

The Bonafides of History Writing

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History writing can be done as historical non-fiction which includes survey level textbooks, printing of primary sources (letters, memoirs, speeches, etc.) or biographies. It can also be written as historical fiction such as novels. There is a stigma that historical fiction is not valid as historical account.

Some writers, like Shelby Foote begin as novelists and turn to non-fiction narrative. Others like myself begin as non-fiction academic history students and turn later to novels.

For students, papers and essays must be meticulously cited with Kate Turabian's Chicago Style of footnotes, endnotes and bibliography. Failure to do so, and using another's words as your own is plagiarism and may be punished as a capital crime. For the professor, work must pass the muster of peer review. No wonder they dismiss historical fiction.

Historical fiction may not contain fantasy. That would be historical fantasy or alternative false history.

It must be a blend of authentic history and the stories of imaginary characters living in a historical period with its historical events. It is a blend of the two, but the history is valid. References and influences are often given, but citation is not required.

The mix of the two elements may vary. John Jakes uses about 10% history and about 90% fictional character stories. The Shaara's, father Michael and son Jeff, use about 90% history and about 10% fictional characters or fictional attributes of actual historical figures. I attempted to write my novels with a 50-50 blend.

Most importantly, one must understand what is truth. Some say there is no truth since accounts conflict. Others say the events and human figures are proven and the causes and effects are well understood to be true. Maybe. Bias, prejudice, viewpoint and perspective (all words mean the same thing) vary with the source, the writer and the reader.

There are errors of omission and commission and narrow focus on an agenda – the telling truthfully of the exceptional portion of the account without giving proportional justice to the whole. It certainly is permissible to tell the part of it but acknowledgment that this is being done would be more honest.

Accounts vary also from the perspective of the writer's time frame – the past written and re-written at different points of time. This is called historiography. It reflects the difficulty, the prejudice and the certain impossibility for the writer to have been there at the moment the history happened, but instead viewed through his contemporary lens. It is unavoidable.

Therefore historical fiction could be just as valid or sometimes more valid than historical non-fiction.