

PULLED INTO THE PAST

Hazel Hutchins

Résumé: Pour élaborer ses récits historiques, *Within a Painted Past* et *Tess*, la recherche en bibliothèque et l'amour du passé et du pays n'ont pas suffi: après avoir consulté un historien, l'auteurs' est rendu compte que la vérité historique, loin de limiter l'imagination créatrice, lui a permis de mener à bien ses projets romanesques.



Hazel Hutchins

Two things have helped me to write successful historical fiction — a long-time enthusiasm for the era about which I'm writing and some expert advice to keep that enthusiasm on the straight and narrow.

I was certainly enthusiastic about both the 1898 mountain setting for my children's novel, *Within a Painted Past*, and the 1926 prairie setting for my picture book, *Tess*. Both stories were imbued with the pioneer spirit — something with which I'd always felt connected due to my own family's history in the rural west. I'd lived in both settings (prairie and mountains), and the land and its history were close to my heart. I'd visited numerous historical sites and I'd read a considerable amount of local and regional history in the form of published diaries, writings and reminiscences of the people who had themselves lived through the early days — a wonderful way to feel history come alive.

It wasn't enthusiasm for the past, however, that started me writing either story. I was snagged backwards into both books by plot ideas that were just too good to be ignored.

I remember the day I was gifted with the idea for *Within A Painted Past*. A painting of a cabin in winter appeared on my bedroom wall — not a religious vision you understand, just a typical writer's hallucination. The falling snow in the picture was painted so wonderfully well that the flakes began to leak out of the painting and fall to the carpet below. A plot began to form in the back of my mind. It involved that past and I thought, with all the reading I'd done, I just might be able to pull it off. I wasn't entirely confident of this, however. Early scribbling in one of my notebooks reads "It's scary — there's so much I don't know."

I began to do what I imagine are very standard types of research: reading local history books at the library; accessing newspapers, photographs and taped interviews at local museums and archives; listening to people talk about the past.

And I began to write. Just little bits at first — I was determined to research well and accurately. But I began to write a little more as well. And a little more. And then, quite suddenly, the story didn't want to wait for any more research — it wanted to run on and be the story it wanted to be. I stood back and let it happen, going back only when the rush was over to check and adjust basic historical facts.

My editor liked the story but felt that it would be much improved if I included not just the basic facts of the past, but the textures, smells and sounds as well. This was a delightful part of the process for me. With the plot and characters of the story mostly under control, I was free to explore for new material. I had started out only “factual” books about Banff and Canmore. Now I searched a wider area.

The most interesting problem with which I wrestled was the dialogue. The way people talked in the late 1890s was not addressed in the factual books I was finding. At the turn of the century, however, Canmore had an author of its own. United Church minister Rev. Charles W. Gordon published many popular adventure novels under his pen name of Ralph Connor. I knew his plots were exaggerated and written according to the sensibilities of the era — heavy on the evils of the devil drink and the darkness of man’s heart. The dialogue he used, however, had the flavour of the times and it stood up when I did research in other places as well. I was able to use many of his expressions and once I began to form my characters’ speech along those lines, I began to truly feel they were people of the past in thought and words as well as action. (Incidentally, among the many other books I read to augment my research were several popular novels written by an even better known personage in Alberta’s past — Nellie McClung.)

But something happened as I was mining for information. The location and era about which I was writing were very specific, but the books I was reading covered a much larger locale and time frame. As well, all sorts of small assumptions about the past were creeping into my writing. I had an excellent editor who liked to ask the question why — “why is the sugar in a bowl and not a jar? why isn’t there a dry sink in the kitchen?” Questions like these made me throw my hands up in the air. I didn’t even know what a dry sink was! I knew I was in over my head as far as these details — so important and so hard to trace — were concerned. I needed help.

The local museums and archives suggested the Glenbow Museum in Calgary. I was very shy of approaching the Glenbow. I had publishing credits in the area of children’s literature, but I did not have any scholarly credits of an historical nature. To my delight, the person with whom I was put in touch — a person who had extensive knowledge of and experience with materials and information about the area and time of which I was writing — made only one comment. “I’m so glad,” said Lorain Lounsberry, “that you care enough to do it right.”

With her help, the sugar was stored in a lidded jar, the mystery of the “dry sink” was cleared up (they were common in eastern Canada but not generally found in the west) and many other things were confirmed, deleted, adjusted or added to keep the historical picture accurate. One of the small touches I enjoyed best was the suggestion to put a board on top of the water pail before a mouse climbed in and drowned.

Did I ever find my characters or the plot hampered by these historical realities? Quite truthfully I found the opposite to be true. Whenever Lorain

pointed out an incongruity, she always had a suggestion that was far more interesting to take its place. And in terms of overall plotting, although my characters were not as free to move about the country or act in certain ways as people of today, the plot possibilities from all the reading I'd done over the years provided more than enough opportunities to keep them busy. Quite often I could even use the limitations of the era to benefit the story. In *Within a Painted Past* it is the contrast between the 1898 character of Lily and the 1988 character of Allison that creates the tension and interest. In *Tess* the young heroine's spirit is the spirit of the still-untamed prairie itself.

Both *Tess* and *Within a Painted Past* were welcome learning experiences. I hope, in time, I will be pulled into the past again.

Hazel Hutchins's subjects include the historical, the gently fantastical, and the humour of family life. Her latest book is *Yancy and Bear* (Annick, 1996). She lives in Canmore, Alberta, and has a home page at <http://www.inkspot.com/~ohi/inkspot/authors/hutchins>.

MY HISTORICAL FICTIONS

Jean Little

Résumé: L'auteur explore la dimension autobiographique de ses récits historiques comme *From Anna* et *His Banner over Me*.



Jean Little

Every so often, I hear a librarian or a bookseller or a teacher say that children do not like reading historical fiction. I do not believe them. I remember too clearly my child self being kidnapped by a book and transported into another age, another time, adventures no longer available to children like me. It was magical. It was what kindled my interest in history itself. I have shared such books with children in the 1990s, loaning them my copies or listening to taped books with them, and I have found that any child with imagination and curiosity can soon be enchanted by a good historical novel. Once in awhile, it takes a bit of coaxing but, after they have finished a couple of chapters of *Warrior Scarlet* by Rosemary Sutcliff or *Rebels of the Heavenly Kingdom* by Katharine Paterson or *Shadow in Hawthorne Bay* by Janet Lunn, they won't put the book down.

I particularly remember *The Spartan* and *Downright Dency* by Schnedeker, and Robert Louis Stevenson's novels and, a little later, all of Rosemary Sutcliff's wonderful books which I collected and read and reread. Hester Burton's novels