

Digging Deep - Finding the Stories in History

As a writer and Steilacoom Historical and Museum Association (SHMA) docent, I have been inspired by all the stories that I have been hearing at the museum over all of my almost 16 years of docenting. So, last year, I wrote a short story about a new aspect of Nathaniel Orr's life. Or rather that of a person near to him. It is titled:

"The Photographer"

"What a bricky girl you landed yourself, Orr," the photographer who also was Nathaniel's best man said. "Now, move a bit closer together." 41-year-old Nathaniel laid his arm around his bride's shoulders. Emma Watson, five years younger than he, looked beautiful in her white wedding gown.

"Now, give me a smile," the photographer said, and as they complied, his roll-film Kodak camera started to click away.

When they were finished, Nathaniel said, " Why don't you come over later? We have some nice roasted geoduck breast for dinner."

I'm stopping right here. I see that some of you are appalled because I just read out some balderdash. This is a satire on bad writing, an example of what happens when there is no research. There are eight big mistakes in this short text.

1. What a bricky girl - language anachronism: compliment from the 1920s
2. Nathaniel's best man - an unfounded, unproven, gripped-out-of-the-air claim
3. Emma Watson - sloppy name research: it's Thompson
4. Five years younger than he - sloppy age research: 20 years
5. White wedding gown – look at the photo it was black
6. Smile? – again, take a look at the photo
7. Roll-film Kodak camera - anachronism: first came out in 1888
8. Roasted geoduck breast - geoducks have no breasts for obvious reasons



Unfortunately, I run into sloppy or even missing research a lot when reading historical fiction or fiction that includes historical bits. It happens when people are too cock-sure that they have all their facts right without getting quick reassurance. And research is so easy these days. We don't even have to go to a library or order a book – online media help us explore the most outlandish topics in detail.

The long and short of it is: If you want to be taken serious as an author and if your story is to be taken seriously, you have to research facts. And sometimes you have to dig really deep for them. As in traveling. Or in talking to eye witnesses if recent facts are involved.

I'm pretty sure | have rehabilitated myself as a serious author once more after I have made clear what the purpose of this fake short story beginning was.

So, what is the connection between history and stories?

First of all, history is a collection of stories that are mostly about

territories, people, events, and inventions. This might sound simplified, but that is why we end up with learning names and numbers in school. It's also the reason why history lessons are often dreadfully boring unless you happen to have a teacher who is able to breathe life into the names. And they have researched and put themselves into the shoes of the people they tell you about. The best might even enable their students to do the same. I had a teacher who made us imagine we were Cesar and Cleopatra or a medieval lord and had us make decisions for specific situations. THAT is when history comes alive.

Obviously, I love history. Otherwise, I wouldn't have become involved with SHMA (Steilacoom Historical Museum Association). And I wouldn't write historical fiction and fiction that includes history. So, what comes first, the story or history? I cannot generalize this.

My husband used to commute to Renton some years ago. As a linguist, I was baffled by the name. It had no reasonable etymology. It didn't describe the traits of the town. Not like Steilacoom as a place of pink flowers or the very obvious Lakewood. So, I looked it up. It was called for a Captain William Renton. I could have stopped right there. But I wanted to know whether was the founder of the town.

He wasn't. Now, THAT roused my curiosity. I checked Wikipedia. The town was already in existence when it was named to honor that captain. So, he must have been more than just a wealthy lumberman and seafarer; he must have been valiant. I searched the internet high and low for pictures; I bought history books and read up on him whatever I could find. There were a lot of holes in the biography, but the over-all picture was that of a clever businessman with the needs of his employees in his mind. A magnate and a philanthropist, if you will. And very colorful, as well. The stuff movies are made of. Movies?

That was when I grew the idea of creating pieces a fake movie script which became an integral part of my Wycliff novel Major Musings. A Hollywood movie is produced in my fictional town of Wycliff. Another very history-heavy Wycliff novel is Greener Grass. This one was NOT inspired by history but by a radio program on competition and jealousy. The grass is always greener on the other side - we all know this saying. But how does it become connected with history?

Here, Steilacoom was inspiring with the marker for the log house down near Pioneer Orchard Park. What if such log house remnants were found on the border of two properties? Now, my Wycliff novels are contemporary - so I had to connect the present with a past where there still were log houses. I created two families of different backgrounds who sort of inherit that log house on their property borders. I started with the first settlement, researched what events would have jarred people in the area. What different reactions they would have had. As in choosing sides during the Civil War. And what impact that had on personal relationships. The book leads up to 9/11 which becomes the starting point of the book - one of the properties gets sold to one of the characters I created in the second Wycliff novel, Wordless Wishes.

There are tidbits that I collect and that I already used, such as the mail brides who were brought to the Puget Sound region because there was a lack of marriable women at one time. Or the expulsion of the Chinese from Tacoma, which ends up one of my Wycliff characters with a Chinese washer woman in Haunted Homes.

There tidbits that I collect and that may or may not feature in future books. The other day, I read a history book by Karla Stover; one fact she researched is about a cattle thief who fled a mob to Steilacoom where he hid in a saloon. He finally surrendered and was shot in the street where he lay bleeding to death for two hours. Another fact is that some tap water in Tacoma was alive with all kinds of tiny creatures back in the day.

The one thing of importance in all these cases is that I have to have the historical facts right. Only then can I build a story around them. Otherwise, you might feel that I'm not taking you seriously. That I don't care enough. That I don't go the extra-mile to provide you with rock-hard facts. If my historical numbers, names, and inventions are not correct, why should you bother with the fiction I weave around it?! You'd feel disappointed already if the reality part is already flawed.

Some of you might be thinking of writing a book yourselves. Maybe an autobiography or a memoir. Now, there's the hook. The history it involves is still current. Even if you are writing about your own life, you will have to do some serious research.

So, get the dates right. Double and triple check!

Make sure that you don't tell stories or secrets that might end you up in a law suit. If in doubt, ask a lawyer.

And finally, there might be people whom you portray in your book. See to it that you spell their names correctly. A single slip will end others up with failing researches.

Research of facts, of history past or in the making is the spine of anybody's story. Anything printed or online is available for a very long time. If you get names and dates wrong, it's YOUR credibility that is on the line.

To see a full list of her novels, visit her website:

<https://susannebaconauthor.com/>

