Medal or Newbery honor where historical fiction or historical nonfiction. And it continues even into the last 18 months or so. Steve Sheinkin's book is nonfiction. "Out of Darkness" is historical fiction. The Lindbergh book is nonfiction. The three in the bottom row are all historical fiction. These are all books that were won print honors or Newbery Medal or best young adult nonfiction from the American Library Association.

But there's a presence there of these kinds of books. Now other books, there's these waves of trends of dystopian and vampire romance, that kind of stuff—that comes and goes. But historical fiction...

historical books are always there. There's a steady... They're not flashy, but they're steady and there. And I think it's because of the payoff of Dean talked about as a writer, but also as a reader. We learn from doing the reading about history, and it helps inform us as well as

engaging us in the story. So it's a Big presence in young adult books. This is kind of a cool hybrid. Nathan Hale, who's a LDS Illustrator and writer here in Utah, has this hybrid where he's got graphic novels. They're nonfiction illustrated like a comic book but tons of research... and even his bibliography is graphic.

It's not words. And these books, he can't write them fast enough. He's in such high demand for this series. "Nathan Hale's Hazardous Tales" has been a real big seller from middle grade readers, but again just shows a presence. We look back in history. The history of historical stuff.

The Newbery Medal, which was started in the mid 1920s, for the most respected book of a year for kids of the first eight years, four of the books that won the Newbery Medal were historical. So just from the earliest beginnings, there's a recognition of "these are the books that have weight." But if you think of popular culture, history is there too. Because if you think of Broadway, "Hamilton," of course dominates (has for the last few years). But if you think of other historical, rather dominant plays on Broadway, so many of them have been historical. Some have been interesting with music and history being blended together. I don't understand that part.

But on Broadway, certainly history is a big deal, and producers obviously know that. If you think of television, of popular TV programs, now these aren't the big trendy ones always. Maybe Downton Abbey was an exception. But historical documentaries or historically based fictional settings are always... are constant, especially in the BBC. They do a really great job with that. So there's something engaging about history. There's a steady presence there. It's almost invisible because it's so pervasive. And it's so steady that we forget that historical stuff is the real stuff. If you think of documentaries on television, Ken Burns is... Steve Sheinkin is like a master young adult nonfiction for historical stuff.

But Ken Burns is easily the documentarian who owns historical stuff... historical documentary. And these are just a few of the documentaries he's done. And he doesn't just crank them out. These are works of art. They're really well done, deeply researched. It's like reading one of Dean's books, where when you watch one of these, you know they've done their homework. This is a broadly researched, deeply researched production. With these books too, you don't feel the weight of the research, the work that he's done to do that, but it's just there. And you're confident that in this writer's hands, and you know that the history has been treated right, properly.

So one of my favorite articles (an academic one) was published about 1998, I think... 1999. David M. Kennedy of Stanford, a famous historian, was speaking to the American History Association, and he was talking about the problem of writing history.

And he said that one of the greatest compliments a story can receive is someone will say about his book: "It reads like a novel." That's a great compliment. But he said the reverse is never true. No one ever compliments historical fiction by saying, "Boy, it reads like history." That would be almost an insult.

And so, as he's talking about how can we get better... now, he's talking to historians, right? How can we write better history? He says, well, the people we should turn to are the novelists, special storytellers among us. They're the ones who know how to tell history because history, after all, is story, right? History.

And it's a wonderful article. It's a wonderful speech—it was a speech he gave. The article is very readable. He's a storyteller himself. You see him at work as he's making the case and talking about how novels work and therefore how good historical fiction should work.

So with history then, to me... and more quotations. This isn't from Kennedy but... and thinking about what makes a good story and that all history is about human beings...is that's one thing that Dean's really great at and other people who write historical fiction: It's not about the period. It's not about the time. It's about the people.

And the people bring the history to life. So the first labor of the historical novelist is to learn the history But then the more important step maybe, or equally important, is to understand human nature and understand human beings and to be able to take a real person and drop them into a moment, a certain moment and have them live and be shaped and affected by the moment they're in. So I think in this quotation that a good historical story? It's about people. It's not about the history. The history is essential, of course if you separate it.

But it's got to be an engaging character with a real conflict, that's shaped by the period that they're in, the conflicts that are going around them. And we relate to them as fellow human beings. People who lived centuries ago still felt the same emotions we feel of sorrow and mourning and envy and love, fear. Those emotions are universal and timeless.

So by starting with a great character, a believable character, that's what really really sells your historical fiction. That's what really makes it after you've done all the great historical work as a foundation as a place to put your character in.

So, When I'm talking to my students, I want to give them a definition or some thinking about what is historical fiction. So Jill Paton Walsh, who's had a great career in the 20th century... a



writer historical fiction, said that “a novelist is historical when it is wholly or partly about the public events and social conditions which are the material of history, regardless of when they’re written.” That’s her definition.

And lots of people would agree with her that something historical is about history, and maybe it was contemporary at one time. But if it’s 100 years ago, what’s historical fiction now? I don’t agree with her.

So my definition of course is the correct definition. But I want to think that a novel is historical when it’s set in historical period that’s at least one generation prior to its audience. So for kids living today, 9/11 is historical, right? For me it’s not. But the tragedy of the Twin Towers being bombed, attacked by terrorists. For kids, for teenagers reading today, that’s historical—the meat of history. And so a story about that would then be historical fiction by my definition.

So if we just look at a couple of examples and apply the definition. Think about Huckleberry Finn. Is that historical or not? Well Walsh would say it is because it’s 19th century stuff, right? I would say it’s not, because Twain, he’s writing about his time. He wasn’t writing about some other time. And so for me, and historical novel requires that the author has had to learn to research himself to create that. But if you take a book like “The Book Thief,” which is the great world war two novel...

Zusak was writing this. Je was right. He was doing the research and finding an interesting character drop into this historical moment of World War Two. And so my definition... and Walsh should also call it historical fiction, and so would I, when she and I would differ on other things.

So I like what Dean said about the specifics of the work, different kinds of historical books. I’m going to go a little more broadly and just kind of say Have these three degrees, the three categories, three ways of looking at historical fiction. The first is a costume, (what I call it and not just me. Others call a costume, costume drama) where the historical work really is about getting the costumes right. They were button to zippers, for example. And so the story could be transported into any other era, and we would just change their clothes and change the mode of transportation and maybe what they eat, their houses or something.

But the stories, not really affected by the moment, but the costumes are. And so an example of a period piece or a costume novel would be typically, Dean said, Regency romance... where this is romance and it could be a dropped into the 14th century, or it could be moved into the 20th century. The lovers conflict would still be the same. The way they got from the one from one house to another might be different. The way things they wore might be different too.

So, history is not so important in the level one historical novel. It's important, but it's not as important. So obviously, level two comes next. And, and this is a continuum. It's not like bang. It's either this or that. And so there's there's a transition as you move from one to another, but for me, in a level two historical novel, history plays essential background role in the story. So there might be figures...historical figures like Dean mentioned. Brigham Young. Or if it's "Les Miserables," it's the French Revolution, which really happened. But the people living in the French Revolution in this story are all fictional and the conflicts are fictional, but they're shaped by the period they're in.

Then the third level of historical fiction would be where the history, is absolutely essential. There's no way you could move the story into any other era, but the one it's in.

And so "The Confessions of Nat Turner," for example, would be one. There was a Nat Turner. You couldn't have him telling the story in any other time than the 19th century. And so you can't even... though this is fiction, it's so tied to period, it can't be moved. So the question for me in looking at history in historical fiction is: "What's the role history is playing in the story?" if I'm thinking of this continuing of level one, two, or three.

How vital is this particular history in making the story possible? And so in "Downton Abbey" for example, I would see this as a level two or level three. Definitely not a level one, even though the British call it a costume drama. But for my way of thinking about history, they are being shaped by the historical moment they're in. And so, the key thing to remember and think about these levels of historical fiction levels one, two, or three...

is it really is a continuum. It's a way of thinking about how is history being used in the novel. It isn't about the quality. There are fine level one novels, and crummy ones. And there are fine level three historical novels, and there are crumbling ones. But as a historical novelist yourself, it's something that you need to be thinking about as you're creating the story. How important do I want history to be? And so, when Dean talked about checking to see what movie was showing in that week, that's a devotion to history, to me, that pushes it to level three, because the history is vital to the story. And it's not just accidental that it's set in the 1950s, but it actually has to be. Not just the 1950s—that particular year, that particular time, that particular week, even.

So it's a commitment you make. And for me when I'm writing a historical fiction, one of the commitments I make is I vow not to bend history for the convenience of the story. And so my goal is to keep the history as square as I can in the story, and have done my homework to make

sure it's consistent. And so I would make the case that it's a noble calling to go into writing historical fiction or even historical nonfiction.

It's a laborious calling because you don't just sit down to spin a yarn. You have to do lots of preparatory work. You have to love the research. And Dean has been pointed out, that can be distracting too. It's a great excuse not to write. But it's a commitment you make, and then once you've done that homework, then you write the best story you can based on that. And so, I would make the case that historical fiction is the most important genre.

It's the genre that gets the most awards. It gets the most recognition, has a longest legs—most lasting power. It is a great place to be as a novelist. And so, I would encourage you to follow Dean's example and consider writing historical fiction. So, Dean, I think we're going to have questions at some point here, but any final words to wrap up our recording?

**Dean Hughes:** Well, I just want to say he compliments me constantly, but he's won more awards for his historical novels and histories than I have. His Emmett Till books are really prominent, important books that he's written. And he's written about other individual sports stars and so forth, and put them in the context of their contribution to their time. And so, you need read Chris's books too.

**Chris Crowe:** Thanks, Dean. I guess we'll sign off, I suppose I hit the end button here somewhere. But thanks for joining LDSPMA or LDSPMA one of those to you. Know, fix this. I hope I'm looking forward to the questions. Thanks to you. All right.