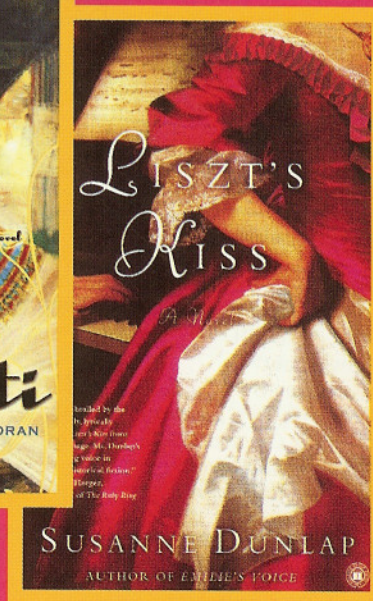
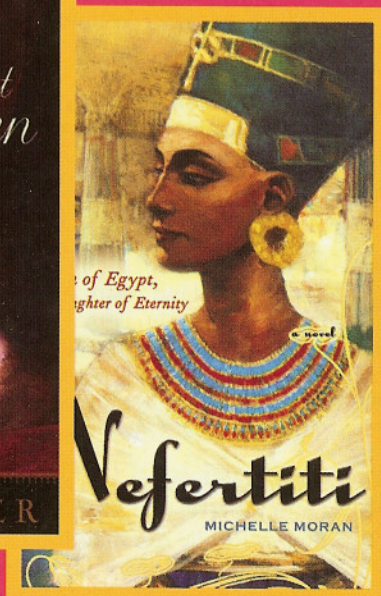
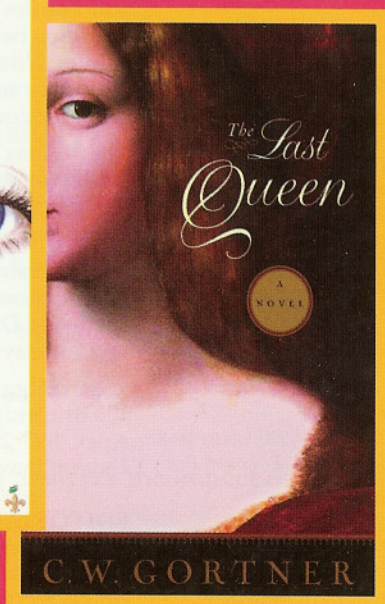
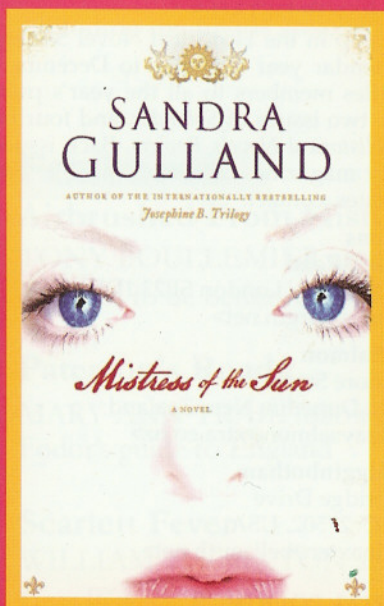


SOLANDER

The Magazine of the Historical Novel Society



Writing Women Back into History

Following an 18th century Fodor's guide

**What's underneath those kilts?
(the lure of Scottish romance)**

Michael Jecks
Margaret Cezair-Thompson
Nicola Morgan

**Historical Fiction Blogs:
Who, What & Why**



A number of readers, both historical romance fans and “straight” historical fiction fans, cite Diana Gabaldon, bestselling author of the *Outlander* historical fiction series, as a favorite author and her hero, Jamie Fraser, as the Highlander who stands above all other Highlanders. Gabaldon says, “I

think people read historical fiction for any of a number of reasons: escape, education, and entertainment being the Big Three. But people read other kinds of fiction for these reasons, too. However, in addition to these factors, I think people read historical fiction as a means of establishing a cultural context for themselves. It’s a way of checking our own progress, achievements, attitudes against those of our ancestors or forefathers. All good fiction has this reflective quality, I think; wherein we look into the book as in a mirror, and discover the shape of our own nature and longings. Historical fiction makes this reflection more explicit, though; any good historical novel will make the reader consciously contrast Now with Then, and thus allow us to ask ourselves: How have we done? Are we better or worse than those who came before? Have we kept faith with the past? Who are we, in the context of history? A good novel doesn’t give you the answers to these questions, of course – but it lets you find them.”

Wendell adds, “A Scottish historical done right has so many layers that can enhance the story from so many different angles. If you only had one sense from which to experience Scottish history, there’s still plenty to learn about, and that richness can create a real feast of a story. The appeal certainly rests in the number of concepts that resonate with modern audiences – it’s a culture and period in history that explores questions of family, identity, pride, bravery, and rebellion.”

And perhaps the kilt helps, too. This brings us to the question that nagged us at the outset: What is under those kilts? Here, at least, are two answers for you:

Ranney: “That would be peeking.”

Greiman: “Trouble.”

Notes

1. http://www.rwanational.org/cs/the_romance_genre/romance_literature_statistics/readership_statistics.
2. Ibid.
3. <http://teachmetonight.blogspot.com/>
4. <http://lynnirwinstewart.yuku.com/>
5. Fiona MacGregor, “The Greatest Work of Fiction?” *The Scotsman*, February 12, 2008.
6. <http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/>

Susan Higginbotham has published two historical novels, The Traitor’s Wife: A Novel of the Reign of Edward II and Hugh and Bess: A Love Story. She has never been to Scotland, but is quite fond of her cairn terrier, Boswell.

Mired in Historical Blogs

KAREN MERCURY *investigates historical fiction blogs.*

A bloggone lonesome town

With the ever-expanding proliferation and accessibility of blogs, and the ease in this Facebook and Myspace world with which they may be created, it has become increasingly difficult to sift through the mire to find sites of interest to a reader of historical fiction. Since Jorn Barger coined the term “weblog” in 1997, blogging has by its inherently dynamic nature evolved from something for only specialized geeks into one of the mightiest and most flexible networking and idea-sharing mechanisms of the Internet.

While Barger may not have imagined the millions of us who daily seek information on cute puppies, catapulting squirrels, or a timeline of the mullet hairstyle, reality evolves from need, and there was evidently leftover room for a new preponderance of blogs related to historical fiction. By the time Merriam-Webster proclaimed “blog” the Word of the Year in 2004, we were irredeemably in love with the concept of posting, discussing, and sharing ideas in a cohesive format. Everyone likes to be heard.

Bloggedly dogging

Like a Victorian scrapbooker of poems, diary entries, and pressed flowers, Jo Beverly of “**Word Wenches**” now does it online. She enjoys sharing “fascinating tidbits that don’t fit into my books.” “Word Wenches” is a fun blog that she shares with like-minded author friends, yet they also discuss complex subjects with readers. While Mary Jo Putney, a fellow Wench of Beverly’s who likes the group effort with six other authors, began blogging in the hopes of selling a few more books – the original and most basic intention of most author blogs – she likes “being able to write about anything from George MacDonald Fraser to the Myers-Briggs test to the history of the spice trade.” Another member, Patricia Rice, adds, “In blogging together, the Wenches hope to widen their audience of readers and give new respect to the variety and quality of historical romance in today’s market.”

Like Turkana elder tribesmen around their fires (who actually still do this nowadays), it’s a natural proclivity to want to chew the fat in a casual setting, to toss out ideas and see what sticks, to get feedback, or simply to hear the opinions of others. To heartily agree with another human is one of the basic joys in life, and to thoroughly disagree, one of our basic rights. Carla Nayland, (“**Carla Nayland Historical Fiction**”) welcomes discussing historical fiction with people on the other side of the world. Her favorite feature is the comment section designed for connecting people. “Blogs are what the writers make them, which means there’s a tremendous variety of style and content, from the chatty to the academic. I’ve extended my historical knowledge and interests by reading other people’s blogs, and I hope my visitors can say the same of mine.” Sarah Johnson of “**Reading the Past**” began her blog in March of 2006 with the desire to connect with other avid historical fiction readers. “At the time, some of the most interesting and important conversations about books and reading were taking place on blogs.” Since Johnson lives in a rural area devoid of many historical fiction readers, her blog helps her feel connected to a larger community. Now she’s become virtual friends with many other bloggers who form a core group.

Feeling united is especially important in an industry that has become increasingly isolated. Between job relocations, a burgeoning reliance on electronic communications, and telecommuting, the sense that we're not alone has become an invaluable bonus in our lives.

The flexibility and freedom to discuss any topic under the sun is important to most bloggers. Outside of the intrinsic confines of a historical novel, where it would be burdensome and awkward to drop a huge "information dump" of knowledge upon a hapless reader, blogs offer the latitude to delve into a much richer level of the minutiae we're obsessed with. Johnson uses "Reading the Past" to "mention smaller, more eclectic things that don't warrant a long essay, like cover art I particularly liked or disliked, curious title changes, or new publishing programs." Kalen Hughes of "**History Hoydens**" started her blog to communicate with readers and other authors. She considers herself a research nerd, as she thinks most historical readers are, so it's fun to share her favorite subjects in more detail than she can in one of her novels. "I think it's generally agreed upon that stopping the narrative for a four page info-dump about how candles were made is less than ideal."

Novel readers who are especially curious about the history behind an author's work might look to a weblog to discover more trivia about the eras and settings. Says Michelle Moran of "**History Buff**": "Writing historical fiction is always a delicate balance. You don't want to overwhelm readers with historical facts, but at the same time you need to set the scene effectively enough that readers feel transported to a different era. And unless an author has included a very detailed Author's Note in their novel, readers will have lingering questions about what was fact versus fiction." "**Reading, Raving, and Ranting**"'s Susan Higginbotham likes writing about the historical events and people that figure into her novels. "Those are what my regular readers seem to enjoy most also, so I've stuck with that," and, in this manner, she's met wonderful people she never would have met otherwise.

Some blogs have begun to narrow the historical focus into more specialized realms. Carrie Lofty started "**Unusual Historicals**" (where "a handful of historical romance authors brave the wilds of unusual settings and times to create distinctive, exciting novels just outside of the mainstream") after wondering why there weren't more romances set in Ancient Rome or the Roaring '20s. She wanted a forum to "gather these writers in one place and explore together" after the trend toward single-title historicals set in the Regency period left her restless. Here up to a dozen authors expound upon monthly subjects, such as "Weapons and Armies" and "Social Movements." In the romance world, Lofty believes the popularity of English Regency, Scottish Highland, and American westerns is based on how they're featured prominently in films. Since we know the customs, costumes, and homes, we're comfortable stepping into those books. "But to imagine 19th-century Africa or Napoleonic Salzburg requires a greater interest in the differences of history, cultures, and locales,"

says Lofty. "Authors cannot assume their readers have a grounding in an unusual setting or locale. Readers of Regencies know what the ton is, what a cravat is, etc."

C.W. Gortner's niche over at "**Historical Boys**" was created to answer the question: Can historical fiction books written by men appeal to readers of both sexes? Gortner says "yes!" His publisher told him

Blog A Go-Go: <http://deannaraybourn.typepad.com/>
 Carla-Nayland Historical Fiction: <http://carlanayland.blogspot.com/>
 Echoes of a Forgotten Age: <http://scottoden.blogspot.com/>
 Historical Boys: <http://historicalboys.blogspot.com/>
 Historical Romance UK: <http://historicalromanceuk.blogspot.com/>
 Historically Speaking: <http://nancycastaldo.blogspot.com/>
 History Buff: <http://michellemoran.blogspot.com/>
 History Buff Author Interviews: <http://historicalfictionauthorinterviews.blogspot.com/>
 History Hoydens: <http://historyhoydens.blogspot.com/>
 Living the History: <http://livingthehistoryelizabethchadwick.blogspot.com/>
 Reading, Raving, and Ranting: <http://susandhigginbotham.blogspot.com/>
 Reading the Past: <http://readingthepast.blogspot.com/>
 Unusual Historicals: <http://unusualhistoricals.blogspot.com/>
 Word Wenchies: <http://wordwenches.typepad.com/>

his gender might stand in his way – that historical fiction by men had a harder time selling than historical fiction by women, and "women write great romantic stories and men do better with adventure." His blog was born as a challenge to disprove this. Gortner describes how he "wanted to primarily showcase male historical writers who, in my opinion, write great female characters, and to showcase women who in turn write strong men." Agreeing about the global village appeal of blogs, Gortner adds, "I've met some marvelous writers I might never have read otherwise. I like to think I'm helping in some small way to dissipate the belief that our sex confines us as writers, when our imagination, in reality, defies gender."

At "**Historical Romance UK**," Amanda Grange uses her blog to let readers know about new releases and author news, but also to discuss classic novels and TV/film adaptations of historical fiction. Grange relates, "Because we all love history we often blog about our research. Recent blogs include Joanna Maitland's research trip to St. Petersburg, Jane Odiwe's information on Regency Brighton, Kate Allan's visit to the Founding Museum, and Melinda Hammond's photographs of the English Pennines." Readers come to Historical Romance UK because it's a one-stop source with an informative magazine-style format that can be read quickly during a coffee break. "It's also popular with us," Grange reports. "We love the way it allows us to interact with readers, as well as each other. The latter point is important, as we live in various parts of the country and it lets us keep in touch with other writers working in our chosen genre."

The "Me" Generation

There is almost universal consent that a site soon becomes tiresome if it's a self-promotional, egocentric author's blog, but there is a variance of opinion on how intimate and personal one is willing to go to allow readers to feel they "know" the blogger. Although "**Echoes of a Forgotten Age**"'s Scott Oden "hopes to achieve

world domination” with his blog, he does confess that it’s an “odd form of therapy – which is why you’re apt to see posts regarding my hobbies and personal life.” He finds that topical posts that tie into some larger media event are particularly effective. His most popular post of 2007 was a review of the film *300*, where readers argued over “who paid the higher price... Spartans or their Thespian allies?” He believes his “me-related” posts help readers make a personal connection. “I’ve always wanted to avoid coming across as The Author, secure in his Ivory Tower of Literature, who treats his blog as his great concession to the hoi polloi.” Oden chooses not to give writerly advice, but greatly prefers posts on “books other than my own, pop culture, role-playing games, my obsession with Orcs, video games, and (tonight) being a map-whore.”

In agreement with Oden, Deanna Raybourn of “**Blog A Go-Go**” opines, “People sometimes have the impression that writers are hugely intellectual, sitting up in our ivory towers and thinking deep thoughts. That may be true for some writers, but me, I’m looking up my horoscope or watching YouTube.” She tries to make a point without ranting, and loathes blogs that are just critical and snarky and don’t offer anything positive. Raybourn views her blog as a way to purge whatever is going on in her head, and, echoing Oden, she finds it “oddly therapeutic.”

Although Elizabeth Chadwick of “**Living the History**” doesn’t “read blogs that go down the Me, Me, Me road,” she does feel her blog adds value for readers who might want to get to know her more intimately than her main website – background histories to her novels, what her next novel is about. “It’s important to talk as much about the history as the writing.” Hughes at “History Hoydens” believes that while there are many of the promotional author blogs, none of them had a research-based agenda, and she’s discovered other authors feel the same way. She keeps her blog fresh by featuring a new release every week and has guest “research posts.”

Moran adds, “Unlike a Me, Me, Me blog, “History Buff” posts excerpts and links to articles readers might enjoy.” Higginbotham also wanted to avoid the “daily writing life” type of blog: “‘Got in 10,000 words today. Saw a sunset and got really inspired.’ Which I find excruciatingly dull, and I’m not a let-it-all-hang-out sort of person, so I didn’t want to post about my personal life.”

A three blog night

Several historical fiction bloggers also interview other authors on their blogs. They find this gives their sites added interest and repeat surfers, who check back to see if one of their favorites has been interviewed. Nancy Castaldo of “**Historically Speaking**” “loves introducing readers to wonderful, well-crafted books and their fabulous authors...I believe all writers of historical fiction love research and some of these authors have fun research tales to share.” Readers recently nominated Castaldo for a Lion Award, an honor handed out by the Shameless Lions Writing Circle to recognize the powerful writing created every day on the Internet.

Moran has a sister blog, “**History Buff Author Interviews**,” where she interviews authors of historical fiction to ask them five questions about their work. As with Castaldo and Moran, Johnson and Gortner also frequently interview authors.

Blog eat blog

Blogging may not be for everyone. Time constraints of day jobs, family, and other promotional efforts have scared some away from taking the plunge. But all agree that publishers have been unanimous in embracing their authors’ forays into the blogosphere. Raybourn acknowledges that some writers are resistant to add to their daily workload, so her publisher is pleased that she blogs. “Publishers just view it as a marketing tool, a way to get your name in front of the public.”

Hughes relates that publishers have told them they appreciate the effort that she and other Hoydens put into their blog, and Putney and Rice agree that publishers like blogging authors for promotional reasons, since word-of-mouth is publicity the publishers can’t provide. Beverly feels that publishers love authors to do something to reach new readers, but admits there have been some perceived downsides to it. “Back in the Dark Ages about ten years ago, editors and agents worried that authors would waste all their writing time on the Internet. It doesn’t seem to have slowed anyone down much!” Johnson has been happy to receive publisher queries to send them review copies, and she believes publishers are taking a strong interest in historical fiction.

Additionally, some have been able to parlay their blogging presence into other beneficial mediums. Chadwick explains, “It’s essential for a mainstream novelist these days to maximise sales...I was recently talking about my subject on a forum about a TV programme and was able to keep directing readers to various articles on my blog archives – very useful for publicity. It’s important to talk as much about the history as the writing.” A popular TV channel contacted Moran through her blog to film eight episodes as a “historian/pop culture expert” for a show that aired in February 2008.

Readers have expressed distaste when they constantly see the same writer’s name appearing as a poster on many different sites. With the knowledge that the readers for one particular type of blog are probably the readers for related blogs, it’s a good plan for authors to limit their Internet presence, or at least scatter their topics between sites and not discuss the same things, otherwise it may seem as though they are, well, shameless self-promoters.

Print journalists may sneer and look down upon Internet journalists as shoddy byte-slinging dilettantes – to be sure, thanks to nearly universal Internet accessibility, there are a plethora of illiterate squirrel-catapulting sites out there. But those with the will to seek can discover many literary sites now boasting of rivaling their print cousins in quality and content. The best of the best have risen from the blog bog, and as a medium that can be instantly accessed, updated, or read, it’s a flourishing and dynamic communication instrument that will only continue to evolve to include...well, enough with the catapulting ferrets, already.

Having traveled the breadth and nearly the length of Africa a few times, Karen Mercury has written three adventurous novels of pre-colonial Africa: The Hinterlands, The Four Quarters of the World, and Strangely Wonderful. She is now finishing a mystery set in 1876 Zanzibar.