

THE ROADS OF RESEARCH

Karleen Bradford

Résumé: L'auteur parle des difficultés et des avantages de la recherche historique: loin de nuire à la dimension créatrice du travail de l'écrivain, la quête de la vérité historique stimule l'imagination et enrichit l'expérience esthétique.



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I began writing historical novels by accident, and research, to me, was an intimidating and boring word. I was visiting Upper Canada Village with my children and while touring the old buildings was suddenly struck with a “what if.” What if a modern-day girl was in one of these old buildings and suddenly found herself back in the past? Perhaps in 1813, when the Battle of Crysler’s Farm took place at that spot. Great idea. Full of enthusiasm, I returned to Ottawa and started to sketch out the plot. Then I realized I knew absolutely nothing about the people who had lived there at that time — where they came from, what they were like, how they lived. My first thought then was: I can’t write this. My second was: But I want to. So there it was. I had to do some research. And a funny thing happened while I was doing it. It suddenly stopped being an intimidating and boring word, and became an exciting and fascinating pursuit. In fact, I became positively enamoured of the activity to the extent that I created a new problem for myself: digging into the past became so interesting and exciting — not to mention so much easier than actually writing — that it was very hard to stop and get to work on the book itself.

Another problem surfaced when I wrote my fictional biography of Lady Jane Grey, *The Nine Days Queen*. I had first heard her story while living in London, but at the time I was writing my first novel and knew I wasn’t up to tackling that project yet. When I finally did feel ready, I was living back in Canada, but I was fortunate enough to receive a Canada Council grant which enabled me to return to London to do the research for the book there. I spent a month submerged in the Reading Room of the British Museum, poring through old books and

manuscripts. I read Jane's letters to King Edward, her cousin. I read his letters back to her. I read letters written by Mary and Elizabeth. I read an account written by an anonymous man who was being held prisoner in the Tower at the same time as was Jane. He describes watching her walk the battlements, sharing a meal with her in her jailer, Mr. Partridge's, house, hearing the roar of the lonely lion imprisoned in the gatehouse cage. I even held in my hands the prayer book Jane carried with her to her execution. It is a fat little book, and falls open, spine broken by pressure on it, to the page where she penned her last letter to her father the night before her execution.

When I began to write the story, I had a notebook crammed with facts. I knew an awful lot about Jane and Tudor history in general. And I felt compelled to put everything I had learned into that novel. The result, of course, was a very lengthy history lesson, with the skeleton of a story, desperate to be noticed, surfacing only here and there. It took many, many drafts before I managed to pare it down. (There are still a couple of slashed anecdotes that I mourn.)

The problem does not go away. While living in Germany, I discovered that the very first crusade of all, the People's Crusade, left from Cologne on Easter weekend of 1096. Cologne was one of my favourite cities, and only twenty minutes away from where I lived in Bonn. I was intrigued by the idea of writing about a young person who got caught up in that first of all the holy wars that swept across Europe and Asia during the next several hundred years. I immediately came up against another problem here, though. Most of the research had to be done in German, and when I arrived there I could not read or speak the language. Books about the crusades soon became the textbooks of my German lessons, and I struggled slowly on. When doing research, you quickly find yourself caught up in a network — a web. You start at a single point, usually wondering how you will ever find out enough to write a credible book. From there a strand will lead off to another source. Two more avenues will open up from that source, and you are off on yet another track. Finally, without quite realizing how it happened, you find yourself inundated in material. I firmly believe in serendipity, too. If I am immersed in Tudor England, I will suddenly see films, TV shows, articles about the Tudors — you name it — popping up all around me. Start digging around about the crusades, and the same thing happens. I am not yet quite plugged in to the Internet, speaking of webs, and I'm almost afraid to take that plunge. I'm afraid I'll be so inundated I'll drown. Besides, for me there is still no greater joy than hunkering down in a library carrel with a pile of dusty old books.

Research has led me along fascinating and sometimes unorthodox paths. My German teacher told me about a winehouse in Cologne that had a basement dating back to the eleventh century, with another basement underneath that was of Roman origin. She wasn't quite certain where it was, exactly, but I knew I had to find it. Research in that case involved a fair amount of wine sampling but when I finally did find that dark basement, with its carved wild animal heads, and the ancient Roman rubblestone cellar beneath it, it gave me the solution to my first

crusades book, *There Will Be Wolves*.

I also followed the route of my first crusaders, down the Rhine, along the Neckar, and along the shores of the Danube through the then communist countries of Hungary and Yugoslavia. In our car, traversing the mountains of Bulgaria was easy, but in my mind's eye I could see thousands of pilgrims strung out along the mountain pass. I corrected a few mistakes that I had made in my first draft: the spot near the source of the Danube where I had merrily drowned people and animals during their crossing turned out to be only about a foot deep, so I had to undrown them, and drown them again later on when the Danube had grown to its full, impressive size. No palm trees in Constantinople. I had planted them there all unknowingly. The superficial things along the road had changed, of course, but following in my crusaders' footsteps, steeped in the changing landscape, I began to feel what it must have been like for them. A distance they could not have even imagined when they set out. Mountains such as they had never before seen. Heat, starvation, violence born of desperation and greed. All these became real to me on my journey.

So much research. Much too much research. And the same problem — how to leave out what I had to leave out in order to tell the story. I solved it this time by the simple fact of determining to write four books. The second book, *Shadows on a Sword*, has just come out this spring and deals with the First Crusade, the only one that successfully liberated Jerusalem. It uses a lot of the material I had gathered for the first. A third book, *Lionheart's Scribe*, about the Third Crusade, led by Richard the Lionheart, is in its first stages. Again, I can use a lot of my original research, but guess what? I need to do more! In the spring of 1997, I hope, I will be crawling around Acre in northern Israel, finding out what it was like to be one of the knights laying siege to that city almost eight hundred years ago. The fourth book will be about the Children's Crusade, the most obscene of them all. Thousands of children set out from Europe, with predictably disastrous results. Many of them ended up enslaved in Egypt. Obviously, I'll have to go there, too. Research boring? I don't think so.

Karleen Bradford is an author of children's and young adult books. Her historical novel, *There Will Be Wolves*, the first book of the crusades, won the Canadian Library Association 1993 Young Adult Novel Award. Her second crusades novel, *Shadows on a Sword*, has just been released. Karleen Bradford has been writing for young people for over thirty years. She has also won the Max and Greta Ebel Award, the CommCept Award, and been shortlisted for the Manitoba Young Readers' Choice Award, the City of Dartmouth Award, and others. She received a Canada Council "B" Grant in 1996 which has enabled her to work on her third crusades book, and will, it is to be hoped, help her visit Israel in the spring of 1997 to do yet more research. Her books have been published in the United States, Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Japan as well as in Canada.