

REVIEWS

The Art and Craft of Writing Historical Fiction

By James Alexander Thom

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If you were to envision the ideal preparation for a novelist who would write with great insight and vividness about the westward expansion of the fledgling United States—say from the 1770s to the 1830s—you might specify that he or she grow up in the hill country of southern Indiana, the region where, during those decades, crucial battles took place and white settlement surged. (Needless to say, your future novelist could be female or male. For the sake of simplicity, please consider the male pronouns that follow as referring to women as well as men.) You would want your writer-in-training to acquire deep knowledge of the indigenous cultures that were displaced or erased, so that he could write with sympathy about what was lost as well as what was gained as whites laid claim to the land. He should do service as a soldier, preferably in wartime, so that he could understand military life without romanticizing it. By working for a spell as a journalist, he could devel-

op essential research skills and a healthy skepticism about official versions of the truth. Experience as a university professor would train him in the use of libraries and archives. So that he might understand life on the frontier, including its hardships, let him live in a log house, cut and split his own firewood, and learn to use tools that work by muscle power rather than electricity. Let him prefer writing with pen and ink on paper rather than on a computer. Let him relish camping and hiking and river running, so that he could retrace the paths his characters took as they traveled the inland waterways, crossed the Indiana frontier, and explored the wild continent to the west. Above all, let him descend from a long line of raconteurs, so that he might acquire a keen sense of storytelling and a love of American speech.

Add all of those qualities together and you will come up with someone very like James Alexander Thom, one of the pre-eminent historical nov-

elists of our day. He was born and reared in Owen County, Indiana, in the river town of Gosport, to parents who were both physicians. His mother was one of the first female doctors in the state, as much of a pioneer as any of the heroines he has written about. As a child, he kept company with storytellers who conveyed to him a rich sense of familial and regional history. He lives today on a ridge in his native county, at the edge of a forest that harbors a white oak as old as our republic, and he enjoys a view to the west across a valley that still looks, to a squinting eye, much as it might have looked in 1800. Thom helped to build the log home he shares with his wife, Dark Rain Thom, who is a Shawnee elder and tribal historian. She has opened the way for him to spend much time among Indians of numerous tribes, in Canada as well as the United States, learning about their traditions and values and their perspective on the saga of westward settlement. Between his childhood years in Owen County and his return there several decades later, he served as a Marine during the Korean War, worked as a reporter and editor for the *Indianapolis Star* and *Saturday Evening Post*, taught classes in journalism at Indiana University, and traversed North America by road and rail and a pair of robust legs.

Everything about this author is robust—the body with which he splits firewood and carves wooden sculptures, the intelligence he uses to search out and sift the truths about

the past, and the imagination with which he brings that past to life. From *Long Knife* (1979), about the exploits of George Rogers Clark in the Northwest Territory during the Revolutionary War, to *St. Patrick's Battalion* (2006), about the Mexican-American War of 1846, his nine novels (one of them co-authored with his wife) have attracted millions of readers worldwide and two have been made into films. Moreover, he wrote and rewrote all of those thousands of pages long-hand. Only in composing his latest book, *The Art and Craft of Writing Historical Fiction*, he tells us, has he resorted to one of those newfangled, odorless machines with a keyboard and screen.

If you aspire to write historical fiction, if you love reading it, or if you are enamored of straight history and imagine you have nothing to learn from novels, you should sit down with this book and listen to one of the masters of the form. Thom's voice on the page is wry, witty, and wise, and richly informed about history as well as art. Much of this engaging book is devoted to explaining how he acquired the knowledge that has enabled him to write his acclaimed novels, and how anyone who aims to write movingly and accurately about the past must prepare for the work.

The shorthand version of his advice is: research, research, and more research. Thom believes that the serious historical novelist should consult the full range of materials that any good historian would use—published

works, archival collections, letters, journals, census reports, genealogies, period newspapers, and a whole long list more. Having worked as a journalist before turning to fiction, he knows how to delve into sources: “It came as a pleasant surprise to me, when I got busy in the historical genre, that doing research is at least as exciting and fascinating as doing the writing. Sometimes the giant task of finding all the facts you need to know turns into a life adventure” (p. 54).

While recounting some of his own research adventures, he distinguishes between *facts*—which can be documented—and *verisimilitude*—which must be created by drawing on everything that is known about the place, time, and individuals of one’s story. Where historians look into the past from the present, he argues, historical novelists render the past as the present: “[W]hat you want to do is re-create it in full—live, colorful, smelly, noisy, savory, painful, repugnant, scary, all the ways it actually was—and then set your reader down smack in the midst of it” (p. 26). The effect of such rendering is to make “that long-ago moment so vivid, so real, so sensuously complete and immediate that the reader is there, then, looking forward, not just here, now, looking back” (p. 27).

Thom credits his Butler University professor, Dr. Werner Beyer, for teaching him the key to immersing readers in the scene-by-scene unfolding of events: “Write to their senses!”

(p. 43). In order to evoke the sensory richness that saturated past moments—the smells and sounds, tastes and textures, as well as visual impressions—the historical novelist must range beyond documents to visit museums, historic reconstructions, and gatherings of re-enactors. He should explore the places where the events occurred. He should eat the foods, handle the tools, heft the weapons, and try on the clothes appropriate to the time and location.

By turns craft talk and autobiography, this book is also a meditation on the often-strained relations between historians and historical novelists. A remark by the celebrated historian, Stephen Ambrose, to the effect that the “novelist doesn’t have to have facts,” set Thom “thinking about the relationship between historians and historical novelists, about their relative authority and levels of veracity” (pp. 23-24). As he envisions and practices this art, historical fiction must be utterly faithful to documented knowledge about the past, but it must also imagine what cannot be documented: the thoughts and feelings and dialogue of characters, the smells and sounds and textures of a particular place and moment, all the things that make up the lived experience, the *interior* of history.

“To envision the difference between early America and our country as it is today requires a vast, transformative leap of the imagination,” he observes (p. 154). If you wish to see such leaps carried out convinc-