

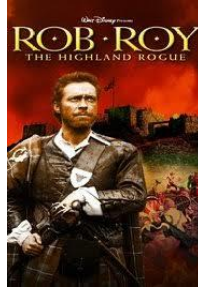
# Historical Fiction

Larry Martin  
October 4, 2017

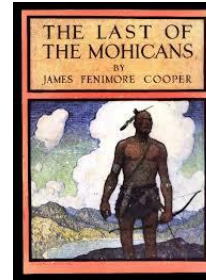
- Plot takes place in the past, generally at least 50 years ago. So HF written today could take place in the 1960s.
- Pays attention to the manners, social conditions and other details of the period depicted.
- Uses invented dialogue.
- Is based on research rather than personal experience.

# Famous 19<sup>th</sup> century historical fiction

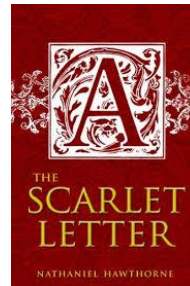
Sir Walter Scott: *Rob Roy* (pub.1817, set in 1715 England and Scotland)



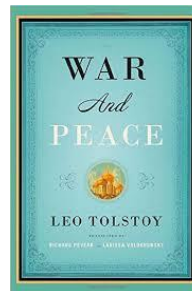
James Fenimore Cooper: *The Last of the Mohicans* (pub. 1826, set in New York State 1757)



Nathaniel Hawthorne: *The Scarlet Letter* (pub 1850, set in 1640s Massachusetts)



Leo Tolstoy: *War and Peace* (published 1869, set in early 19<sup>th</sup> cent. Russia)

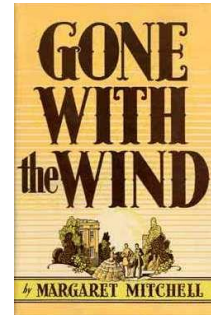


# Famous 20<sup>th</sup> century historical fiction

Robert Graves: *I, Claudius* (pub. 1934, set in Rome, 44 BC - 41 AD)



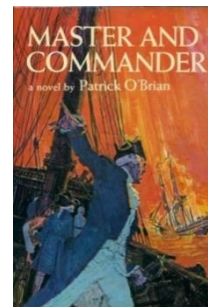
Margaret Mitchell: *Gone with the Wind* (pub. 1936, set in Civil War Georgia)



E.L. Doctorow: *Ragtime* (pub. 1975, set in New York 1902-1917)



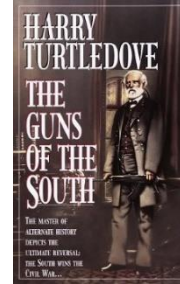
Patrick O'Brian: *Master and Commander* (pub. 1969, set in 1800-1801 Medit. area)



# Popular sub-genre of HF: alternate history

## With time travel

Harry Turtledove: *Guns of the South* (pub. 1992; setting Civil War)



Stephen King: *11/22/63* (pub. 2011; setting 1950s & 1960's)

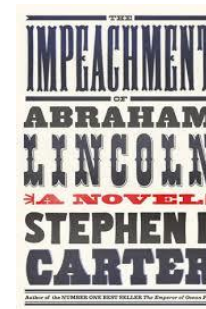


Lawrence Martin: *Out of Time: An alternative outcome to the Civil War* (pub. 2014; setting Civil War)

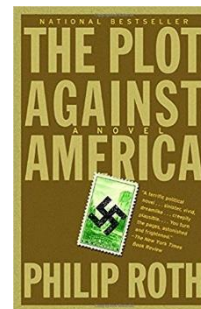


## Without time travel

Stephen Carter: *The Impeachment of Abraham Lincoln* (pub. 2012; setting 1860s after Civil War)



Philip Roth: *The Plot Against America* (pub. 2004; setting 1940s America)



# Authors like to blog on rules for the HF genre.

Elizabeth Crook: [http://www.elizabethcrookbooks.com/articles/historical\\_fiction.htm](http://www.elizabethcrookbooks.com/articles/historical_fiction.htm)

Edward Rutherford: <http://www.edwardrutherford.com/rules-for-writing-historical-novels>

Sarah Johnson: <https://historicalnovelsociety.org/guides/defining-the-genre/defining-the-genre-what-are-the-rules-for-historical-fiction/>

Katherine Clements: <https://www.writersandartists.co.uk/writers/advice/899/dedicated-genre-advice/writing-historical-fiction/>

Brian Klems: <http://www.writersdigest.com/online-editor/8-rules-of-writing-historical-fiction-research>

Caro Clarke: <http://www.caroclarke.com/historicalfiction.html>

## Some oft-quoted HF “rules”:

- Avoid back story early in the novel -- spread it out
- Don't mess with well-known facts about historical figures (e.g., birth, death dates)
- Use historic dialect sparingly or not at all
- Avoid first person
- Create historically-accurate setting

Like general fiction rules (“show don't tell”; “one POV per scene,” avoid passive voice, etc.), most are ripe for breaking by experienced writers.

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**I will offer my own four basic rules for writing HF.**

## Rule 1. Research the period you are writing about.

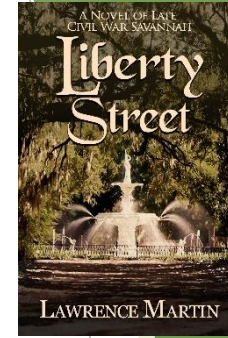
Then you can mess with it, but first you have to study it. You have to convince the reader you know the details, so if something doesn't seem right, it is done on purpose and not out of ignorance. Readers catch things written out of ignorance; it's like bad grammar or an obvious punctuation mistake. This rule will keep you from writing something stupid, like:

“Just before her execution, October 16, 1793, Marie Antoinette was allowed to make one phone call.”



## Rule 1. Research the period you are writing about (cont.)

Okay, no HF writer would have Marie make a phone call. But consider these two gaffes in an early draft of my Civil War novel *Liberty Street*, set in 1864-65. Both were caught (thankfully) in critique groups.



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**Abigale poured boiling water over the tea bags, and handed the cup to Rufus.**



Tea bags first introduced in 1904!

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**“What you talking about, you old Kraut?”**

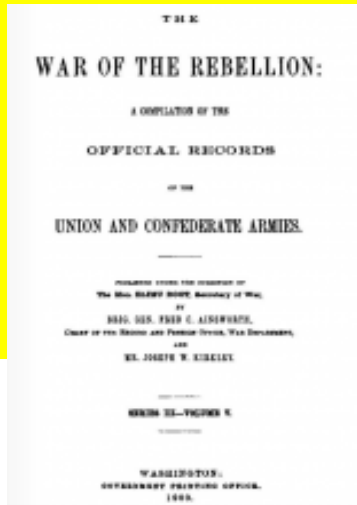


Derogatory term “Kraut” first used during WW1!



## Rule 1. Research the period you are writing about (cont.)

The internet has made historical research much easier than before. An amazing wealth of archives can be found by careful digging. Specialized research libraries, plus visits to historic sites can also be rewarding, but primary-source research using internet sources is now feasible. For example, all 127 volumes of *War of the Rebellion* -- the definitive Civil War history containing primary documents from the war -- are on the internet.



Published 1880-1901

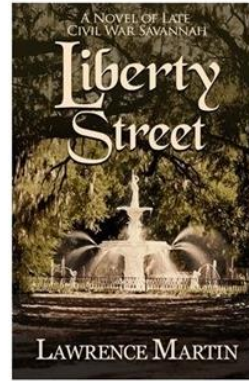
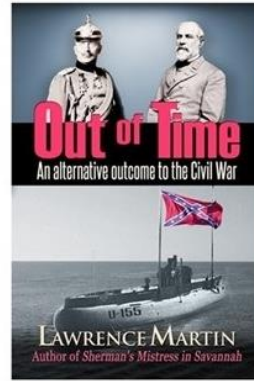
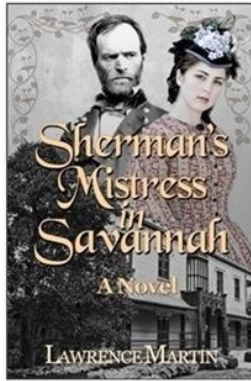




## Rule 2. Recognize that people have not changed.

A hundred or a thousand years ago, our species still had to eat, sleep, excrete, make love, talk and walk just like today. Whatever period you write about, men and women always had jealousies, worried about money and their children, cussed, lied, cheated, daydreamed, got the flu, suffered insomnia, etc. etc. The environment, technology and customs have changed dramatically over time, but *people* have not.

**In HF, make your characters talk and think and behave like real people. If they don't, it borders on "Historical Fantasy," a whole different genre.**



### THE SAVANNAH CIVIL WAR TRILOGY

[www.lakesidepress.com/CivilWarNovels.html](http://www.lakesidepress.com/CivilWarNovels.html)

## Rule 3. Write About the period that most interests you...

...not what you think is in vogue or what you think agents are looking for. If you chase the market, the market you are chasing may not be there when you finish the book. Any story can be set against any time period. You need to have a passion for the period you're writing about.

I received the following agent rejection for *Liberty Street: A Novel of Late Civil War Savannah*:

**"There was a lot I enjoyed about your novel, especially your assured writing...but I am going to have to pass. The historical fiction market has changed dramatically in the past few years and we are seeing less demand for stories in this time period."**

Had I received this comment before starting the book, it would have had no effect on my plans. I had done a lot of for my first two Civil War novels, and was determined to do the third using the same backdrop.

**Write what interests you, not what you think some agent or publisher is going to want 1, 2 or 3 years in the future.**

## Rule 4. Make the story interesting to the reader...

...so that he/she wants to keep reading. This rule gets to the core of writing fiction, where all the usual well-know rules apply.

- Show don't tell
- Avoid info dumps
- Minimize passive voice and adverbs
- Use tags carefully to show who is speaking
- "Kill your darlings."

### Read Stephen King's Memoir *On Writing*

You won't find more helpful rules and advice about writing anywhere.

"This is a short book because most books about writing are filled with bullshit."

Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*

