

Alternate History: Picking Out the Threads



Off in a Time Machine...

I love history. In another lifetime I am no doubt a professional historian, possibly a medievalist, but with a heavy emphasis on social history and sociological context as well.

In this lifetime, though, I am a novelist with amateur historian inclinations, a sociology background to throw into the mix, and an enduring habit of looking for the story arcs (such as they are) that lie within discrete historical events. They are there in abundance, but not as often recognized or remarked upon as one would think. Then again, perhaps this is no surprise, for people read less today (things of substance, that is) than in earlier eras, and as usual, tend to read things more current than old books and reference works from a bygone time. But I shall attempt to put the shortcomings of contemporary reading habits aside, and think of the bigger picture. For there is one here, I'm sure of it.

I have an interest in historical novels, and for some time have been doing the research for [a story cycle](#) set primarily in the American West. In the course of this research, I kept coming across fascinating information and events that don't fit into my book plans, but seemed like they needed to appear *somewhere*, to be remarked upon and remembered in some way. But I don't have time to become exhaustively familiar with these various eras, as a dedicated historian would. It seems to me that the facts and anecdotes that linger across time are like so many bits of kaleidoscope glass scattered upon a table top. Which shiny bit do I want to examine today? Is it worth my time to reassemble it into the larger mirror it once was a part of, or is that even necessary to appreciate the bright, unique thing I hold in my hand?

In fact, I often do reassemble the whole, or a good part of it, to satisfy my curiosity about the subject at hand. I did this on a small scale when I reconstructed the inhabitants of London's Hanover Square in 1854 for my [Lillian story](#). [1] I have done it with some genealogies, with diplomatic reports of an international incident in Asia in the 1870s, and the civic life of a 19th century town that interested me. But when it comes to creating (or recreating) an entire era and place on the page, there an author must make certain strategic decisions. How much research is necessary to tell the tale? How much must be done to create a believable setting that supports the story? And if the subject is historical, how much creative license can one take before aficionados of the era cry foul and throw the book across the room? (For the record, I hope never to push my readers to that point.)

And this, for me, is where alternate history comes in.

As a reader, I love it. I think it's fascinating to explore the "what ifs" of history, especially because one theme that recurs in some of my writing is about the mutability of time, and our experience with it. I find it fascinating, for instance, to contemplate how the world would be different today if Germany had been victorious in World War II. What if the U.S. had entered a Cold War with Greater Germany instead of Russia? (Robert Harris asks that question in the gripping 1992 thriller [Fatherland](#)). What if the South had won the American Civil War? (see Harry Turtledove's [How Few Remain](#) for some speculation on that line of events, how it may have come about, and where it might have led). What if Rome had never become an empire? To explore that possibility, see John Maddox Roberts' treatment of a victorious Carthage and vanquished Rome in [Hannibal's Children](#).

I think it could be argued that today's urban fantasy genre also got its start as a type of alt-history. In these settings, most notably established, I think, by [Laurell K. Hamilton](#), the world is just like our own, but for one difference: monsters really do exist, and magic is real. This blending of fantasy with reality is what takes the otherwise-well-known-to-us historical events and gives them a twist.

Why Write Alternate History?

As a writer, alternate history is less (potentially *far* less) confining than historical fiction, in terms of the facts that must be mustered on the page. Inconvenient facts can be altered, and those which the author does not know, or is unable (for whatever reason) to research, can simply be invented. "In this world, *this* is how it happened..." Of course there is a limit to how much one can play fast and loose with real historical facts, and use invented "facts" in support of the fiction. The more one tips towards fabrication, the more the work reads like a fantastic invention. Not necessarily a bad thing, in and of itself (there is, after all, a whole genre called "fantasy" for that very reason) - but one moves ever farther from an historical setting if that is the path chosen.

If part of the draw is that setting, and what we understand to be "true" about that setting, the author can't stray too far afield in that regard. To me, the more challenging and effective alternate history is the one which cleaves as closely as possible to our past reality, departing from that baseline only where the world's internal rules and and events dictate differently.

Notes From the Lizard Lair

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This is the path I've taken with my other WIP, [Queen Victoria's Transmogrifier](#). It is partly alt-historical, partly paranormal; it makes a fantastic departure with the premise that magic is real. But to the greatest extent possible, the rest of it is pure Victoriana, and incorporates other bits of English history as well.

In my next post on alternate history, I'll talk about the strange tale of Sir John D'Abernon, the real-world 13th century knight whose name lives on in the village place name of Stoke D'Abernon in Surrey, England. Sir John was once Sheriff of Surrey and Sussex; he suffered a late-career embarrassment that gives me the perfect foil for some events in my alt-historical version of Surrey in 1871.

NOTES

1. Reconstructed the neighborhood, that is, as best I could with limited resources. With better access to information I think I could have done a more complete job of it. This sort of exercise goes beyond historical research, I think, and straddles the line of anthropology, urbanistik, and a few other disciplines.

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How do you feel about alternate histories? Have any books you care to recommend? Leave your thoughts in the comments below.