

## THE TRUTHFUL LIE: READING & WRITING HISTORICAL FICTION

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*“Until you attain the truth, you will not be able to amend it. But if you do not amend it, you will not attain it. Meanwhile, do not resign yourself.” –Book of Exhortations*

The historical novel is produced in several forms: a historical personage as the main character; fictional characters working with historical personages; and fictional characters within a real historical event or merely within an historical period/society. No matter its diversifications, a *good* historical novel demands the wise selection of the right fact for the right effect; it doesn't surfeit readers with too much information, or starve them with too little. In the end, the story rules through the power of the language. If you've swept your readers into Jill's world by judicious use of historical fact, you must hold them there because of Jill herself, because of Jack, and your vivid language charting their journey up the hill.

This workshop group will consider the practical challenge at the core of writing historical fiction: the seamless integration of fictive imagination and historical fact. Truth relies on historical research. However, the evidence of historical reality must be finely woven into the verities of any good novel—point of view, plot, character, setting, structure. Sessions will begin with discussion and deconstruction of an exemplary scene focusing on specific craft elements (see above). We will workshop two participants' scenes, chosen ahead of time by me in tandem with the element discussed that session. Scenes from the following authors will be considered during sessions: Russell Banks (*Cloudsplitter*); Amy Bloom (*Away*); Geraldine Brooks (*Caleb's Crossing*); Edwidge Danticat (*The Farming of Bones*); E.L. Doctorow (*The March*); Charles Frazier (*Cold Mountain*); Lalita Tademy (*Citizens Creek*); Sarah Waters (*The Paying Guests*). In addition to our examination of craft elements, participants will be introduced to the tools of historical research for novel writing, with particular attention on how to set the scene and establish the period and how to find a voice that is historically accurate in terms of language, but with modern appeal. By the end of the workshop, participants will have polished a scene from their own historical novel (or short story) in-progress and honed skills in bringing history to life through storytelling.

**Prerequisites:** Participants must submit one scene from a work of historical

fiction, 7-10 double-spaced pages. Writing samples should be submitted to me electronically as an attachment one week prior to workshop; PDF format is preferred. (Your scene should evince some of the elements you needed to know from your historical research, i.e. historical event(s), geography, daily life (how people lived, what they ate, what they wore, customs, values, etc.) Participants should read in advance of our meeting three articles housed at my website ([lashondabarnett.com/historical-fiction.html](http://lashondabarnett.com/historical-fiction.html)); they are: “Seven Rules for Writing Historical Fiction”; “The Lying Art of Historical Fiction”; and “The Site of Memory” by Toni Morrison (essay taken from *Inventing the Truth*, edited by William Zinsser, New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995) which is available for download by clicking the button.