

**The Readers' Advisory Guide
to Historical Fiction**

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second edition

The Readers' Advisory Guide to Historical Fiction

Jennifer S. Baker



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For my parents

ALA Editions purchases fund advocacy,
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SERIES INTRODUCTION

Joyce Saricks and Neal Wyatt, Series Editors

In a library world in which finding answers to readers' advisory questions is often considered among our most daunting service challenges, library staff need guides that are supportive, accessible, and immediately useful. The titles in this series are designed to be just that. They help advisors become familiar with fiction genres and nonfiction subjects, especially those they don't personally read. They provide ready-made lists of "need to know" elements such as key authors and read-alikes, as well as tips on how to keep up with trends and important new authors and titles.

Written by librarians with years of RA experience who are also enthusiasts of the genre or subject, the titles in this series of practical guides emphasize an appreciation of the topic, focusing on the elements and features fans enjoy, so advisors unfamiliar with the topics can readily appreciate why they are so popular.

Because this series values the fundamental concepts of readers' advisory work and its potential to serve readers, viewers, and listeners in whatever future space libraries inhabit, the focus of each book is on appeal and how appeal crosses genre, subject, and format, especially to include audio and video as well as graphic novels. Thus, each guide emphasizes the importance of whole collection readers' advisory and explores ways to make suggestions that include novels, nonfiction, and multimedia, as well as how to incorporate whole collection elements into displays and booklists.

Each guide includes sections designed to help librarians in their RA duties, be that daily work or occasional interactions. Topics covered in each volume include:

- The appeal of the genre or subject and information on subgenres and types so that librarians might understand the breadth and scope of the topic and how it relates to other genres and subjects. A brief history is also included to give advisors context and highlight beloved classic titles.

- Descriptions of key authors and titles with explanations of why they're important: why advisors should be familiar with

them and why they should be kept in our collections. Lists of read-alikes accompany these core author and title lists, allowing advisors to move from identifying a key author to helping patrons find new authors to enjoy.

Information on how to conduct the RA conversation so that advisors can learn the tools and skills needed to develop deeper connections between their collections and their communities of readers, listeners, and viewers.

A crash course in the genre or subject designed to get staff up to speed. Turn to this section to get a quick overview of the genre or subject as well as a list of key authors and read-alikes.

Resources and techniques for keeping up-to-date and understanding new developments in the genre or subject are also provided. This section will not only aid staff already familiar with the genre or subject, but will also help those not familiar learn how to become so.

Tips for marketing collections and lists of resources and awards round out the tools staff need to be successful working with their community.

As readers who just happen to be readers' advisors, we hope that the guides in this series lead to longer to-be-read, -watched, and -listened-to piles. Our goal is that the series helps those new to RA feel supported and less at sea, and introduces new ideas or new ways of looking at foundational concepts, to advisors who have been at this a while. Most of all, we hope that this series helps advisors feel excited and eager to help patrons find their next great title. So dig in, explore, learn, and enjoy the almost alchemical process of connecting title and reader.

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American Library Association (ALA) conferences seem to be the beginning of many great ideas and more than a few book proposals, and this book is no exception. When Neal Wyatt and Joyce Saricks took me aside at a conference hotel, for a “chat,” I received their suggestion that I write a readers’ advisory guide on historical fiction with surprise and delight. They said they had every confidence in me and hoped I’d agree to it. That confidence in my ability to write *and* finish this book hasn’t wavered in the slightest during the three years it has taken me to do so. I can’t thank them enough for their hand-holding support, great suggestions, and gentle corrections. Both Joyce and Neal have read and critiqued every draft of every word in this book, and I am so grateful.

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supporter, who let me camp over at her house for quiet and solitude when I needed it and cheered me on when I most needed cheer. My sister, Catherine Albiston, attorney, author, and professor, gave me practical advice on organizing a project of this size while encouraging me to carry on, as did my daughter, Cailin Baker. Without their help this book would still be masses of sticky notes and lists of titles in random spiral notebooks. And of course my husband, John: thank you for being the best friend and patient support of my life.

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This book is my work, but without all of you I could never have accomplished it.

INTRODUCTION

This book is intended to help readers' advisors identify the main types of traditional historical fiction and its offspring; to develop a vocabulary for discussing and understanding historical fiction; to understand the particular appeal of historical fiction; to identify some of the benchmark authors and titles in historical fiction; to suggest resources and tools for readers' advisors; and to develop strategies for successful readers' advisory in historical fiction.

In libraries, bookstores, and educational curricula, historical fiction is usually described by time, place, individual name, or topic. These categories have therefore become historical fiction's subgenres. Organization of references about historical fiction, such as Sarah Johnson's excellent book *Historical Fiction II: A Guide to the Genre*, is therefore based on these frames and usually indexed to include biographical references to famous people mentioned or featured.¹ Little readers' advisory advice is available specific to historical fiction, except in the case of Joyce Saricks's *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction* (revised edition), in which the author discusses the elements of historical fiction readers love, the most important of which, according to Saricks, is accurate and interesting historical and geographic detail that give readers an experience of another time and place or a new perspective on a historical figure.² Saricks does an admirable job of pinpointing the essential benchmark authors in many genres, including historical fiction, describing their specific appeals, which in turn gives readers' advisors clues about how to talk to readers. This book encompasses both Johnson's and Saricks's approaches, both by presenting important titles and topics and by discussing readers' advisory in historical fiction.

Given the complexity of reader appeal and the many choices of historical time frames available to choose from, how do we identify historical fiction subgenres that make sense apart from other genres that often co-opt elements of historical fiction? Unlike other genres, such as mystery, romance, and science fiction, where distinct subgenres have predictable appeal to select audiences, historical fiction subgenres have less to do with appeal than with intellectual or topical categorization. Readers

of paranormal romance, those who like science fiction space opera, and readers of cozy mystery can use specific language to identify their reading tastes. Paranormal romances are usually chilling, sometimes violent, and often erotic. Space opera is usually suspenseful and filled with the technical language of its postulated interstellar world. Cozy mysteries are witty, sometimes hilarious, and suspenseful but never directly violent. This common language helps readers' advisors immensely in conversation with genre readers. In historical fiction such subgenre-identifying, general-appeal language is missing. Categorized by date, place, and subject, historical fiction's appeal is measured title by title, author by author. This requires readers' advisors to work a little harder in conversation with historical fiction readers, to elicit title- or author-specific appeal information.

Long reference books like those of Saricks and Johnson may seem daunting, especially if a reader needs on-the-spot book suggestions. It's easy to lose momentum with readers if you cannot converse enthusiastically about the kind of books they love. Brad Hooper's *Read On . . . Historical Fiction: Reading Lists for Every Taste*, a fun, shorter historical fiction reference, is filled with wonderfully eclectic book lists with titles like "Turbulence and Change," "The Apple and the Apple Tree, or "When the Fabric of State Is Torn," and is organized by broad appeal (setting, character, story, language, mood or atmosphere).³ It is written to be enjoyed by the reader, especially a reader who knows what formal appeal category he or she enjoys; it might be a good follow-up to a readers' advisory conversation rather than a readers' advisor's tool. Another wonderful, similar readers' reference, *Book Lust*, by Nancy Pearl, is a great book to savor and refer to at leisure—plucking out title gems is its chief delight—but it is not meant to be used as a reference tool. (Though if you read all the books Nancy suggests, you will probably *be* a great readers' advisor!)

Libraries and bookstores are arranged by broad subjects, by author, and by title. Unless we create a special display, we rarely shelve historical fiction separately for readers to browse. When it comes to labeling the books themselves, it's difficult to draw a genre line and say, "This is historical fiction, but this is not." Is Sir Walter Scott's work historical fiction or classics? What about a fantasy book set in Elizabethan England? Is it fantasy or historical fiction? An alternate history book—is it science fiction, fantasy, or historical fiction? We can catalog it as all three, but we have to shelve the item in only one place. It's easiest and most logical to interfile historical fiction with general fiction. In this book, you may notice a few titles and authors cropping up in several different chapters. This is a virtue of a similar issue: many of the best historical fiction books not only blur

the line between genres but also manifest multiple appeals. Some historical novels are strongly character-centric or setting focused, while others may have both a strong sense of place and well-developed characters, and be filled with magical realism.

The library catalog is also difficult to use in historical fiction readers' advisory. Searching by general keyword for something as simple as historical fiction about the Civil War yields far too many titles to browse through and is infrequently annotated in a manner conducive to quick scanning during reader conversations. Even book lists of Civil War fiction you may have available online or at your desk make great passive readers' advisory, but they are not reader specific. Perhaps the most important role of a good readers' advisor is to provide individual readers with good suggestions uniquely suited to their current mood and taste. The trick is to find useful resources that are as available and fast as a library catalog, Amazon, or Google.

Without an understanding of how readers talk about historical fiction and the broad categories of historical fiction available, readers' advisors can flounder. This book focuses on the aspects of historical fiction that draw readers in and how we can identify them quickly enough to make educated suggestions. What tricks can we use to scan unfamiliar materials and identify appeal? How can we remember huge mounds of historical fiction titles and link them for readers? What do we need to know to talk with readers who love certain types of historical fiction?

The chapters in this book establish an appeal vocabulary for historical fiction that works well with all types of fiction and gives a broad description of the genre, broken down into subgenres and categories that give readers' advisors a vocabulary to talk with readers.⁴ Each subgenre is illustrated with several popular, current title examples and their appeals, along with a few titles for further reading that are similar.

Chapters 1 and 2 of this book discuss appeal characteristics and how readers' advisors can successfully talk with and make good book suggestions for historical fiction readers. Chapters 3–7 are devoted to “pure” historical fiction: novels and stories in which the action takes place fifty years or more in the past and before the author's recollection. Historical fiction transports the reader into another time period for the purposes of entertainment and understanding of a previous time and place and people. Surprisingly, even this simple definition quickly calls into question many other types of fiction most readers assume are historical fiction, such as Holocaust or World War II fiction by authors whose personal experience informs their writing and classic novels like *The Adventures of Huckleberry*

Finn (Twain) and *Jane Eyre* (Brontë). Chapter 8 discusses historical fiction in relation to other genres, literary fiction, and classics.

Chapter 9 proposes efficiency strategies for busy readers' advisors and ideas for virtual readers' advisory and for integrating other parts of your collection, such as nonfiction and other media, into your reading suggestions for historical fiction readers. Finally, chapter 10 suggests resources and ideas for keeping current in historical fiction readers' advisory, including how to create a historical fiction reading plan.

This book can serve as both a self-guided tour of historical fiction, filled with suggestions for readers' advisory practice, and as a reference for use with readers trolling for great new historical fiction suggestions. In addition, I hope readers will find a tantalizing plethora of historical fiction to add to their personal reading lists.

NOTES

1. Sarah L. Johnson, *Historical Fiction II: A Guide to the Genre*, Genreflecting Advisory Series (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2009).
2. Joyce G. Saricks, *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction*, rev. ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 2009).
3. Brad Hooper, *Read On . . . Historical Fiction: Reading Lists for Every Taste* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2006).
4. While the appeal language used in this book is my own, some overlap of terminology may be found with EBSCO's NoveList databases as a result of popular usage.

1

A WALL OF PORTRAITS, A HALL OF DOORS

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HISTORICAL FICTION

Looking back on the history of historical fiction is like looking at old paintings in a vestibule or above a staircase: you see what and who went before, but you are also aware that things have changed. We appreciate the works of older historical fiction authors, even though they may seem outdated or anachronistic when compared with our current historical knowledge and storytelling preferences. It's worth taking a peek, though, into some of the older authors and titles, not only for familiarity with titles that older readers may mention but also for the sake of understanding how historical fiction has morphed into what we more often read today.

While most of what we consider historical fiction today was written in the twentieth century, storytelling has been an integral part of civilization from our very beginnings. Many of humanity's earliest stories told of heroic feats of the past, but for the purpose of this book, these works are not considered historical fiction, but they are very old! For our purposes, historical fiction is defined as novels (and sometimes short stories) with settings from a historical period at least fifty years prior to the work's publication or occurring before the author's memory. Surprisingly, this definition leaves out a number of titles most people consider historical fiction, such as *Oliver Twist* (Dickens), *The Count of Monte Cristo* (Dumas), *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe), and many other well-known books set during the authors' lives.

Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) is generally recognized as the first author of historical fiction as we know it today. His best-known novel, *Ivanhoe*, is a story that encompasses the legend of Robin Hood and the history of the conflict between King Richard I of England and his brother John.

Scott also wrote *Rob Roy* and *Waverly*, which, with *Ivanhoe*, are only three of the nineteen novels in the *Waverly* oeuvre. *Rob Roy* and *Waverly* were written in 1814 and 1817, about seventy years after the Jacobite rising, the subject of both books, placing them among the first historical novels written in English. Later, other classic authors of the nineteenth century also ventured into the relatively unknown territory of serious historical fiction. Among the more famous are *A Tale of Two Cities* (Dickens), *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne) and *War and Peace* (Tolstoy).

IMPORTANT TWENTIETH-CENTURY HISTORICAL FICTION AUTHORS

Taylor Caldwell (1900–1985)

By the middle of the twentieth century, earlier classic writers like Dickens, Dumas and Scott, were joined by popular fiction writers in creating great stories of historical fiction. Some of the authors of this period wrote novels that readers still enjoy, once a good readers' advisor suggests them. Taylor Caldwell, for instance, had a huge following for her absorbing and unput-downable family sagas about the powerful and wealthy dynasties that built the US economy. Although literary critics panned Caldwell's writing style, readers recognized her excellent storytelling skills and clamored for more. Try *Captains and the Kings* or *Dear and Glorious Physician*, two of Caldwell's best-known novels.

Dorothy Dunnett (1923–2001)

The six novels in the *Lymond Chronicles* series were published in Britain between 1961 and 1975 and quickly became Dunnett's most famous work. Set in Renaissance Europe and in Russia, each book in the series features Francis Crawford of Lymond, a Scottish nobleman with a nose for adventure and his own moral code, as he comes into contact with powerful figures of the time. Using this pattern as her frame, Dunnett exercises her skill at bringing the time period alive through her delightful protagonist and her twisted and intricate plot strands. Dunnett's work is not as well known in the United States as in the United Kingdom, and readers of historical adventure who love a great story will appreciate hearing about Lymond. Be sure to include Dunnett on your reading plan, too. Start with *Game of Kings*, the first of the series.

Howard Fast (1914–2003)

Older readers will remember Howard Fast's Immigrants series, beginning with *The Immigrants*, if no other of his nearly one hundred published works. They may be surprised to learn that Fast also wrote novels about the ancient world and the American Revolution. All of his novels read at a good clip and feature ordinary people whose circumstances force them to examine their lives in new ways, often with dramatic results. Fast's popular historical fiction is more than just stories—Fast was an idealistic, intelligent man whose life reflected some of the issues with which his characters contend. Immigrant novels are still popular, and readers may enjoy looking at fictional immigrant experiences of the past.

Jean Plaidy (1906–1993)

Beloved of historical fiction readers in the mid-twentieth century and author of 183 books, Jean Plaidy wrote imaginative stories of famous figures from past centuries, bringing them to life for modern readers. While many people were aware that "Jean Plaidy" was a pseudonym, few knew just how many pseudonyms Eleanor Hibbert actually had. As Victoria Holt she became well known for her gothic romance novels; as Philippa Carr, for romantic historical family sagas. She wrote under several other names, too, including her own! As Jean Plaidy, though, Hibbert is still recognized as a prolific author of popular and well-researched historical novels that focus more on women and relationships than on analysis of time periods. Many Plaidy titles have been reprinted in the past decade, so be sure to include them in your readers' advisory repertoire. Sample the Tudor series, beginning with *Uneasy Lies the Head*; the Borgia Duet (*Madonna of the Seven Hills* and *Light on Lucrezia*); or the Queens of England series, beginning with *Myself, My Enemy*. The Tudor and Queens of England series are highlighted in chapter 6 of this book as part of the section on learning history through historical fiction.

Mary Renault (1905–1983)

Known mainly for her sensitive fictional portrayals of famous ancient Greeks, Renault appeals to modern readers on many levels. Though she was not a historian, Renault did her research, and her novels are filled with the details of ancient life and of warfare. She was one of the first few historical fiction authors to write openly about homosexuality among

the leaders of ancient Greece. Her characters come to life; their stories are moving and full of humor. Readers who enjoy this time period and haven't read Renault will thank you for starting them out with her Alexander the Great trilogy, beginning with *Fire from Heaven*.

Irving Stone (1903–1989)

Stone characterized his novels as “bio-history”—biographical novels of historical figures.¹ He wrote sixteen novels featuring politicians, scientists, authors, and artists, all of which are well researched, fascinating to read, and deliciously long. Stone was sometimes criticized for always being “upbeat” and for idealizing his characters rather than showing them as real, flawed individuals, but many readers enjoy this approach to famous people they admire and will appreciate Stone’s perspective. *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, about Michelangelo, and *Lust for Life*, about Vincent van Gogh, are two of his very best novels.

By the 1980s, as historical fiction increased in popularity, it was often grouped together with literary novels set in historical time periods and with historical romance, adventure, mysteries, and westerns as one genre, to readers’ confusion. It became apparent that readers needed clearer genre delineations in general, and that even within each genre there existed nebulous differences between books that went beyond favorite authors and lengthy descriptions of why we enjoyed reading and particular kinds of books. We lacked a common vocabulary to describe reading tastes. It wasn’t until 1982, in *Readers’ Advisory Service in the Public Library* (Saricks), that the concept of appeal characteristics was created.² As library and information science programs and readers’ advisory training grew in influence, so did our use of appeal terminology, which is so important in our interactions with readers. Sometimes readers will mention an author they have enjoyed—a good readers’ advisor uses appeal terms in these conversations to help readers talk about why they like certain authors or certain types of books. If a reader cannot think of an author’s name, readers’ advisors can ask leading questions about appeal and then suggest a well-known author and/or title that might coincide with the reader’s taste. These well-known authors and/or titles are referred to as benchmarks. Benchmarks can be introduced into the conversation as references for readers, who have probably heard of or read the book, but if not, then you can tell readers about the book, gauge their interest, and suggest starting with the benchmark.

BENCHMARK AUTHORS OF CURRENT HISTORICAL FICTION

Today's benchmark authors have some of the same characteristics in common with the popular historical fiction writers of the twentieth century. Many cover the same time frames—the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the ancient world—or have a similar style or structure, such as sweeping sagas, historical romance, and adventure. Others are biographical novels about famous people or fictional characters. One characteristic that differentiates current historical fiction from that of the twentieth century is a modern perspective on history. Some of the older titles feature subjects of limited current interest, like Caldwell's biographical novels of Bible figures or Jean Plaidy's novels that highlight famous female figures from history mainly in relation to their connection with powerful men. Sometimes the language used or views expressed by the characters are noticeably outdated. These factors do not necessarily mean readers should or will bypass older historical fiction, but it can seem to date us as readers' advisors if they are the first books we mention or pull off the shelf. We need to keep up with current trends and popular perspectives on history. Well-known newer titles can serve as modern benchmarks—books that represent the historical fiction genre as it is now, in the twenty-first century.

The authors listed here are great current examples of historical fiction writers that readers' advisors can reference in conversations with readers. If you haven't read these current benchmark authors, take the time to review their work and to include some of the titles listed here in your personal reading plan.

Bernard Cornwell

Like Jean Plaidy, Bernard Cornwell traces English history through its leaders. His series include the Warlord Chronicles, about King Arthur, the medieval Grail Quest trilogy, the Saxon Stories, the Starbuck Chronicles, and his well-known Richard Sharpe novels—all twenty-two of them. His stand-alone book, *Agincourt*, is a phenomenal study of human nature under the pressures of war and a great perspective on medieval battle. The Battle of Agincourt, however, was also a definitive one that dramatically changed the balance of power at the time. Cornwell shows readers what the battle was like through the eyes of a commoner—an archer—whose experience is moving and powerful. If you read only one Cornwell book, let this be the one.

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