

ARRT Historical Fiction Genre Study Kickoff Meeting

February 2011

The ARRT Historical Fiction genre study began with a few housekeeping notes:

- The ARRT Steering Committee took a number of things into consideration when choosing historical fiction as the next genre study topic, including the fact that ARRT members voted in the majority for historical fiction in an online survey.
- The study will span two years. Meetings are bimonthly. There was some discussion regarding meeting locations, including alternating between Skokie PL and another library, possibly Berwyn. The group decided to meet at Berwyn PL on April 7 and then decide whether it would be a good fit as an alternate meeting space.
- The study coordinator will be Joanna Hazelden of Chicago Public Library. Debbie Walsh of Geneva Public Library helped lead the kickoff meeting.
- The source book used in planning the study is *Historical Fiction II: A Guide to the Genre* by Sarah Johnson (Libraries Unlimited, 2009). It's an excellent resource—if your library doesn't already have a copy, you may want to borrow it through ILL.
- Because many historical fiction titles are doorstoppers, it's understandable that finishing every book may not be possible. To help everyone cope with the reading load, Debbie encouraged us to use the techniques in Georgine Olson's handout "Speed-Reading Books—How to Read a Novel in 10 Minutes."

What is historical fiction?

One of the first orders of business was to explore a definition for historical fiction. This is can be tricky, as the age of the book can be a factor. (For example, a book about the Vietnam War may not be seen as historical fiction for someone who served in that conflict, but it probably is considered historical for a teen reader.)

A popular definition is to consider books written 50 years after the fact as historical fiction. But whose past are we talking about? One participant noted that some might consider Jane Austen historical fiction, even though she was writing about her contemporary times. (Classics like Austen can share appeal factors with historical fiction). However, it was pointed out that most patrons probably aren't making that distinction—they define historical fiction simply as a story that takes place in the past.

Is author research part of the equation (i.e., if the writer had to research the time period as opposed to having first-hand experience)? Historical fiction has a different feel—you can tell that there was research. It fills in details that a contemporary author might leave out because they assume the information is a given. Ultimately, there is a three-prong time issue—the distance of time between the events depicted in the book and when the author wrote it, and the distance of time between those two factors and when one is actually reading the book.

Is historical accuracy important? Some members of the group thought that there could be moments where authors take liberties. Others prefer veracity. It is important to find out what a patron prefers ... a patron who lived through the events or reads widely about the era might be more skeptical and require accurate historical detail. People read historical fiction to learn. One of the appeal factors of historical fiction is to learn about another time and place. In a sense, historical fiction can provide a reading map for the reader.

In the romance genre study, we had a checklist of sorts that we used to measure books (for example, romance novels have the love story as their central facet and end in a happy ending.) The same approach doesn't work as well for historical fiction. Instead, it might be more instructive to look at appeal factors instead. Joanna shared some of the appeal characteristics that Sarah Johnson lists in her book:

- Historical accuracy. As mentioned earlier, some readers are familiar with an era and want the book to feel authentic—dialogue, costumes, social customs, etc. Is the language realistic or anachronistic? Some readers only want touches of period detail to help set the stage. The amount of detail varies by book and author.
- Emotional appeal. Historical fiction makes the unfamiliar familiar and readers want to feel that pull, not just have dry details they can read in nonfiction
- Time period/frame. Certain people only read about one historical era, others read widely. Likewise, authors sometimes stay in a certain period while others switch eras and styles.
- Character. Some books feature historic figures, others create fictional characters. Many books do a bit of both.
- Other general appeal factors to keep in mind: subject or theme; pacing, level of violence and sexual content. These all vary.

The ARRT Steering Committee struggled over whether to organize the genre study by time period or subgenre. So we did a bit of both, as does Sarah Johnson. The next two sessions look at “traditional” historicals broken up by era. Future sessions will focus on subgenres such as historical mysteries, historical romance, etc. The discussion then turned to subgenres. Some libraries put historical fiction stickers on their books. Other talked about how their patrons won't cross over to or from historical fiction and the subgenre. In other words, the fantasy element is more important to a historical fantasy reader than the historical element. This would be something to further explore in future meetings.

Gone with the Wind

The group then turned to the assigned reading for the kickoff meeting, *Gone with the Wind*. Most everyone had already read the book once before, with many members noting that they had been particularly drawn to it in their teen years. The movie and book were closely tied together in the minds of everyone.

It was interesting to note that the book was published halfway between now and the Civil War itself. Someone asked if *GWTW* was historical fiction, because it seemed as though Margaret Mitchell barely considered the war and its aftermath as history. Was Mitchell putting her contemporary values on the

characters? (One participant noted that she once read the book for a class that considered it representative of the novels of the 1930s.) The book can be read for both character and history—it's a compelling story even if you didn't like the characters, and vice versa. Debbie asked if it was a women's book, and the consensus was yes. It's not a story about the Civil War battles, but about the home front, a topic that naturally draw in women. It doesn't seem as though teen girls are reading it as they once did—Gen X might be the last generation to love the book.

But is it a historical novel? The group couldn't arrive at a consensus. The time period is integral to the plot, but several members took exception to historical accuracy. Any conflict presented in historical fiction will likely have taken sides, and Mitchell definitely sided with the South. It certainly could be a book that would offend some readers. Cathy Jo summed things up best by saying that it was about the aristocratic south at the end of an era.

Other books read:

Along with GWTW, the group was asked to read a book by a classic benchmark author. The titles, along with some reader comments, included:

Jean Plaidy

The Bastard King. William the Conqueror conquers ... a good story about the era, but some instances of historical "info dumps."

Mary Queen of Scots. Many Plaidy novels tend to be from female POV.

Queen in Waiting. The early years of Catherine of Ansbach, wife to the future George II. The book featured a bibliography in the back.

Katharine the Virgin Widow. Katharine of Aragon, Henry VIII's first wife who got dumped (but not beheaded!). The book makes you want to read more about the time period.

Irving Stone

Immortal Wife by Irving Stone. Jessie Benton Fremont, wife of California senator John C. Fremont and a prolific author. The research showed and the book is still timely today.

Lust for Life. Easy to read, although the transitions are clunky. One edition has a note about how much of the story is true.

The President's Lady. Rachel and Andrew Jackson. This is Rachel's story. Writing was clear and workmanlike. Grabbed the emotional feeling and got into the character's skins. It also featured a disclaimer about fact and fiction.

Mary Renalt

The Persian Boy (about Alexander the Great) and *The Last of the Wine*. Ancient Greece. Both books were entertaining with historical detail skillfully woven in without "info dumps."

Homosexual themes are common in her work, but aren't graphic.

Howard Fast

April Morning. Revolutionary War, more for female readers.

The Immigrants. Three immigrant families in San Francisco. Flat, unbelievable characters.

James Michener. *Chesapeake*

Sir Walter Scott. *Talisman*. A guy's read about Richard the Lionhearted. Lots of chivalry.

Dorothy Dunnett. *Game of Kings*. The first book in the Lyman Chronicles is a classic, but it was challenging keeping the characters straight.

ARRT Historical Fiction Genre Study Traditional Historical Fiction, Part I

All historical fiction shares some appeal factors—readers want the past recreated through historical details, with the fiction element providing the emotional intensity and entertainment factor that nonfiction may lack. The unfamiliar is made familiar, and the past is vicariously experienced. However, there are appeal factors specific to each subgenre. As Sarah Johnson writes in *Historical Fiction II*, traditional historical novels are the type of books that readers usually picture when they think of historical fiction. Elements typical to traditional historicals include:

- Linear plots which are more likely to be biographical, as the reader watches the protagonist's life unfold
- Longer page counts (but the books usually are comfortably paced)
- Historical details are integral to the story, not reduced to background color
- The protagonist typically overcomes adversity and the book concludes optimistically
- Readers often look for specific time periods or stories set in specific places

Because the subgenre is so large, it was broken into two parts for the purpose of the study. For this session, participants read traditional historical novels set from the prehistoric period to the Tudor era.

Books read

Dawn of Empire by Sam Barone—Mesopotamia during the Bronze Age. Three participants read this book, with reaction ranging from “yuck” to “okay.” It's fast-paced and bloody, so readers who like that sort of mayhem may enjoy it. The book might even appeal to James Patterson fans.

The Skystone by Jack Whyte (Book 1 of the Camulod Chronicles)—Last days of the Romans in fifth-century Britain. Well-written; sparks your interest in the rest of the series

Prince of Darkness: A Medieval Mystery by Sharon Kay Penman—Murder mystery set in Britain during the time of Prince John. Accurate portrayal of medieval times, with nicely fleshed-out supporting characters.

The Garden of Ruth by Eva Etzioni-Halevy—The life of the Biblical character, a woman who converted to Judaism and gave birth to the future King David. The reader found it pretentious and melodramatic.

Clan of the Cave Bear by Jean Auel—Cro-magnon girl grows up among Neanderthals in the first book of the Earth's Children series. Intensely detailed and immersive, almost like you're studying a diorama at a natural history museum.

Mistress Shakespeare by Karen Harper—Some records indicate that the Bard may have been married twice. This book looks at the life of his purported first wife. Lots of historical detail, especially about Elizabethan-era theater.

The Sun's Bride—Gillian Bradshaw. Seafaring adventure in Ancient Greece. A "male romance" à la W.E.B. Griffin.

The Lady Elizabeth by Alison Weir—Character study of the early years of Elizabeth I. Good gateway to historical fiction for those unfamiliar with the genre.

Master of All Desires by Judith Merkle Riley—Light medieval tale with fantasy elements that's set in the world of Catherine de Medici and Nostradamus.

Imperium by Robert Harris—The life story of Cicero. Detailed, serious look at historical intrigue.

The White Mare by Jules Watson—The life of a spirited tribal Scottish princess at the time of the Roman invasion. Dense and intricately plotted, the author adds a postscript stating that she made most of the book up, because the historical record for that period is so sparse. First in a trilogy.

Shield of Three Lions by Pamela Kaufman—First in a trilogy set in medieval England about a young girl who disguises herself as a boy, journeys across Europe and ends up on the Crusades. Funny, bawdy and fast-paced, with less focus on the historical detail.

Song of the Earth by John R. Dann—Prehistoric epic set around 2000 B.C.

Pillars of the Earth and *World Without End* by Ken Follett—Page-turners set in the 1300s. Well-developed characters, lots of politics, religion and class issues. Perhaps best not to read both immediately back to back, as the latter mirrors the former in a lot of ways, and might seem repetitive.

Helen of Troy by Margaret George—The story of the face that launched a thousand ships, but stripped of mythology. Author notes she tried to remain true to the history of the time period, because it's unknown whether the actual woman ever existed.

Time and Chance by Sharon Kay Penman—The complicated relationship between Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine.

Assegai by Wilbur Smith—British East Africa among the big-game hunters. Ernest Hemingway meets spy thriller.

Pirate Queen by Alan Gold—Biographical tale of Grace O'Malley, Irish pirate. Conversational tone, powerful ending.

Warrior Queen by Alan Gold—Biographical tale of Boudica, Celtic queen. Characters not well developed, but lots of historical detail. Bizarrely, characters speak in a 1950s dialect.

Antigone's Wake by Nicholas Nicastro—Sophocles goes to war. Begins with interesting historical details about Athenian culture, but it turns dull once he gets to the battle.

To the Tower Born by Robin Maxwell—The princes in the Tower, from the viewpoint of their sister and her best friend. Mystery, conspiracy and two strong female characters.

The Company of Liars and *The Owl Killers* by Karen Maitland—Medieval suspense tales that focus on the common people. In the former, misfits travel during the Black Plague. Mix of *Canterbury Tales* and *And Then There Were None*. The latter is about a group of women in an English beguineage in the 1300s. Both are good in audio.

Memoirs of Mary Queen of Scots by Carolly Erickson—Some of the liberties taken with historical accuracy stand out, because there is quite a bit known about Mary. Somewhat slow-moving—might appeal more to women's fiction readers.

White Queen by Philippa Gregory—Lyrically written account of the wife of Edward IV during the Wars of the Roses.

Boudica: Dreaming the Hound by Mary Scott—more on the warrior queen.

Byzantium by Stephen Lawhead—St. Aidan takes the Book of Kells from Ireland to Constantinople. Author is known for fantasy books, and this has similar feel with adventure/quest/spirituality elements.

The Gilded Chamber by Rebecca Kohn—The biblical Queen Esther. Told in first-person, but tedious—you don't care for the characters.

Scandal of the Season by Sophie Gee—A behind-the-scenes look at what inspired Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. Fluid writing, not many info dumps. Recommended.

Nefertiti by Michelle Moran—The Egyptian queen's story through the eyes of her sister. Page-turner with much historical and religious detail.

All for Love by Amanda Elliott—Regency-era affairs of royal mistress Mary Robinson. Insipid character; not recommended.

In the Shadow of the Ark by Anne Provoost—Noah's flood from point of view of a girl from a different tribe. Fast read, but not much of the Bible story there, other than the setting. Bad sex scenes, too.

Duchess by Susan Holloway Scott—Impoverished Sarah Churchill attempts to ingratiate herself in the English court during the Restoration. Lots of detail about the schism between Catholics and Protestants.

Sarah by Marek Halter—Another Biblical tale, this one about Abraham’s wife. Sarah is a strong character, but the sense of place and historical detail is weak.

Render Unto Caesar by Gillian Bradshaw—A Greek from Alexandria is embroiled in intrigue in Rome, where a female ex-gadiator becomes his bodyguard. Fast-paced.

Irish Princess by Karen Harper—Irish noblewoman flees to England when her family is killed and becomes BFFs with Elizabeth I. Based on a real historical figure.

The Heretic’s Wife by Brenda Rickman Vantrease—Main character the wife of the man who helped translate the Bible into English. Enjoyable romantic plot with multiple perspectives, but could have used more historical detail.

The Observations by Jane Harris—In 1860s Edinburgh, an Irish maid observes her employer and finds that she in turn is being watched. Fun, but not a lot of historical detail.

Scourge of God by William Dietrich—Attila the Hun vs. the Roman empire.

The Perfect Royal Mistress by Diana Haeger—Charles II and Nell Gwynn. Quick read that is heavily focused on the love story, but it’s not quite a romance

Pride of Carthage by David Anthony Durham—Hannibal marches on Rome. Lots of battlefield description, but the interpersonal relationships depicted broaden its appeal to women.

Gates of Fire by Steven Pressfield—Grim look at battle of Thermopylae.

A Factory of Cunning by Philippa Stockly—A French noblewoman and her maid establish themselves at a London inn and swindle their way through late 18th-century society. Strong sense of place and characterization.

As a wrap-up, the group discussed whether the books read stuck to the appeal factors discussed earlier. Many were biographical and had strong female characters (common trend among historical novels of the last several years). Most were well –paced but some were quite long. The writing quality varied, and some had happy endings while others didn’t.

ARRT Historical Fiction Genre Study

Traditional Historical Fiction, Part II

For the second part of our look at traditional historical novels, participants were asked to compare the books they read against the historical fiction appeal list (and were asked to continue referring to this list while reading in future subgenres). To review, these elements include:

- Linear plots
- Longer page counts
- Rich historical detail
- Protagonists that the reader can root for

- Optimistic endings

Many of the books read adhered to these guidelines, but some issues and questions did arise that are worth considering:

- 1) Must readers have preference for a book's frame? Or would two books set in different time periods but featuring a similar tone be readalikes for historical fiction readers? Some patrons might only want to read books set during the Tudor era, while others who enjoy reading books about the private lives of royals don't necessarily require a particular time frame. This is probably something you'd want to ask the patron before guiding them further.
- 2) A couple of the books had fantastical elements that were off-putting to those who didn't expect them. Is this a trend? Someone brought up the point that the further back a book is set, the more unreal the setting might seem. In that element of world-building, historical fiction and fantasy share a sensibility. But if readers are looking for nitty-gritty historical details, they might be similarly turned off by these supernatural elements.
- 3) One participant noticed that many of the older titles she searched for weren't available in audio format. Newer, more popular authors seem to be better represented.
- 4) What is the difference between historical fiction and literary fiction that happens to be set in the past? There is crossover, but the appeal factors above aren't always evident in literary fiction. Publishers aren't helping us gauge differences—there are a lot of Philippa Gregory-esque covers out there.
- 5) On a somewhat related note: some books had framing devices set in the present day, or alternated between past and present. At what point do these types of books stop being historical fiction?
- 6) Is authenticity the most important element for a reader? Are they reading for fun, for historical details, or both? The discussion brought up the differences between a novelist who writes history, such as Philippa Gregory, and a historian who writes novels, such as Alison Weir.
- 7) Certain writers, such as Sandra Dallas, write both historical and contemporary fiction, so you do need to check the jacket blurb or catalog subject headings when you're suggesting a title.

Books read

Madame Tussaud by Michelle Moran—Strong female lead and storyline; some gory details
 Gendarme by Mark Mustian—Split contemporary and historical perspective on Armenian genocide; engrossing, but felt somewhat unrealistic.

Cathedral of the Sea by Ildefonso Falcones. Fast-paced, epic multigenerational tale set in 12th century Barcelona.

It Sleeps in Me by Kathleen O'Neal Gear—North America circa 1400 C.E. Erotic beginning, strong female characters, immersive. Not for everyone, but would appeal to Jean Auel fans.

Signora DaVinci by Robin Maxwell—Leonardo's mom. Lots on Florentine politics and humanist culture,

little about art. Moves quickly and might appeal to Phillipa Gregory fans.

Shadow Patriots by Lucia St. Clair Robison—Quaker spy in Revolutionary War.

Duchess of Aquitaine by Margaret Ball—Linear account of Eleanor's life. Deeply researched; tone and pace seemed similar to a fantasy novel.

Andersonville by MacKinlay Cantor—Pulitzer winner with more appeal to serious nonfiction readers—dense, tiny font, hardly any female characters to speak of.

The Scarlet Contessa by Jeanne Kalogridis—Italian Renaissance setting but lots of supernatural elements made it seem particularly unrealistic.

The White by Deborah Larsen—Woman kidnapped by Seneca Indians. More literary than genre, with the focus on the story of her experience. But the historical details about the tribe are interesting.

Jewel Trader of Pegu by Jeffrey Hantover—Jewish trader travels to Burma in 1598. Character-driven and well-written account of little-known time and place.

Sex Wars by Margaret Percy— Push for women's suffrage movement in U.S. Meticulous research that doesn't bog the story down.

A Free Man of Color by Barbara Hambly—Early 1800s New Orleans set mystery with lots of historical details.

Blood of Flowers by Anita Amirrezvani—Female rugmaker in 17th century Iran. Artist angle would appeal to readers of Susan Vreeland and Tracy Chevalier.

The Quilters Apprentice by Jennifer Chiaverini—Set in present day. Oops! Later books in the series go back in time.

Soul Thief by Cecelia Holland. Vikings raid Irish coastal town. Blood, passion, action!

Diary of Mattie Spenser by Sandra Dallas—Colorado territories in the late 19th century. Traditional, linear plot, sad parts but does end optimistically. Framed by modern element.

Whiter Than Snow by Sandra Dallas—Character-driven tale set in a Colorado mining town in 1920s; timeless feel that makes it hard to figure out the time period described.

The Religion by Tim Willocks—Turkish siege of Malta. For more hard-core historical readers, but fast-paced and epic.

Wolves of Andover by Kathleen Kent. Prequel to *The Heretic's Daughter*. Strong female protagonist, stark, realistic bloody parts. Optimistic ending.

Virgin: Prelude to the Throne by Robin Maxwell—The goings-on of Catharine, widow of Henry VIII, and her step-daughter Elizabeth.

The Killer Angels by Michael Shaara—Classic that gets into the mind of Civil War generals and offers great sense of authenticity for the characters and battle details. Great for guys and for nonfiction readers.

Gods and Generals by Jeff Shaara—Jeff follows in his father's footsteps with Civil War novel. Engaging, but he's not as good a writer as his dad.

Master of Verona by David Blixt—Dante's son travels to Verona with his dad in the early 1300s. Several historical personages appear; good read for both men and women.

Little Balloonist by Linda Dunn—Based on the life of a real person, a woman balloonist in Napoleonic-era France.

Dreamers of the Day by Mary Doria Russell—Ohio teacher in Egypt during the Cairo Peace Conference meets Churchill, Lawrence of Arabia and others. Weak historical that loses credibility with fantastic elements at the end.

Doc by Mary Doria Russell—Doc Holliday and Dodge City. Offers realistic view of life that feels like a fleshed out biography.

London in Chains by Gillian Bradshaw—Young woman in the period of the English Civil War. Entertaining with a touch of romance.

Caleb's Crossing by Geraldine Brooks—The life of the first Native American to graduate from Harvard. Literary historical with lush descriptions. For those who don't mind reading dialect.

Kristin Lavransdatter by Sigrid Undset—Three-part classic about life in 14th-century Norway. Feels contemporary and very realistic. Try to get it as three volumes with the Tiina Nunnally translation.

Gatsby's Girl by Caroline Preston—F. Scott Fitzgerald's first love.

The Devlin Diary by Christi Phillips. Mid 1600s. Fast-paced, strong female character.

Adventure/Military/Western Historical

Adventure

The benchmark title was *Master and Commander* by Patrick O'Brian. Most of the group hadn't read the book before; those who had seen the film adaptation starring Russell Crowe found that it did not affect their reading of the novel. Many of the group members were overwhelmed by the book's level of nautical detail—there were a several passages where one's eyes would glaze over and thus readers would lose track of the story. However, others very much enjoyed the plot, dialogue and characters, especially the friendship between the protagonists Aubrey and Maturin. O'Brian was skilled at evoking the sense of isolation one has at sea.

Sarah Johnson's *Historical Fiction II* noted that adventure historicals have heroic protagonists, relatively fast pace and well-realized settings, with readers becoming armchair time-travelers of sorts. Furthermore, characters usually develop over the series, and this is the case with *M&C*. Fans of the books often recommend starting with the second or third book in the series (*Post Captain* and *HMS Surprise*), as these generally eschew the great nautical detail and give meatier character portrayals (such as Maturin becoming a spy). The series is considered more humorous as it progresses, with lots of running jokes that delight O'Brian's fans. However, there is a dearth of strong women characters.

Many compared the O'Brian book with Bernard Cornwell's Richard Sharpe series and C.S. Forester's Horatio Hornblower novels. All the books share protagonists with a strong sense of honor, commitment to cause and each other, who've all earned their rank. However, *Master and Commander* does provide a contrast between Aubrey's more rigid moral code and Maturin's shades of gray.

Those who read the Sharpe books found them to be quite entertaining and lighter than the O'Brian (thinking of Sean Bean in the British TV adaptation didn't hurt either). The action was easy to visualize. However, the order if the series is confusing—there is both a publication date order and chronological order—check www.bernardcornwell.net for clarification.

Other comments:

- These adventure historicals would make a readalike with military sci-fi, such as Lois McMaster Bujold's Vorkosigan saga and David Weber's Honor Harrington books, which also share quite a bit of world-building and technical detail.
- The audio version read by Patrick Tull was recommended over the version read by Simon Vance
- Most adventure historicals seem to feature the Napoleonic era from the British perspective—is it that books from the French perspective haven't been written or that they haven't been translated into English?
- Men generally seem to be the audience for most of these books—they have a “bromance” factor. But women read them too, as was evidenced by a few women who noted how surprised they were that they had read so much on the suggested reading list for this meeting.
- Do readers actually call them “adventure” novels? It was noted that teens ask for adventure, but adults ask for action or books like Clive Cussler.

Adventure books discussed:

Saratoga: A Novel of the American Revolution by David Garland—Brit perspective of the war. A Male fantasy of sorts—protagonist is the best at everything, gets the girl, etc. Easy reading, fast-paced.

Jack Absolute by C.C. Humphries—British rake and spy in 18th-century America relies on his contacts in the Mohawk tribe for secrets.

Captain Alatriste by Arturo Perez-Reverte—17th-century Spanish swordsman for hire. One reader felt disappointment that the book seemed to only set up the next in the series—she wanted more plot involvement. Others found that to be a selling point, and loved the details of the time period. Most agreed that this had a more literary Dumas-type feel, with wide character appeal.

Troy by David Gemmell—action starts before Trojan War, using real-life details and projecting them as the story that eventually would be seen as mythology. Features a strong female character and a sense of humor. More adventure than military.

Captain Blood by Rafael Sabatini—swashbuckler about a 17th-century doctor who defies the British crown and is condemned to slavery in the Caribbean; he escapes and turns pirate. Rousing, old-fashioned fun.

Bloody Jack by L.A. Meyer—this YA series is a fun teen naval adventure with a strong female protagonist; highly recommended.

Westerns

Western historicals are really “novels of the West”—more literary, with more female characters (even though they still largely about men) Known historical figures tend to appear (whereas traditional Westerns feature more no-name cowboys). More women read Western historicals, while men usually read traditional Westerns (often considered romances for men). The violence is more stylized, less bloody. One participant noted a recent increase in popularity in rural areas and in prison populations.

But why have Westerns dropped in general popularity? Award-winners like *Lonesome Dove* and those written by popular crossover authors such as Robert Parker and Elmore Leonard do well, as do some of the classic writers such as Louis L’Amour and Zane Grey. It seems as though these books circulate better if we call them historical novels, not Westerns.

Westerns discussed:

Lonesome Dove by Larry McMurtry—Literary family saga with complex characters, both male and female.

Texas Rifles by Elmer Kelton—Strong female character. Provides interesting perspective of the period, when some Texans were strong Unionists and other Confederates.

The Branch and the Scaffold by Loren Estleman—Unique characters and sharp prose—author is winner of several awards.

Lady of No Man's Land by Jeannie Williams

English Creek by Ivan Doig—Set in Montana during the Depression. Well-written.

Literary Historical

Benchmark: *Atonement* by Ian McEwan

We began with a general discussion about the nature of historical fiction—should it really be considered a genre, or are we just talking about an appeal factor (i.e. setting)? It was generally felt that some books do seem to fall within the boundaries of historical fiction, such as the traditional historicals and sagas that we read earlier in our study. Others are subsets of their own genres, such as the literary historicals, historical mysteries, etc. One person suggested asking yourself, “What’s the point of the book?” If it’s the dominance of the historical element and meticulous research, etc., then it’s more likely to be historical fiction. A quick poll of our group revealed that only a handful of their libraries stickered the historical books (although one person said she said her library stickers were pretty arbitrary!). Sarah Johnson’s article “What are the rules for Historical Fiction”

(<http://historicalnovelsociety.org/guides/defining-the-genre/defining-the-genre-what-are-the-rules-for-historical-fiction/>) was cited as a place to look for more information.

We then looked at Johnson’s definition for literary historicals as described in *Historical Fiction II*. These are books that often convey contemporary themes in a historical setting. They are darker stories, with endings that tend not to be optimistic. They feature elegant prose and are more character-driven. Literary historicals can really play with narrative—flashbacks, story-within-story frames and non-chronological timelines. These are often book club selections and award winners, and often feature historical settings that are uncommon.

Atonement seemed to fit to these traits. There is an unreliable narrator, and there is only a dash of the historical elements. There is lots of character development, but the same actions could have been transferred to a different place and era. The ending was a surprise for those who hadn’t seen the movie adaptation (which changed the ending slightly). One reader who prefers historical novels to literary ones liked the Dunkirk evacuation scene the best—the one part of the book that has a richer historical description.

Other books read:

Castle in the Forest by Norman Mailer—Fictional biography of Hitler. Very psychological—it seems as though the author might have read too much Freud.

Cold Mountain by Charles Frazier—A retelling of *Odyssey* in the Civil War era. The book has a glacial pace that’s quite deliberate, as the language is meant to make the reader slow down.

The Real Minerva by Mary Sharratt—Women’s fiction/mystery in 1923 small-town Minnesota.

Outlander by Gil Adamson—Canadian woman on the run in the frontier after killing her husband. Character-driven with an interesting fish-out-of-water element.

Night Watch by Sarah Waters. Story of several Londoners during the war years. Plays with narrative by jumping around in time period a lot.

The Custodian of Paradise by Wayne Johnson. Canadian female newspaper columnist in the waning days of WWII. Character-driven, but also the sort of book that could have taken place at some other time.

The Last Song of Dusk by Charles Hix—The nature of love in Shanghvi, India. Elements of magical realism.

The Luncheon at the Boating Party by Susan Vreeland—The story behind the Renoir painting. A lot of name dropping about the people and the time period. Good for those with a lot of interest in art.

The Madonnas of Leningrad by Debra Dean—Framing device of an elderly woman with Alzheimer's remembering her time surviving the siege of Leningrad by taking shelter in the Hermitage. Lovely story, good for book groups.

Empress Orchid by Anchee Min--Biographical novel of the last empress of china in 1850s. Modern themes, strong female character.

Harmony Silk Factory by Tash Aw—1940s Malaysia, but not a book to learn more about that historical period. Unreliable narrator book about an event seen through different perspectives. Lots here for book groups.

Lambs of London by Peter Ackroyd—Shakespearian plagiarism. More historical than literary—a no-brainer for fans of Shakespeare.

The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller—Retelling of The Iliad as a personal tale. Quick read, but parallel to real time and place not really historical.

The Cove by Ron Rash—Appalachia at the end of WWI. Elements of mystery, very atmospheric and good for book clubs.

Heyday by Kurt Anderson—More adventure or traditional historical than literary. Lots of historical details about 19th century America and plot-driven. Good appeal for men.

The Welsh Girl by Peter Ho Davies—Didn't learn anything about Wales!

Arthur and George by Julian Barnes. Arthur Conan Doyle defends an accused half-Indian, half-Scots solicitor accused of a crime he didn't commit.

Inspirational Historical

The benchmark was Gilbert Morris' Lions of Judah series, which follows the Jewish ancestry of Jesus from Noah onward. Most read the first book of the series, *Heart of a Lion*. Reactions were mixed. While one study participant thought it read like historical fiction with a Biblical setting, others thought that there wasn't enough historical detail to hold one's attention. One reader kept going only because she wanted to figure out the identity of the book's enigmatic "river beast" (turns out it was a hippo).

Interestingly, some libraries didn't have the series at all while others didn't carry all the titles. The author still gets a lot of checkouts in certain areas. At one library, the book had a Gentle Reads sticker.

Other Morris books read included *The Reluctant Bridegroom* (about a wagon train of brides headed westward) and *The Sword of Truth* (a saga set in Tudor England); both had a bit more historical detail and seemed a bit less pointedly Christian. As someone mentioned, Morris is more concerned with detailing the characters' relationships with God and one another than with historical world-building.

This was typical of many of the other books read—many dealt with relationships, family and feelings. Some seemed like true historical fiction, but several could have had their plots and characters plopped into other settings or time frames. Ultimately, these are comfort reads for a lot of people—Morris even mentions this himself. By comparison, the historical novel *The Preservationist* by David Maine tells the Biblical story of Noah in a far more literary and challenging way—even though it's ostensibly the same subject as *Heart of a Lion*, you'd give it to very different readers.

Other points of discussion:

- The group mostly read female authors. The majority of readers of inspirational historicals are women, and publishers usually target that audience.
- Many of the books featured patriarchal relationships. This was surprising given the comparison to the inspirational romances that were read in the previous genre study, which had strong female characters. Is this a common characteristic of this genre? It was discussed how traditionalism and conservatism seems to play a part in evangelical belief, and in an odd way the books' paternalism is more reflective of the true historical record (in comparison to historical novels that sometimes take an anachronistic view of powerful women in societies where men were quite dominant).
- These are comfort reads for a lot of people. However, without reading the book yourself it's difficult to gauge whether the book might appeal to a wider historical fiction audience or if a readers' advisor should only give it to patrons specifically asking for Christian fiction. The libraries that put it under the broad banner of Gentle Reads maybe doing so because they don't have an Inspirational or Christian fiction section. Libraries don't use the word evangelical as a genre description, and this can be tricky if someone wants something inspirational but not evangelical.

- Most of the Christian fiction publishers such as Tyndale House, Zondervan and Waterbrook publish many historical and historical romance titles.
- Gentle reads squash together lots of genres. These books are getting reviewed more; libraries have recent copies but not older ones.
- These books often come as trilogies and series. Some of the romance-based series don't feature happy endings (at least in the first books in the series). The fact that many libraries have holes in the series might be attributable, in part, to inspirational titles not being reviewed much in the past. Now that they are, libraries are buying more of the books.

Some of the titles that seemed to have more historical detail were:

- *The Widow of Larkspur Inn* by Lawana Blackwell (1860s England)
- *Treasures of the North* by Tracie Peterson (the Yukon during the Gold Rush)
- *New Day Rising* by Lauraine Snelling (pioneer story with shades of Laura Ingalls Wilder)
- *Dreamers* by Angela Elwell Hunt (Egypt in the time of Joseph—she's a more natural storyteller than Gilbert Morris)

The romantic Western series of Kristen Heitzmann and Jane Orcutt also had historical details and could not have been set in other times. Two other books of note were *Only the River Runs Free* by Brodie and Brock Thoene and *The Fields of Bannockburn: A Novel of Christian Scotland from Its Origins to Independence* by Donna Fletcher Crow. The former is set in 19th century Ireland with Catholic good guys and mostly Protestant bad guys (it was the only book read that had a Catholic viewpoint). The former is a 700-plus page doorstopper that was more historical than inspirational. It may qualify as a saga as well, and may be mentioned at the next meeting.

Historical Fiction—Sagas

Benchmark title: *House of Riverton* by Kate Morton.

Morton's book is considered part of the "classic saga" subgenre. According to Sarah L. Johnson in *Historical Fiction II*, classic sagas focus on the relationships and domestic concerns of several generations of a family. The books tend to be long (many make up parts of series with multiple volumes) and there's usually a strong matriarchal figure, cementing the fact that the books typical appeal to a more female readership. They focus on domestic lives and work of ordinary people swept up in vast cultural or social change, not the actual politics of the change itself.

They've tapered off in popularity from their heights in the 70s and 80s, but new life has recently been infused by literary authors dipping their toes in the subgenre. In addition, they continue to be popular in the Christian market. They're also popular in Britain—it was commented that this was perhaps because of the traditional class rigidity and importance of family history in the U.K. Sagas allow people to become emotionally invested in a family and detail how sweeping social changes affect their lives.

With its Edwardian setting, *House of Riverton* has the feel of period dramas such as *Downton Abbey* or *Upstairs Downstairs*. One reader was reminded of *Water for Elephants* in the way the book featured an elderly character looking back on somewhat mysterious events. Another felt the book had the gothic à la Daphne du Maurier. The historical elements were well-detailed but some readers felt the book wasn't as rich or melodramatic as what they expected—they would have wanted to learn more about the other characters in the novel, especially the protagonist's mother and her relationships. One person commented that it would have made a fine conclusion to a trilogy, but didn't feel completely satisfying as a stand-alone.

Many in the group associated sagas with the sweeping TV miniseries of the '70s and '80s such as *Roots*, *North and South* and *The Thorn Birds*. They appreciated maps and family trees that illustrated the sweeping story, and were frustrated when the books lacked these supplements.

Aside from classic sagas, Johnson mentions other subgenres to the subgenre. Sagas with a sense of place have settings that almost become characters in their own right. Sagas of cultural and ethnic heritage frequently are written by authors who share their characters' ethnicity—they focus on life, not politics. Glitz and glamour sagas feature families involved in the jet-set world of finance, show business, etc. Epics are similar to sagas except they have a longer timeframe and are usually connected to one place (such as the works of James Michener and Jean Auel).

Books read:

Immigrants by Howard Fast. Saga about Italian fisherman's family coming to San Francisco near the turn of the 20th century. Long and too much of a potboiler, but Fast is one of the few saga authors who appeal to a male audience.

Poldark by Winston Graham. First book of the Cornwall, England-set saga begins in late 18th century. Felt more modern than the benchmark title with sex, violence, intrigue, etc. even though it was written in 1940s. Saga with a strong sense of place.

God is an Englishman by R.F. Delderfield. First in the classic Swann Family series that explores an English business family and the changes that occur in an industrializing country from the 1860s to the first World War.

Waiting Time by Eugenia Price. A young woman inherits a rice plantation in the antebellum south. Had inspirational elements as well.

Red River by Lalita Tademy. A fictionalized account of four generations of the author's family, who were freed slaves in Louisiana. Features a strong matriarchal figure and written in dialect, which might make it a better audio choice for some.

Monsters of Templeton by Lauren Groff. A woman traces her somewhat fantastical roots in a town in upstate New York. It's not quite historical—an example of a genre blend with light fantasy, humor,

family drama, historical details. Would appeal to readers of literary fiction, but doesn't read well in audiobook format.

The Ravenscar Dynasty by Barbara Taylor Bradford. Bradford based this Edwardian novel on the War of Roses. Glitzy saga with soap-opera feel—sort of the “upstairs” side of *Upstairs, Downstairs*.

No Angel by Penny Vincenzi. Glitzy saga centered around a publishing family in England—full of strong women characters and the rise of the upper middle class. A huge bestseller in England.

Toss of a Lemon by **Padma Viswanathan**. One women's life in India/Bangladesh. Multigenerational story with strong matriarch and view of societal changes. It also works as a literary novel.

The House of Scorta by Laurent Gaudé. The tribulations of five generations of an southern Italian family, told episodically. An award-winner and bestseller in Europe.

Consequences by Penelope Lively—Brief snippets of life amid three generations in 20th century England. Very literary.

Baker Towers by Jennifer Haigh. Wartime saga with a strong sense of place, set in a Pennsylvania coal mining town from the 1940s to the '60s.

Historical Fantasy

Many participants stated that they couldn't envision giving a historical fantasy to a general historical reader. It was suggested that time-slip or time-travel books might generate more crossover—the books tend not to have a lot of fantasy in them (other than the time-slip element), and are usually rich in historical detail.

It was agreed that you have to know your patron and be careful with suggesting these to less adventurous, non-fantasy readers. Using them as a “stretch book” in the Nancy Pearl formula of suggesting two readalikes and a third stretch book might be the way to go. One historical fantasy author who is a sure bet for many readers is Connie Willis—she often provokes “I don't like fantasy but I like her” comments from patrons. Historical fantasy would also work well with YAs. If a patron reads everything about a particular historical time period, then a fantasy set during the same period may also work. Historical fantasy often is easier to read than some historical fiction. If a historical reader can immediately suspend disbelief, they might be willing to give it a try. Readers who like military historical might also like military historical fantasy (such as Eric Flint) or Harry Turtledove's alternate histories.

Books read:

Soulless by Gail Carriger—Steampunk/paranormal adventures of a feisty Victorian spinster. First in a trilogy that is very good for romancer readers (with caveat that second book doesn't have a happy ending, but love story is sorted out by the end of the third book).

This Scepter'd Isle by Mercedes Lackey—Elvish intrigues in the court of King Henry VIII.

The Little Book by Sellton Edwards—Rock musician time travels to late 19th century Vienna.

The Book of Lost Fragrances by M.J. Rose—The mystical properties of an ancient perfume wafts through the centuries. If you consider a story of reincarnation historical fantasy, then this fits the subgenre.

The Hypnotist by M.J. Rose—An FBI agent falls into his past lives to solve an old mystery. Rose has complex plots and a huge cast of characters.

In the Garden of Iden by Kage Baker—No one expects the Spanish Inquisition! Least of all when it turns out that one of them is a cyborg.

The Doomsday Book—A college student inadvertently travels to the Middle Ages during the Black Death while her cohorts try to bring her back to their present time. An entertaining mix that goes back and forth between the historical and modern characters, although the technology is a little dated.

Shadow of Night by Deborah Harkness—Sequel to A Discovery of Witches. Witches, vampires, historical elements, Elizabethan times ... swoon! Good for fantasy, romance and even general fiction readers who don't mind some paranormal.

Promise of Wolves by Dorothy Hearst—Jean M. Auel meets Watership Down. Heavy on fantasy light on historical; seems aimed more at teens.

Passion of Mary Magdalene by Elizabeth Cunninham—Mary Magdalene transplanted to early Ireland, where she goes to druid college, before meeting Esus. Shennanigans ensue. Wild feminist retelling of Bible history, written somewhat tongue in cheek. First of a series.

Shades of Milk and Honey—Mary Robinette Kowal. Accomplished ladies in Regency England draw, play music and also practice magic. Interesting premise, but story is a bit slow.

Farthing by Jo Walton—English country house mystery mixed with alternate history in late 1940s England.

Man in the High Castle by Phillip K. Dick—SF classic alternate history asks what if the Allies had lost World War II?

Mists of Avalon by Marion Zimmer Bradley—Legend of Arthur told from the perspective of his half-sister, Morgaine and recast as a battle between the pagan and Christian worlds.

11/12/63 by Stephen King. Not technically historical fantasy but with author's pedigree and so many details of day-to-day life in the 1960s, would appeal to historical, speculative and general fiction readers.

Historical Fiction vs. Biography

For this meeting participants were asked to select a historical figure and read both a biography and a historical novel that featured them. In some cases the fiction was read first, in others the biography and

at least one person read them read concurrently. When the novel took several liberties with the historical record, it was generally agreed that reading a bio first might spoil the fiction, because the reader would get too caught up in the inaccuracies. However, many books stuck to the main facts and embellished when it came to dialogue and gaps in historical knowledge. It was less complicated for fiction authors whose subjects had lives that weren't meticulously recorded. One simple idea for cross-collection promotion was to put a bookmark suggesting a couple of fiction titles in a biography or history book and vice-versa in a historical novel.

Books read:

The Maid by Kimberly Cutter (fiction), *Joan: The Mysterious Life of the Heretic Who Became a Saint* by Donald Spoto (nonfic), *The Maid and the Queen: The Secret History of Joan of Arc* by Nancy Goldstone (nonfic), *The Virgin Warrior: The Life and Death of Joan of Arc* by Larissa Juliet Taylor (nonfic)

Joan of Arc was written about quite a bit in her time, so there is a lot of coverage out there. The nonfiction was varied, with the Goldstone book being dry and academic while the Taylor book was interesting and accessible. Cutter's book deviated from the real-life story at times, but did adhere to fact fairly well (although there was a suggestion of a sexual relationship that wasn't anywhere else). Because the fiction gave Joan dialogue it seemed much more immediate and emotional.

Loving Frank by Nancy Horan (fiction), *Death in a Prairie House: Frank Lloyd Wright and the Taliesin Murders* by William R. Drennan (nonfic), *The Women* by T.C. Boyle (fiction)

Frank Lloyd Wright, Mamah Cheney, affairs and murder. *Loving Frank* was great entertainment, while *The Women* was well put together and gorgeously written, but very dense. *Death in a Prairie House* was rather dry to start, given such a sensational topic, but that may also have been due to the fact that *Loving Frank*, read first, was so compelling.

Innocent Traitor by Alison Weir (fiction)

The life of Lady Jane Grey. She was portrayed as very precocious—overly bright for her age, really—and her parents (who forced her into political machinations to make her queen) were painted as horrible people. No nonfiction focusing on Lady Jane could be found. There was a movie version of her story starring Helena Bonham Carter.

The White Queen by Philippa Gregory (fiction), *The Women of the Cousins' War: the Duchess, the Queen and the King's Mother* by Philippa Gregory (nonfiction)

The beginning of the War of the Roses in two well-done books. Although in the novel Gregory brought in elements that were just speculation, she does a great job of drawing you into history and creating a personality for these figures.

Katherine by Anya Seton (fiction) and *Mistress of the Monarchy: the Life of Katherine Swynford, Duchess of Lancaster* by Alison Weir (nonfic)

Two books that complement each other well. The Weir book obviously is more factual, getting quite specific in the biographical elements and the social and political implications of the life of the mistress of John of Gaunt.

Crippen: A Novel of Murder by John Boyne (fiction) and *Thunderstruck* by Erik Larson (nonfiction)

The two most wildly divergent books of the session, about a convicted wife-murderer in England. The novel portrayed him as a nice guy with a horrible wife, who took the fall for the murder that was committed by someone else; the nonfiction places him completely to blame and describes the details completely differently. The novel almost needs to be read first, because it is a completely different story. One wonders if the Larson book had been released earlier whether or not the novel would have been released or changed the name of the main character to someone fictitious.

Jane Austen by Carol Shields (nonfic) and *Jane and the Unpleasantness at Scargrave Manor* by Stephanie Barron.

Much is known about Austen's life but much is also still unknown, so Barron plays with the unknown spaces by making Jane an amateur sleuth. It's clever and lighthearted, but still plays within the bounds of what we know did actually happen to her.

Devil's Brood by Sharon Kay Penman (fiction).

Henry II, Eleanor of Aquitaine and their children—long but engrossing.

Pearl Buck in China by Hilary Spurling (nonfic) and *Pearl of China* by Anchee Min (fiction)

Read the nonfiction first, it seemed more like real life. While sympathetic to Buck, the author had more perspective than in the fiction, which placed loose and fast with the facts. Because of some of the themes an evangelical Christian reader may have some issues with the book.

The Hidden Diary of Marie Antoinette by Carolly Erickson (fiction) and *Marie Antoinette: the Journey* by Antonia Fraser.

Both defend the French queen of not being as frivolous, but a good mother to her kids. The nonfiction was superior to the novel and gave a good sense of the character and everyday life.

ARRT Historical Fiction Genre Study Wrap-up

For the final genre study meeting, everyone read recently published books that took place during a time period when the reader was a teen or young adult. These books weren't really historical fiction, but it was interesting to see how they related/compared to true historical fiction, and how historical details are viewed by those who had lived through the period. Those that has lots of period details seemed more nostalgic than historical—the authors didn't appear to do research as much as put down details from memory.

Books read in the 1960s time period:

The Wednesday Wars by Gary Schmidt

1970s:

Arcadia by Lauren Groff

Watergate by Thomas Mallon

Fortress of Solitude by Jonathan Lethem

1980s:

The Chocolate Money by Ashley Prentice Norton

Crossing California by Adam Langer

Downtown Owl by Chuck Klosterman

Love and Shame and Love by Peter Orner

The Round House by Louise Erdrich

Tell the Wolves I'm Home by Carol Rifka Brunt

"V" is for Vengeance by Sue Grafton

1990s:

The Future of Us by Jay Asher & Carolyn Mackler

In wrapping up the discussion, some of the participants still felt that historical fiction isn't a genre of itself but rather the time period is part of the story's frame. Others discovered that they liked elements of historical fiction—those books with split time periods or with meticulous world-building. It was evident that as part of the RA interview you need to figure out if a person is after a particular time period or after a style of book (such as one with the split periods