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Hi! Welcome to my presentation on historical fiction!

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Let's start with what is Historical Fiction?

Well Saricks states that "Historical fiction transports readers to the past, thereby letting them witness what has transpired in our global family timeline... "[Readers] read to learn about a particular setting in a manner more enriching and entertaining to them than a biography or narrative history; to spend hours immersed in an era they find compelling; or to simply, and wonderfully, do a bit of armchair time traveling" (Wyatt & Saricks, 2019, p.169).

Traditionally, historical fiction stories are written by authors who were born some time after the events they are depicting, though if we're suggesting a book to a patron, we may not have time to verify that the author was born after the time period the book is portraying. It's more a rule of thumb when classifying a book - for example, *Pride and Prejudice* would not be considered Historical Fiction even though it is set in the past as Jane Austen was writing about the time period she was living in.

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Let's get into a brief history!

First, there wasn't really a start to the genre as there has always been some form of historical storytelling for as long as people have been telling stories - heroes and big moments in history have always been of interest when telling stories.

Our modern understanding of what a historical novel is comes from Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* published in 1814, which tells the story of the 1754 **[JAH-KAH-BITE]** Jacobite rebellion. There's been a few booms in historical fiction popularity, particularly in the 1880's and 1890's, during the Great Depression, and in the 1960's, 1970's, and 1990's. The popularity spikes tend to happen around marks of historical significance, such as a longing for the past during the Great Depression, and the centennial of the Civil War and U.S. bicentennial (1960's and 1970's), and the turn of the century (1880's, 1890's, 1990's).

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In terms of current trends for historical fiction, we're seeing a loosening of parameters (so less historically rigid and with more experimenting with form), more and more historical fiction centered in World War II, more female narrators, and more diverse authors and stories - we're moving away from a very euro-centric narrative for historical fiction, which is great because the sub genres of historical fiction are a nightmare of euro-centric tales with little focus on naming stories outside of that.

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Alright, let's look at characteristics of historical fiction.

### Frame/setting

- Worldbuilding is the most important component of historical fiction.
  - it must be historically accurate: the geography, the customs, culture, society, events must be firmly anchored in the world the author is building and in reality.
- The setting of historical fiction will vary throughout all of time BUT
- the setting must be real and it must be on earth. If the reader wishes to learn more about an actual historical setting, they should be able to use context from a historical fiction novel to help them understand what really happened.

### Tone

- Just as the setting throughout time can vary, so can the tone. Historical fiction can be anything from comedic to somber depending on the story it is telling.
- The tone can be a major contributor to the appeal - it is meant to help the reader with immersion and to make the setting feel more real. Details of events come to life through the tone so if you are reading about a starving child living through a war, you probably don't want a comedic narrator making light of the situation.

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### Storyline

- The storyline of historical fiction works to explain and offer context to help the reader link character motivations and actions to what is happening in the world around them.
- A Saricks' quote I think that really captures this idea is, "It is one thing to read about the social, religious, and political motivations behind the Salem witch trials; it is quite another to follow the frenzy of accusation, defense, and judgement, to witness the events sweeping through the desperate and divided community and to mark each hanging as it occurs" (p.172).
- The storyline will vary depending on the events the story explores, like whether the focus is on a specific event, such as the sinking of the Titanic, or over a greater expanse of time, such as Ken Follett's *The Pillars of the Earth*, which follows the events surrounding the creation of a cathedral over 50 years.

### Characterization

- Saricks notes that "Characters underpin every historical event..." which makes them the vehicle through which the story unfolds.
- It's common to fictionalize real people as the main character, create new characters to observe the events unfolding from an outside perspective, or do a combination of both - any is fine so long as it fits with the history that the story is exploring.
- Characters are dimensional and are meant to feel realistic
- They are not meant to be observed but rather lived through, to help the reader understand what is happening at this point in history.

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### Language/style

- Varies wildly due to the wide variety of settings
- Authentic word choice, thy, thine, ect can be alienating, but the lack of such language when appropriate can also take a reader out of the story.
- Modern phrasing or language may be welcome to some readers, but again can take others out of the story.
- Saricks recommends inviting readers to look at the first couple of pages of a historical fiction novel to help decide if the language used works for them
- Style on the other hand is often the same between historical fiction novels. Often referred to as literary historical fiction, the style is lyrical, deftly constructed, and extremely clear.
- The form the story may take can vary, as seen in fictional diaries and memoirs, having the time frame bounce between current day and the past (like a narrator telling their life story), or having time jumps to move the story forward - which takes us into pacing!

### Pacing

- Historical fiction is often longer and is very rarely fast paced
- The pacing is meant to foster engagement and immersion for the reader to really sink into the events as they unfold
- Since there is so much focus on worldbuilding and establishing the setting and historical details, the pacing is not typically the reason readers pick up a historical fiction book
- Tension can be created from the audience already knowing the outcome of the real-life event

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So here are some popular authors. One thing to note is that the world of historical fiction is slowly moving to be more diverse, but most of the well known authors are white men. So here are mostly not those.

- **[YANG-SHE CHEW]** Yangsze Choo, *The Ghost Bride* (historical fantasy, Li Lan, the daughter of a genteel but bankrupt family, has few prospects. But fate intervenes when she receives an unusual proposal from the wealthy and powerful Lim family. They want her to become a ghost bride for the family's only son, who recently died under mysterious circumstances. Rarely practiced, traditional ghost marriages are used to placate restless spirits. Such a union would guarantee Li Lan a home for the rest of her days, but at a terrible price.)
- **[YA JAW-SEE]** Yaa Gyasi, *Homegoing* (A novel traces three hundred years in Ghana and along the way paints a portrait of the forces that shape families and nations)
- **[OWL]** Jean M. Auel, *The Clan of the Cave Bear* (Through Jean M. Auel's magnificent storytelling we are taken back to the dawn of modern humans, and with a girl named Ayla we are swept up in the harsh and beautiful Ice Age world they shared with the ones who called themselves the Clan of the Cave Bear.)
- Geraldine Brooks (who is the first author to pop up when you look up historical fiction authors, *March*, Acclaimed author Geraldine Brooks gives us the story of the absent father from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*—and conjures a world of brutality, stubborn courage and transcendent love. An idealistic abolitionist, March has gone as chaplain to serve the Union cause. But the war tests his faith not only in the Union—which is also capable of barbarism and racism—but in himself.)
- Amor Towles, *A Gentleman in Moscow* (A Gentleman in Moscow immerses us in another elegantly drawn era with the story of Count Alexander Rostov. When, in 1922, he is deemed an unrepentant aristocrat by a Bolshevik tribunal, the count is sentenced to house arrest in the Metropol, a grand hotel across the street from the Kremlin)

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Ok on to subgenres.

Subgenres for historical fiction are kind of weird and are classified in a variety of ways, kind of like sub-subgenres. There are subjects, but also time periods, but also places. So you could be looking for a war book, but then you'll need to narrow it down to which war, taking place where, and taking place when. I've organized it based primarily off of the classifications of Jennifer S. Baker's *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Historical Fiction*, but I do want you all to be aware that the subgenres of historical fiction are weird and not always called the same thing and these are brief overviews because there are a lot. Also, these are examples and I don't have answers for these combinations.

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Subgenre: historical fiction based on time period

Prehistoric had its heyday in the 1980's and isn't currently being widely published. Prehistoric titles take place at the very beginning of civilization and the appeal is around how humans figure

who they are as a species. Very popular in this subgenre is Jean M. Auel [OWL] and the *Earth's Children* series, which looks at the emergence of "modern humans."

Ancient civilizations/before the common era: these novels are set in ancient times such as Greece, Egypt, and Rome or in Biblical times. Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* and Madeleine Miller's *The Song of Achilles*

The Middle Ages (6th-14th century): big highlights of these novel are the societal changes that happened during this period - crusades, violence, fall of the Roman empire, religious persecution

The Renaissance: 15th and 16th centuries: world is on the edge of big change, new art, very eurocentric

Age of Enlightenment: 17th and 18th centuries: focuses more on bigger picture like the French Revolution instead of singular stories

Nineteenth century: Collapse and rise of empires, stories that surround conquest

Twentieth century: lots of war stories, we start to see more diverse works

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Historical fiction based on place

Africa: themes include colonialism, race, economic dominance, and political upheaval

Asia and the Middle East: desire for autonomy, revolution. *The Sleeping Dictionary* by Sujata Massey centers on orphaned Kamala whose struggle for independence mirrors India's struggle for independence against colonial rule

Australia: nature, exploitation

Europe: wide variety of themes, based on time period

North America: themes of wilderness and nature, final frontier and Western stuff

South and Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean: political turmoil, lyrical

Asia, Australia, Africa (basically anyone not Euro-centric): not finely defined, but has novels that explore the histories of the many, many civilizations that make up the entire rest of the world  
Some

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Historical fiction based on subject

American Revolutionary War

American Civil War

World War II

The Vietnam War

Witchcraft

Pirate/Nautical times

The Great Depression

History of Medicine

History of Science

Regional historical fiction (meaning historical fiction specific to a smaller area, like *LaRose* by Louise Erdrich, which is set in North Dakota and has a story specific to that area).

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Time travel/time slips: these books are ones where a character from either modern times or another time, falls back in time somehow and then has to learn how to exist in the past. An example of this is *Outlander* by Diana Gabaldon. **[GAB-uhl-dohn]**

Biographical historical fiction: the character is the central piece of the story and was a real figure. Biographical historical fiction breathes life into a historical figure - authors will have done a great amount of historical research and while not all of the details will be accurate, they will correctly represent the time period. An example of this is *The Last Empress* by Anchee Min, which tells the story of Empress Dowager Cixi **[DOWGER C-TCHE]**(referred to as Empress Orchid), from her rise to power as Empress of China, until her death).

Blends

Historical fiction often blends with other genres. *A Golden Age* by Tahmima Anam is a horror historical fiction novel about women's struggles during the Bangladesh War of Independence. *The Cassandra* by Sharma Shields is a sci-fi/fantasy historical fiction novel using Greek myth to look at the creation of the atomic bombs during World War II.

### **Slide 14 - awards**

Society of American Historians Prize for Historical Fiction, formerly known as the James Fenimore Cooper Prize. This prize is awarded biennially in odd-numbered years for a book of historical fiction on an American subject that makes a significant contribution to historical understanding, portrays authentically the people and events of the historical past, and displays

skills in narrative construction and prose style. 2021's winner is *Conjure Women* by Afia Atakora.

Langum Prize: "A prize to encourage and reward excellent American historical fiction... in our effort to make the rich history of America accessible to the educated general reader. The David J. Langum, Sr. Prize in American Historical Fiction is offered annually to the best book in American historical fiction that is both excellent fiction and excellent history." 2019's winner was Mark Barr's *Watershed*.

Michael Shaara Award: "Excellence in Civil War Fiction is an annual literary award awarded to the writer of a work of fiction related to the American Civil War." The last award was in 2014, *Nostalgia: A Novel* by Dennis McFarland

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael\\_Shaara\\_Award\\_for\\_Excellence\\_in\\_Civil\\_War\\_Fiction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Shaara_Award_for_Excellence_in_Civil_War_Fiction)

The Reading List: "The Reading List seeks to highlight outstanding genre fiction that merit special attention by general adult readers and the librarians who work with them." the 2021 winner is "*Conjure Women: A Novel*" by Afia Atakora

<https://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/awards/284/apply#:~:text=About%20the%20The%20Reading%20List,librarians%20who%20work%20with%20them>

<https://www.ala.org/news/member-news/2021/02/2021-reading-list-years-best-genre-fiction-adult-readers>

Walter Scott Prize: "The Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction is one of the most prestigious literary prizes in the world. The Prize celebrates quality, innovation and ambition of writing , and is open to books first published in the previous year in the UK, Ireland or the Commonwealth."

<https://www.walterscottprize.co.uk/about-the-prize/> Hilary Mantel has won the 2021 Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction for *The Mirror and the Light*

## **Slide 15 - resources**

- The Readers' Advisory Guide to Historical Fiction by Jennifer S. Baker
- Historical Fiction I and II: A Guide to the Genre by Sarah L. Johnson
- Read on Historical Fiction: Reading List for Every Taste by Brad Hooper

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[HistoricalNovel.info](http://historicalnovel.info): in-depth bibliography of historical novels created by Margaret Donsbach. (historical fiction writer)

[The Historical Novel Society](http://thehistoricalnovelsociety.org): Features book reviews, interviews, articles, upcoming books, and links to author's websites.

## **Slide 17 - Events**

Club Book is a program of the (MELSA) and is coordinated by Library Strategies. While this isn't solely historical fiction, they often feature historical fiction novels and will include interviews with the authors.

Events through MN publishing company History Through Fiction. Tomorrow, there will be an event called "What's New in Historical Fiction" "Discover what's new in historical fiction! Join History Through Fiction for a special author panel featuring historical novelists with new and upcoming titles."

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Alright, time for the Book Talk!

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Last Night at the Telegraph Club by Malinda Lo (Jan 2021)

Set in 1954, Last Night at the Telegraph Club follows 17 year old Lily Hu, an American born daughter of Chinese immigrants. Lily has always felt out of place amongst her peers, fascinated by rocket science and hiding her budding attraction to women. After finding an ad for the Telegraph Club, a lesbian bar, Lily finds herself growing closer to her classmate Kathleen and struggles to balance her loyalty to her family and her secret desire for something more. Set during the wave of McCarthyism, Last Night at the Telegraph Club tells a story of young romance set amongst a roiling sociopolitical period that threatens to rock the very foundation of Lily Hu's world.

- Slow build that intertwines intense world-building and historical fact to lead the reader through the coming-of-age of the protagonist.

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The Mercies by Kiran [KEERAN] Millwood Hargrave (Feb 2020)

Based on the true events of the 1621 witch trials and Vardø [Var-Dah] storm, The Mercies follows Maren Magnusdatter, a young woman living in the aftermath of a storm that killed nearly all the men of her small Norwegian fishing village. As the women of the village find their way, the arrival of a witch-hunter and his young wife threatens to upturn and destroy all that the women have built in the aftermath of tragedy. While the witch-finder begins a brutal examination of the village, Maren finds herself becoming close to Ursula, the mistreated wife of the witch-finder. "Hargrave's tale offers a feminist take on a horrific moment in history with its focus on the subjugation of women, superstition in isolated locations, and brutality in the name of religion" (Publisher's Weekly).



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The Night Watchman by Louise Erdrich (Mar 2020)

When long-held treaties between Native American nations and the federal government are threatened by a bill that will effectively strip Native Americans of their land, rights, and identity in 1953, Thomas Wazhushk [**Waa-JUSHK**], a night watchman and member of Chippewa Council, spends his days finding ways to help his tribe fight back and his nights patrolling a factory near Turtle Mountain where he has a chance to catch his breath. His niece, Patrice, attempts to strike out on her own to find her long-gone older sister. The heart of the story revolves around the people living at Turtle Mountain more so than an intense political drama. The story slowly unfolds and keeps its characters at the heart of the tale.

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Conjure Women by [**Afia ATA-KORE-A**] Afia Atakora (Mar 2020)

Exploring the legacy of a Southern plantation both before and after the Civil War, *Conjure Women* tells the intertwining stories of three women: Miss May Belle, her daughter Rue, and Varina, the daughter of their former slavemaster. Rue follows in the footsteps of her mother and acts as the midwife and healer for the inhabitants of the former plantation's freedmen and faces concerns of witchcraft following the birth of a strange child in the community. Moving throughout time, *Conjure Women* weaves a tale of the connection and bonds between these three women, their desires for the future, and how far they'll go to protect the things they love.

- Heavy world-building with lyrical words that tell a story where the characters are very much at the heart of the story.

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*A Cruelty Special to Our Species* by Emily [**CHUNG-MIN**] Jungmin Yoon (Sep 2018)

I wanted to include this collection in this presentation to really highlight how varied historical fiction can be and how the genre is evolving from more rigid historical fact to exploring the past in new and engaging ways.

If you are not aware, the Korean "comfort women" are women and girls kidnapped into sexual slavery before and during World War II by the Japanese Imperial Army. "Comfort women" is a loose translation for the Japanese euphemism used, which basically means prostitute.

Comfort women were not just Korean, but the majority of them were Korean (to our estimates, 50-80%). There were an estimated 50,000 to 200,000 comfort women in total, though we are still not entirely sure of the actual numbers due to the destruction of official records and the women's

bodies. The original propose of "comfort houses" were meant to lower wartime rape though this obviously didn't work considering the kidnapping and forced imprisonment of the women. Comfort women were brutalized, murdered, and tormented. In Korea, the first former comfort woman, Kim Hak-sun, came forward in 1991 to publically tell her story.

Yoon seeks to amplify the voices of the Korean "comfort women" through her compelling poems that investigate the horrors the former comfort women experienced as survivors of sexual slavery and use that understanding to highlight the violence that Korean women in America still experience today. Yoon notes that her poetry "[S]erve[s] to amplify and speak these women's stories, not speak for them."

Alright, let's look at characteristics of historical fiction.

Frame/setting: in terms of world-building, the collection takes place in four parts and builds vivid imagery through descriptions of the testimonies of the former comfort women, confessions of their rapists, and firmly anchors the poems in the real world

Tone: the tone of this work is more melancholy and pained, fitting for the subject matter. Like previously mentioned, the tone of the story needs to match the subject matter.

Storyline and characterization: Part two: The Testimonies give voice to each "character" to help connect the reader to each personal story and offer context to help link what is happening in the world to what is happening in the story. The "characters" are dimensional and feel realistic as they take us through what they went through. **(read section)**

Language/style: obvious style and language here is specific, with modern phrasing used to help contextualize more period accurate moments in the Testimonials and the Confessions. It is lyrical, much like how most of historical fiction will be and what is happening happens clearly - metaphors are minimal.

Pacing: is slow as it takes us through history and the tension is very much created from prior knowledge of the real-life events that occurred.

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### Questions

- "Readers turn to the past, in fiction and in fact, to understand the broad sweep of narrative that has formed the world as we know it." Historical fiction will exist as long as storytelling does and I'm excited to see how the genre will continue to evolve and how authors will find new ways to tell tales of the past.

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### References