

the part of many that the stories will not be well-researched, that they will be an attempt at merging romance and crime, or that they will just be tedious, because who wants to wade through pages of “literary” writing by an author who really, really wanted to have been born in the 1700s? Besides, it’s rather fluffy, airy stuff, and rather pointless. Who would read it?

I would say that there is much more to historical fiction than that.

For me it was always an escape from the present day. Historical fiction generally tended to be rather like science fiction, I think, in that the authors were re-imagining the periods they wrote about. Of course, all too often there would be anachronisms—a medieval monk who tended to have 20th-century views of justice, for example—but there are gems of storytelling too.

For me, historical writing at its best is some of the best writing you can find. I spend an inordinate amount of time checking the history of the law, making sure that the situations I throw at my characters are authentic, making sure that their religious beliefs and observances are consistent with their period, and ensuring that I have, for example, the right men investigating murders, and that they are doing so for the correct reasons.

It is not always easy. I have used, to pick one example, a Keeper of the King’s Peace. Coroners were administrators, charged with recording details of crimes for taxation and for court cases later. No, it was the Keepers who were the law-enforcers of the 1300s. Created as a balance to help control the largely corrupt Sheriff system, while also restraining Coroners, the Keepers had a warrant to hunt down felons “from hundred to hundred, shire to shire” and then to hold them for justice. They were the true policing force, calling up the *posse comitatus* to help

them when needed.

They were often needed because this was a particularly brutal period. Populations had grown massively in the 1200s, but with the turn of the century there was a famine that affected the whole of Europe. It is reckoned that from 1315 to 1322 between one-third and one-half of the population died of starvation—in the city of Ypres alone, ten percent of the city’s inhabitants died in the month of June 1316. Whole villages were wiped out; those which weren’t were abandoned, and peasants with no other means of support were forced to join together in bands and terrorised the country.

And not only peasants. The wealthy saw rich pickings. Knights like the infamous Gilbert Middleton took to robbing travellers near his land; the Folvilles terrorised their lands, riding out to rob, murder and rape. A weak king constantly threatened by his barons, the dislocation of the populace by famine and disease (the Black Death was soon to strike), and the consequent breakdown of civil order meant that murder increased.

How could anyone not be fascinated by such a period? It was a gift for a writer.

And then, of course, there are other mystery novels. I am guilty of having just finished a story set in the 1920s, a police procedural which uses traumatised soldiers from the First World War as the main characters. Whether police officers or criminals, the Great War, as it was called, led to fascinating characters of greater or lesser strength. As a not-terribly-young man myself, I knew several veterans of that conflict. My uncle Albert will always stay in my mind as the archetypal veteran: a gentleman, quiet, always clad in a waistcoat and tie no matter what the weather, and invariably restrained. He would never talk of the war, just as others wouldn’t. Their experiences had been so

terrible, they could not bring themselves to bring such memories back to mind. They preferred to forget, while honouring those who had fought with them.

For me, the best aspect of historical mysteries is, the writer can look at events of the present day and reinterpret them for a modern audience by giving a perspective through events of the past.

I once received a letter from a reader in America. She had been reading *Outlaws of Ennor*, sixteenth in my Last Templar mystery series, and insisted that her husband should read it. He did, but she noticed that he got stuck. He kept turning the pages back and rereading a section. When she asked him what was the problem, he explained that he, a Vietnam veteran, had reached a passage in which I described the feelings of an old warrior who had been involved in a war atrocity.

Wolves, Castles and Research by Gay Tolt Kinman

In the Beginning

Castle Reiner was the first book I wrote. Set in 1899, starting in London with stops in San Francisco and Los Angeles and ending at Hearst Castle on the California coast. The story was in the gothic tradition—spooky castle, strange goings-on, a small child for whom the heroine is governess, and the father or guardian may or may not be as he appears. Think *Jane Eyre*.

The book was accepted—altogether five times by small publishers. The first one’s husband had a heart attack, so she stopped publishing. The second publisher died. Not much you can do about that! The third, Clocktower, published it online and in trade paper. The cover showed a very gothic castle. Then he

It was too close to home for that American. He went over that passage again and again. His wife was able to talk to him for the first time about his experiences, and she was also, again for the first time, able to tell him what it had been like for her, a young bride, forced to wave goodbye to her husband, not knowing whether she would ever see him again.

My little scene of two or three pages was enough to let them both open up after a quarter century of marriage.

So, my answer to those who doubt the benefit of historicals is, no, it’s not all fluffy and airy stuff. And certainly not all bodice-rippers. If you aren’t sure of historical crime, perhaps you need to read a few more!

Michael Jecks is the author of some fifty novels. He was the founder of *Medieval Murderers*, a past Chairman of the Crime Writers Association, and is the Hon. Secretary of the Detection Club.

went out of business, all amicable, rights returned.

The fourth was Hilliard and Harris, which also published my next two books (*Death in Covent Garden*, and *Death in a Small Town*) in hardback and trade paper. I changed the title of *Castle Reiner* to *Wolf Castle* and marketed it as a Young Adult novel, as the heroine, Lavinia (Vinney) Fergusson Cathcart, was 17. Shawn Reilly Simmons did the covers for all three—spectacular! Then H & H went out of business—amicable, all rights returned, digital copies available for purchase, and best of all, I was able to use the cover of the book featuring a castle which I liked. The fifth publisher, *Mysterious Women*, is still in business and the book is available on Kindle and Amazon in trade paper—and eventually audio!

Research

I read the *London Times* for the first week of October 1899. Then a San Francisco newspaper and the *Los Angeles Times* for the entire month of October. Interesting stuff. Both cities were really small towns with the rich and famous having short news articles about where they were going to be traveling or had just returned from. And the classifieds! That was the best reading. The prices of the day were breathtakingly low. Of course, so were the wages. Then I researched about wolves, lycanthropy, werewolves—stuff like that. Since the castle in the story was Hearst Castle—which hadn't been built in 1899, but no matter—I had to go up to visit it a few times as part of my research.

All in all I decided I was never going to write another historical novel. Too much research!

However—alas—everything I write is

I Guess Faulkner Was Right by Abigail Keam

William Faulkner's line, “The past is never dead. It's not even past,” is one of the most quoted lines in American 20th-century fiction and resonates today in all literature, including historical mysteries.

Does history revolve in circles or undulate in waves? The same patterns keep emerging—the same type of grifters who try to con the gullible, the same type of heroes who risk everything, and those who watch from the sidelines.

I have always been fascinated by history and knew I wanted to write an entertaining mystery series where I could combine fiction with historical fact.

When I began writing my 1930s *Mona Moon* mysteries, I decided to weave real people and events into the story line. I wanted to make those mysteries come alive with both the saints and the scoundrels of the day. After doing

researched. Now I'm working on a book, “The Lido Libretto,” in which a mystery author gets a grant to write a libretto on Lido near Venice. I had to research Lido—although I've been there a few times, how to write a libretto—not much on that; and Mary Magdalene—as the opera is about her. (She was *not* a prostitute!); and German shepherd guard dogs.

The moral is that contemporary stories require background information also—so I haven't escaped research after all!

Gay Tolti Kinman has nine award nominations for her writing, which includes short stories, children's and Y.A. fiction, eight adult mysteries; and short plays—now in a collection of twenty plays, *The Play's the Thing*. Kinman has library and law degrees.

much research, I discovered the 1930s had been politically explosive like the 1960s and even today with many of the same issues still confronting the world. So how does one incorporate themes of social justice, world events, and conflict into a mystery and write a story that is still entertaining and fun to read? Not with a hammer, but with a soft wave of a woman's hand fan.

One way is to give voice to a female protagonist to whom women will relate. The second is not to become “preachy.” My job as a mystery writer is to author an engaging story with facts that enhance the reader's enjoyment of the book—not deter. One thing that helps is that my intrepid champion speaks from the perspective of a gal who needed grit and resolve to survive the harrowing years of the Great Depression. She is my “every woman.”

Enter *Mona Moon*, my American cartographer, who is broke with no prospects in sight. Not good news for a single woman in one of the worst years of the Depression. A man, wearing a Homburg hat, knocks on her tenement door after midnight. She answers with a pistol in hand. The man announces he is a lawyer representing her estranged dead uncle and informs *Mona* that she has inherited the *Moon* family fortune.

With that introduction, I plucked *Mona* from New York City and planted her on a horse farm in Kentucky's Bluegrass where *Mona* discovers that half of her farm hands can barely read or write, her bank refuses to give her credit because she's a woman, and the employees at the *Moon* copper mines are threatening to strike due to low pay. All three concerns were real issues in the 1930s, which caused protests/riots in the dark days of the Depression—lack of educational opportunities, women's economic rights, and workers scraping by on subsistence pay.

Throughout the series, I write about the influential people of the day such as Mary Breckinridge, founder of the Frontier Nursing Service; Gertrude Bell, Far East cartographer and founder of the National Museum of Iraq; Albert “Happy” Chandler, governor of Kentucky and Baseball Commissioner who integrated baseball; Jack Keene, founder of Keeneland Race Course, and many more.

In *Murder Under a Black Moon* (*Mona Moon* # 6) I wanted to introduce an antagonist who was as intelligent and powerful as *Mona*, but contrasted her political and social views. I couldn't think of anyone who fit that bill as well as Alice Roosevelt, daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt. A force in her own right, Alice was witty, provocative, and politically astute. She was one of the most quoted and socially

followed women of her day. To write scenes between Alice and *Mona* sparring with each other was a pure delight. Having such accomplished women disagree on how to hold the fabric of society together and then solve a murder mystery collectively made me giddy with delight. The words just flew from the keyboard. I hardly had to fictionalize much of Alice's dialogue. I used many of her famous quotes in the novel and stayed as true to her real character as possible.

“If you haven't got anything nice to say about anybody, come sit next to me.”

“My father always wanted to be the corpse at every funeral, the bride at every wedding, and the baby at every christening.”

“I have a simple philosophy: Fill what's empty. Empty what's full. Scratch where it itches.”

“My specialty is detached malevolence.”

And by using Alice Roosevelt as a character, I will be able to segue to *Mona* meeting Eleanor Roosevelt, Alice's first cousin, in the next book. I have spent many an hour imagining what those three astute women would discuss over lunch. Another circle.

I believe Faulkner was right about the past. It is never dead, and writers can incorporate the past into their historical mysteries making them richer. If a reader enjoys the mystery and learns something as well, then I am thrilled because we should all be keepers of history. And as we all know from a good mystery, secrets from the past never stay buried. See you between the pages.

Abigail Keam is the award-winning author of thirty novels, including the 1930s *Mona Moon* Mystery Series. Her most recent historical novel is *Murder Under a Black Moon*. She lives on the edge of the Kentucky Palisades and is a beekeeper.