

# *A Short Guide to Historical Fiction Subgenres*

Sarah Johnson  
Booth Library, Eastern Illinois University  
sljohnson2@eiu.edu

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## **THE BASICS:**

### **Traditional Historical Novels**

Entertaining, straightforwardly-told novels that portray a historical period, place, and its inhabitants as realistically as possible.

#### A sampling of benchmark authors:

Jean Auel (prehistoric Europe)  
Colleen McCullough (ancient Rome)  
Margaret George (mammoth biographical novels of famous historical figures)  
Sharon Kay Penman (medieval England and Wales)  
Jean Plaidy (British and European monarchs)  
Mary Renault (ancient Greece)  
Lucia St. Clair Robson (American history; Japan; she also writes historical westerns)  
Jeff Shaara (Civil War, Mexican War, American Revolution, World War I)

#### Current examples:

W. Michael and Kathleen O'Neal Gear, *People of the Nightland* (prehistoric North America; creation of the Great Lakes, circa 13,000 BC)  
Margaret George, *Helen of Troy* (the legendary beauty tells her own story)  
Philippa Gregory, *The Boleyn Inheritance* (revisionist historical novel about Anne of Cleves, Katherine Howard, and Lady Jane Rochford, who inherit Anne Boleyn's legacy)

### **Multi-Period Epics**

Chronological fictional snapshots of one historical period, or about a particular cultural/ethnic group, which show how a place and its people have changed over time.

#### A sampling of benchmark authors:

James Michener (wrote about many historical locales)  
Edward Rutherfurd (British Isles, also Russia)

Current examples:

Steven Saylor, *Roma* (the history of ancient Rome, from 1000 BC through the founding of the Roman Empire, seen through the history of several families)

Edward Rutherfurd, 2-volume Dublin Saga, comprising *The Prince of Ireland* and *The Rebels of Ireland* (large-scale historical epic about Ireland's capital)

**Sagas**

Historical novels that focus on characters' domestic lives and family relationships, especially over multiple generations. They may occur in multi-volume series.

A sampling of benchmark authors:

Philippa Carr (Gothic romantic sagas of women in British history)

Catherine Cookson (British regional sagas set in the North-East of England)

Howard Fast (American history)

Winston Graham (18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century Cornwall)

Alex Haley (African-American experience)

John Jakes (Civil War, among others)

Eugenia Price (Deep South)

Current examples:

Victoria Lustbader, *Hidden* (friends and families in Roaring '20s New York)

Barbara Taylor Bradford, *The Ravenscar Dynasty* (the Wars of the Roses story of the Lancaster-York family feuds, retold in Edwardian England)

**Western Historical Novels**

Novels set in the historical American West, from the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century through the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, which incorporate significant historical detail and a strong sense of place.

A sampling of benchmark authors:

Judy Alter (famous women of the West)

Don Coldsmith (Plains Indian life and culture)

Elmer Kelton (Texas Rangers, among others)

Louis L'Amour (western sagas, among others)

Larry McMurtry (cattle drives, celebrity characters)

Richard Wheeler (celebrity characters, morality tales, mountain men in the 19<sup>th</sup> c west)

Jeanne Williams (female western settlers)

Current examples:

Win Blevins, *Dancing with the Golden Bear* (mountain men, early 19<sup>th</sup> century West)

Nancy E. Turner, *These Is My Words* and *Sarah's Quilt* (the strength and courage of a western pioneer, the author's great-grandmother)

William Haywood Henderson, *Augusta Locke* (six generations of a family, spanning the 20th century in Wyoming)

## GENRE-BLENDING:

### Historical Mysteries

Novels in which detectives from past eras serve justice by solving crimes, using techniques appropriate to the time period.

#### A sampling of benchmark authors:

Rhys Bowen (early 20<sup>th</sup> century New York City; Molly Murphy)

Lindsey Davis (ancient Rome; Falco)

Margaret Frazer (15<sup>th</sup> century England; Dame Frevisse)

Barbara Hambly (1830s New Orleans; Benjamin January)

Anne Perry (Victorian England; Thomas and Charlotte Pitt, William Monk)

Ellis Peters (12<sup>th</sup> century England; Brother Cadfael)

Elizabeth Peters (19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century Egypt; Amelia Peabody)

Steven Saylor (ancient Rome; Gordianus the Finder)

#### Current examples:

Megan Abbott, *The Song is You* (unsolved murder of actress Jean Spangler in 1949 California; feminist noir)

Suzanne Arruda, *Mark of the Lion* (mystery/adventure in early 20<sup>th</sup> century East Africa)

Susanne Alleyn, *A Treasury of Regret* (police procedural set in Paris in 1796)

Simon Levack, *Demon of the Air* (Mexico during the Aztec Empire)

### Romantic Historical Novels

Emotionally engaging novels focusing on the love relationship between two people, most typically a woman and a man. Three categories, depending on the novel's scope and the history/romance balance: *romantic epics*, *romantic historicals*, and *historical romances*.

#### A sampling of benchmark authors. There are really too many to name!

Jo Beverley (*historical romance*, medieval and Georgian England)

Elizabeth Chadwick (*romantic historicals*, medieval England; also writes traditional historical novels)

Sara Donati (*romantic epics*, early America)

Diane Haeger (*romantic historicals*, European and American history)

Dorothy Garlock (*historical romance*, early 20<sup>th</sup> century West)

Roberta Gellis (*historical romance*, medieval England)

Georgette Heyer (*historical romance*, Regency England)

M.M. Kaye (*romantic epics*, India and Zanzibar; she also wrote contemporary mysteries)

Linda Lael Miller (*historical romance*, American West; also writes contemporaries)

#### Current examples:

Cheryl Sawyer, *The Winter Prince* (romantic epic set during the English Civil War)

Anthony Capella, *The Wedding Officer* (romantic historical; culinary love story set in war-torn Naples)

Mary Balogh, *Simply Magic* (gentle Regency romance about a teacher from Miss Martin's School for Girls)

### **Historical Adventure**

Fast-paced, action-oriented historical novels with heroic protagonists who travel far and wide in their quest for adventure, to fight the enemy, or to face off against nature.

#### A sampling of benchmark authors:

James Clavell (exotic adventure in historical Asia)  
Bernard Cornwell (many locales, best known for military historical fiction)  
C.S. Forester (Napoleonic-era naval adventure)  
George MacDonald Fraser (bawdy adventure/parody featuring antihero Sir Harry Flashman in Victorian times)  
Gary Jennings (exotic adventure in barbarous foreign lands)  
James L. Nelson (naval adventure)  
Patrick O'Brian (Napoleonic-era naval adventure)  
Wilbur Smith (Africa and ancient Egypt)

#### Current examples:

Bernard Cornwell, *The Last Kingdom*, *The Pale Horseman*, and *Lord of the North* (King Alfred vs. the Vikings)  
Conn Iggulden, *Genghis: Birth of an Empire* (Genghis Khan and his quest to conquer the known world)  
Arturo Perez-Reverte, *Captain Alatriste* and *Purity of Blood* (swashbuckling series about Captain Alatriste, fictional 17th century Spanish swordsman)  
Julian Stockwin, *Quarterdeck* (latest in a series of naval adventures, Age of Sail)

### **Historical Thrillers**

Suspenseful stories set in the past that feature intelligent protagonists (usually male) who find themselves in perilous situations, with potential danger always around the corner.

#### A sampling of benchmark authors:

Caleb Carr (serial killers in 19<sup>th</sup> century New York City)  
Ken Follett (World War II)  
Alan Furst (spies in WWII-era Europe)

#### Current examples:

Michael Wallner, *April in Paris* (WWII-era thriller about a Gestapo translator who falls in love with a resistance fighter in occupied Paris)  
Javier Sierra, *The Secret Supper* (historical religious thriller about Da Vinci's *Last Supper*)  
Elizabeth Kostova, *The Historian* (literary thriller, origins of Count Dracula)

### **Literary Historical Novels**

Lyrically written novels that use historical settings, eloquent language, and multi-layered plotlines to convey contemporary themes.

A sampling of benchmark authors. Many also write contemporary fiction.

Tracy Chevalier (relationship between art and life)  
Kathryn Harrison (eroticism, the mapping of the human psyche)  
Thomas Mallon (American history)  
Rose Tremain (atmospheric novels of place and personality)  
Susan Vreeland (the inner lives of artists)

Current examples:

Donald McCaig, *Canaan* (changes wrought by the Civil War in the former Confederacy and out west)  
Robert Hicks, *The Widow of the South* (a real-life Confederate heroine)  
Sarah Dunant, *In the Company of the Courtesan* (escapades of a dwarf and his mistress in Renaissance Italy)  
Jude Morgan, *Passion* (the women in the lives of the Romantic poets)

**Christian Historical Novels**

Novels in which the authors share their own deeply held Christian beliefs via thoughtful stories about characters who struggle to live godly lives in an imperfect world. Most often used to refer to evangelical fiction; also called “inspirational fiction” by publishers.

A sampling of benchmark authors:

Angela Elwell Hunt (many eras; also writes contemporary Christian fiction)  
Gilbert Morris (many eras)  
Tracie Peterson (women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century West)  
Michael Phillips (many eras, most recently the post-Civil War South)  
Francine Rivers (ancient Rome, early America)  
Bodie and Brock Thoene (many eras, emphasis on the ancient/modern Middle East)

Current examples:

Tamera Alexander, *Rekindled* (love lost and found again on a cattle ranch in the West)  
Tricia Goyer, *Dawn of a Thousand Nights* (story of honor, thwarted lovers in Hawaii and the Philippines during WWII)  
Nancy Moser, *Mozart's Sister* (struggles of Mozart's brilliant and talented sister Nannerl to realize her dreams in a man's world)

**“THE OUTER LIMITS”:**

**Time-Slip Novels**

Creatively written novels that help readers imagine that slipping from one time period to another is indeed possible.

A sampling of benchmark authors:

Kage Baker (dryly funny science fiction series about cyborgs who travel to the past on scientific missions)  
Barbara Erskine (reincarnation themes in modern and medieval England)  
Jack Finney (*Time and Again*, modern and 1880s New York City)  
Richard Matheson (for his classic *Bid Time Return*, alternate title *Somewhere in Time*)

Anya Seton (*Green Darkness*, classic reincarnation novel of Tudor and modern England)

Current examples:

Amanda Elyot, *By a Lady* (chick-lit style time-slip novel about a modern actress in Jane Austen's England)

**Alternate History**

Novels that examine alternative possible outcomes for past events, exploring how history may have changed as a result.

A sampling of benchmark authors:

Harry Harrison (also writes other types of science fiction)

Harry Turtledove (major wars throughout history)

Current examples:

Newt Gingrich and William Fortschen, Civil War trilogy: *Gettysburg*, *Grant Comes East*, *Never Call Retreat* (what if the Confederacy won the Battle of Gettysburg?) and *Pearl Harbor* (WWII alternate history)

Stephen Baxter, *Emperor* (alternate history of ancient Rome)

**Historical Fantasy**

Historical novels that contain elements of the fantastic: magic, supernatural powers, mythical creatures, and the like.

A sampling of benchmark authors:

Marion Zimmer Bradley (Arthurian and Roman eras; feminist historical fantasy)

Barry Hughart (eighth-century China)

Rosalind Miles (women in Arthurian legend, feminist themes)

Judith Tarr (medieval fantasy; also wrote traditional historicals and alternate history/fantasy)

Current examples:

Fiona Avery, *The Crown Rose* (a princess of medieval France and the mysterious group who guards the royal family)

Mercedes Lackey, *The Wizard of London* (wizards in WWII-era London)

Juliet Marillier, *The Dark Mirror* (druids in ancient Pictish society)