

Fiction is no stranger to truth

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Writing fiction is a strange way to spend time.

The novelist spends half the workday ginning up imaginary characters in imaginary situations, and the other half drenching the story in literal reality so that the reader will believe the aforementioned lies.

Fiction anchors itself in physical reality to build trust with the reader. Writers can sneak in whoppers as long as they're packaged with familiar details.

Few of us would read beyond this first line: "The sun rose in the western sky as always when she walked into a room." (Well, I might read beyond it, since it's clear that this lady is more than the run-of-the-mill knockout found in most made-for-boys fiction and probably looks like my wife. Points for me? Double figures?)

To gain the reader's trust in the writer's authorial voice, he needs to make his reportorial voice accurate. This means that novelists need to know about what they're writing, either through first-hand experience or research.

Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719) is generally considered to be the first "realistic" novel in English. Defoe, of course, did not live for 28 years as a shipwreck survivor on a deserted Caribbean island near Venezuela. He wrote from London. But he did ground his story in several castaway accounts.

That Defoe placed Antarctic seals and penguins on Crusoe's equatorial beaches did not discredit his tale with his readers since The National Geographic Channel had yet to reveal what was really what when it came to South Pole critters.

Defoe, incidentally, was condemned to stand in a pillory for three days in 1703 for seditious libel against Queen Anne who was persecuting all religious Nonconformists (Presbyterians, Baptists, Congregationalists, Puritans and later Methodists, Quakers and Unitarians) who refused to join the Church of England. Some say sympathetic Londoners tossed flowers at him instead of the ever-handy street garbage and manure.

Defoe died in 1731 while hiding out from his creditors, a plot line I'm sure he regrets not using.

Some topics are beyond feasible research.

I would never try to write a novel about a prickly scholar in the Qin Dynasty who refused to allow his book, which challenged the reigning imperial philosophy in 213 B.C., to be burned...in full knowledge that the penalty for refusal was death. (Great story, but how could I make the ending a little happier without changing it?)

I'm incapable of learning enough about the physical and social realities of that time and culture to manufacture a story whose details would both be true and ring true. (My current knowledge of the Chinese language ranges from "I love you." to "Cold beer, please."—taught to me by different women at different times for different reasons.)

James Michener wrote 40 novels, most of them historical sagas. He started several in prehistory, because geology shapes human events. Michener's signature was the amazingly deep research he did to understand his settings and get his facts right.

I've dipped a toe...maybe just the nail of a toe...in Michenerian research by setting one chapter in a 1932 coal-company town in West Virginia. I spent time in several such towns in the 1970s, but they looked hugely better than the Depression-era photographs I've reviewed. If I don't get fictitious Fricktown right, my readers won't believe the murder I describe really happened.

Writers are told to write about what they know. So a lot of fiction is about the writer. Fortunately, this doesn't require a lot of expensive research or out-of-pocket travel.

The danger here is this: what a writer knows always involves other people, some of whom are scores the author may be trying to settle.

One example comes immediately to mind.

The late Nora Ephron's Heartburn (1983) is a sour reshredding of her marriage and divorce to philandering journalist Carl Bernstein, who, she insisted, "was capable of having sex with a Venetian blind." This doesn't say a whole lot for her when you think about it. (Ephron did not specify which gender the disabled Venetian was, but Bernstein never complained about that part of her description.)

Nora also wrote unkindly about her Hollywood screenwriter parents who had written unkindly about her as a college student. Her mother told her, "Everything is copy."

Everything *isn't* copy. I'm not that ruthless.

For that reason, my book's characters are composites of people I've known, people I know of and people I conjured out of my mental vacuum.

The Becker character, who some might believe is closest to me, is not nearly as smart, handsome, athletic, rich, funny, suave, urbane, polished and fashionably-dressed. Becker is just a lawyer.

Two female characters are interested in Becker for reasons that I need to work on. These interests are advanced and consummated, though not at the same time and together. One ends badly; the other ends goodly.

At last count, I have three murders and a couple of sex scenes. I'm considering upping the sex. If you want to have fun, write a sex scene.

Most of my characters are a mix of good and bad. That is one point of the book. It's what keeps the pot boiling.

But my organized-crime characters are unalloyed thugs. They are not leavened with the "family values" that Hollywood routinely assigns.

With about 200 pages more or less done, I can report murders, mobsters, money, miners, mayhem, molls, mugs and a couple of sex scenes that don't begin with "m."

Poor Becker. What a mess he's in. And he was just trying to be useful and do good.

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