

Info-Hunting for Fiction

Info-hunting for fiction, particularly a novel, begins from the question: Why am I writing this story as fiction? Why will fiction make it a better treatment of the subject than non-fiction? A good reason might be “the subject intrigued me.” But so many subjects intrigue. Why this one and why as fiction? How should you decide how to spend the next 3-4 years of your life?

My last novel, *The Tiger Claw* is a work of biographical fiction that tells the story of Noor Inayat Khan, a Sufi Muslim woman who searches for her beloved through wartime France. It needed to be told as fiction because the non-fiction available on the subject was insufficient, contradictory or physically impossible. Dead-end areas could be illuminated by educated speculation and imagination. Imagination and research could add to the already existing sum of knowledge on the subject.

Sourcing the text

Compare what you know to your vision of what the plot requires. List the information you need. In many cases, especially if you're middle class and insulated from problems of food, clothing and shelter, you may have the empathy to write the story, but not the understanding.

Sourcing is not a one-time act, but an ongoing activity. It took half my time in the four years I spent writing *The Tiger Claw*. At ShaunaSinghBaldwin.com, you can see the resulting bibliography .

Your bibliography is important because it makes the copyediting stage easier. A good copy editor will be a "fact checker" for fiction. Use pencil or post-its to index your books as you read, so you can find the material again. Collect bibliographies prepared by librarians and other writers on topics that I may need in the future.

Sources of information

1. **Primary/secondary research.** A novelist is often faced with the opportunity to become a historian, to pursue source documents and build the narrative on them. Several writer friends have been lost in this swamp -- the fiction languished and was killed by the facts. They say they will get back to their novels some day. I'm a major consumer of history, though not a historian. I search for old editions of history books and compare how stories have mutated over time, what information has been suppressed/deleted in various editions. And I ask myself why. I may not come up with the right answer, but questioning the silences is where I find motivations, plot turns and sometimes whole stories.
2. **The Net.** Beware the net. Ask yourself who is paying for the web site before you quote. What is the site's political agenda. The same standards of scepticism apply on the net as in print, and higher. When researching from the net, print and file rather than collect URLs, as web sites come and go. See List of helpful sites below.

3. **Library.** Be nice to your local librarians. Hug them, learn from them. Show up at library events. Sign petitions to save their funding. Use Interlibrary Loan -- it's the most amazing resource and can save you a lot of money. Libraries subscribe to *Facts on File* and other expensive databases. These should be your first stop for collecting articles.

4. **Interviews:** Need an expert? Begin from your local university. Need life experience? Begin from your elders. People, especially older people, are so very willing to be interviewed. If you gain access, be careful:

- a. Life stories are each person's work of art. People who tell you their life stories entrust you with their lives and legacies. Use a voice-recorder. Take notes while recording. Be respectful while asking questions about sensitive issues and difficult times. Request permission to use material. Use the information sensitively.
- b. Sometimes you need to interview someone you dislike. Quote exactly, do not editorialize. Let the material speak for itself. Consider a point of view shift that will tell the story. For example, while researching *What the Body Remembers*, I was told a story about a man who mistakenly wore a nightgown to a wedding. The person who told it was the one who laughed at the "fool." So I changed the point of view to that of the (poor, uneducated) man who wore the nightgown.

An InfoHunter's List of Helpful Web Sites/Listserves

- FactsonFile.com
- Historyworld.net
- Wikipedia.com
- www.NYTimes.com
- Time.com (archive issues now available)
- BBC.com (excellent overview chronologies)
- CBC.com (excellent overview chronologies/ IN-DEPTH articles are invaluable)
- <http://www.gutenberg.org> (full text of classics and a great source of ebooks - don't quote without it)
- HistoricalNovelSociety.org
- www.foodtimeline.org
- Bookfinder.com (OOP books. Includes Abe Books, but has a global reach).
- Teach12.com – The Teaching Company. Excellent for quick study - Western civilization only.
- Web sites of those with opposing views.
- Google Answers. When you need an answer on deadline for a m/s, this is a great resource. Expect to pay.
- Amazon.ca, Amazon.UK – .de, .fr etc.
- Audible.com (carries NPR shows for download).
- <http://aom.giss.nasa.gov/moonloc.html> (Moonrise/moonset)
- www.emedicine.com
- <http://www.cdc.gov/>
- <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?db=PubMed>
- <http://content.nejm.org/>
- www.clinicaltrials.gov
- www.clinicaltrials.gov
- <http://www.fpnotebook.com/HEM1.htm>
- www.psych.org

Developing Chronologies

Stories are more interesting than real life because of the management of time, but how do you begin managing time? Particularly for a novel, and even for many short stories, you need to create:

- Event Chronologies
- Character Chronologies

This is fundamental research that a realist fiction writer ignores at his/her peril -- anachronisms can be the easiest route to loss of trust in a writer. Even when you think you remember events because you lived through them, you need to check chronology. We misremember things. Notice that printed chronologies are developed with political agendas - we edit events we don't want to emphasize. For instance, the *2001 Michelin Guide to France* presents a chronology of French history with a one line entry for WWII (despite the fact that their largest number of tourists in that year were Americans on nostalgia trips over WWII events in France). Develop your own chronology document for every story, even if it's only a page.

One of our major problems is that many chronologies emphasize American events, so if you're writing a work set anywhere else in the world, you will need to verify with historians.

Collecting language: It jars me when I'm reading a story whose writer uses a word that wasn't in the vocabulary at the time of the tale. I'd like to loan such a writer my etymology dictionaries or *English Through the Ages* by William Brohaugh (1997) that tells me for instance, that the word DNA was in use by 1940 in the USA. If you don't want to get caught showing an item like Reddiwhip which was invented in 1947 in a scene taking place in 1945, refer to Food history timelines for the USA at www.foodtimeline.org. The only problem: they won't tell you when the Nanaimo bar was invented and maybe your tale takes place in Canada.

And what about Jargon dictionaries? I used to collect them till they became common on the web. But be very careful using jargon in dialogue.

Geographical research: Google Earth and travel sites can provide a tremendous amount of preliminary information, but actual travel gives you the right details for all five senses and metaphors that characters from that locale might use. Net and travel articles cannot give you a sense of distances to answer questions like: How long would it take a character to travel from x to y? Think of yourself as being on the lookout for interesting places, just like a movie location scout. And if you just can't afford to go there, take a walking tour online or buy a walking tour guide.

And lastly, when is it time to stop researching and start writing? Try this guideline: "when your spouse or significant other begins to cry."

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