

Creative Writing Workshop: Shaping the Past

- I. Introduction: Creative writing gives us the freedom to weave a compelling story by carefully and accurately manipulating the historical record in order to
 - a. Stand as an eyewitness to events
 - b. Vividly describe time and place
 - c. Imagine the thoughts and emotions of characters
 - d. Interpret the significance and consequence of actions
 - e. Illustrate the role ordinary people play in shaping the course of history
 - f. Raise the issue of how different choices would have effected different outcomes
 - g. Make the connection between the past and the present
- II. Some considerations in crafting historical fiction
 - a. Audience: who are you writing for? What is their reading ability? Do they think concretely or conceptually? How much prior knowledge do they have?
 - b. Narrator: who is telling your story? What do you know about the narrator? In what way is the narrator's story similar to others? In what way is it unique? Is there a bias in the narrator's telling of the story?
 - c. Other Characters: who else do you need to include to round out the story? Are all of your supporting characters fictional? Or is there an authentic way to include historical figures? Tips for creating memorable characters: state what the character wants; honor the struggle; add conflict; portray vivid personalities; create convincing motivation; reflect unspoken feelings in someone or something else; place them in empathetic situations
 - d. Setting the Scene: Use action and character development to move the reader from one plot point to the next. Think of scenes as stepping stones that lead you down the path of your story—each separate from the other, each critical to reaching the end of the journey. Point toward future action in the opening scenes. Construct your scenes with action and reaction. Create obstacles. Avoid dead ends. Surprise the reader with plausible actions that don't conform to expectations.
 - e. Dialogue: the goal is to create the illusion of authenticity. Create dialogue that reveals character and mood. Invent an authentic voice for each character. In writing historical fiction, be aware of anachronisms—in settings, actions, and speech.
 - f. Writing is a Craft: each writer develops a toolkit that helps him hone his craft. Read, read, read—anything and everything. Keep a journal. Carry a notebook to record words, phrases, pieces of conversation, descriptions of people and places. Write each day. Use prompts when the well runs dry.
 - g. Critique: develop thick skin. Writing is personal but it benefits from being read by others.
 - h. Edit: work and rework until you are satisfied that it's the best reflection of your knowledge and creativity.