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What is Historical Fiction?

Historical fiction features in books, movies, television, and a number of other media. This kind of fiction involves stories that are set in the past. There are no set rules, but the setting is usually at least fifty years earlier than when the story is written. The setting is a particular period in history and often includes real historical characters. The story's main characters are usually fictional, although the social conditions of the time are presented accurately.

Historical fiction stories usually take place during a significant period in history. In some stories the characters are part of the historic events taking place but in others the events merely serve as the background to the story. The writer is allowed a certain amount of artistic license, but must not deviate from the established historical facts. Stories that do this are classed as alternate history or "What if?" stories.

Settings

Historical fiction stories take place in a definite time and place and these are generally eras that the readers will be familiar with. The world where the story takes place, as well as the actual timeline of events in the story, whether used as part of the plot or just as background, needs to be accurate.

Plausibility

Even though the story is set in a different time period, the reader still needs to believe that the events depicted could have really happened.

Characters

These can be entirely fictional or real people from history. Either way, they still need to be characters the reader can understand and identify with, and also behave in a realistic manner. They also need to behave in a way that's appropriate for the time period.

Plot

As with stories set in the present day, the plot has to make sense, be plausible, and involve a solution to a problem. Historical fiction plots usually feature both fictional and real events.

Description

The description of characters, locations, and events need to be very vivid in historical fiction. Important historical information that the reader may be unfamiliar with also needs to be well explained.

Dialogue

As in stories with contemporary settings, the dialogue of the characters can help us to learn more about them and also move the story along. Dialogue must be broadly in keeping with the era, but not so much that it becomes difficult for the reader to understand. Dialogue should also reflect the knowledge and thoughts of people in that time period.

Anachronisms

In addition to keeping dialogue authentic, anachronisms need to be avoided. Fictional characters in the medieval period or in World War II obvious can't carry cell phones, check their email, or talk about TV shows. However, characters also can't have political views that are not in keeping with their time or social status. The role of women in society was also often very different to today at certain times in the past, for example.

Time Travel, Alternate History, and Historical Fantasy

In addition to the standard definitions of historical fiction, there are some other genres.

Time travel is a very popular genre that is related to historical fiction. In these types of stories, characters from the present day are transported to the past. Although the modern characters have knowledge of events to come and are aware of modern technology, for example, the same rules about the historical setting still need to be observed.

Alternate history is also sometimes referred to as "What if?" stories. These are usually set in a world where historic events either did not occur or unfolded in a different way. Scenarios include Napoleon being killed in battle in 1799, the Confederacy winning the American Civil War, German victory in World War II, and so on.

Historical fantasy involves characters, even real historical figures, in specific time periods, but also features dragons, magic, or other elements of fantasy.

A Final Consideration

It is important to remember that not all novels that are set in the past are classed as historical fiction. *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wuthering Heights*, *David Copperfield*, and *Great Expectations* all take place in the past, but this is also when they were written. Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, and Charles Dickens were not historical novelists but were writing stories set in their own time period.