

*Presentation handout for the Historical Novel Society Convention, Portland, Oregon, June 2017*

*“How Far Can a Horse Walk in a Day and Other Questions of Accurate Historical Travel?”*

*with Maryann Trail*

## **The Devil’s in the Historical Details**

### **Faith L. Justice**

So I’m writing a book set in 5C Alexandria. I know the plot and my characters intimately. I’m typing away at the seduction scene when I think, “Did they have underwear back then? If so, what was it like?” I know the handsome hero doesn’t unzip his pants but does he unbutton, unbuckle, untie, unwrap? Of course I could finesse this with a sentence like, “He dropped his garments onto the floor.” But it won’t be long before readers get impatient with generalities because the devil is in the historical details.

The sights, smells, sounds and descriptions of clothes, food, housing, and transportation in a different time make the reader suspend disbelief and join whole-heartedly in the fiction. Valerie Anand, who writes historical mysteries (most recently *A Traitor’s Tears*), under the pseudonym Fiona Buckley makes this point: “When planning a specific book, I read works on the period, and chase up such details as the layout of particular towns, styles of furniture, fashions of the time, laws in force, and technologies which existed then. I use maps a lot. I had my sitting room floor completely carpeted while I tried to work out whether one could or could not ride a horse from one point to another in a single day. I always try to be accurate, because there is always someone out there who will write in and point out your mistakes.”

Doing historical research can be daunting. Because I’m of a “certain generation” I hit the books first; more specifically, the local library. The research librarians are my best friends. Through interlibrary loans, I get almost any book I need. Libraries have access to hundreds of digital databases and research collections. You don’t have to be a scholar, just an interested reader. Anita Diamant (*The Red Tent*) made good use of her local university library to research her biblical story of Jacob’s only daughter. “I looked for artifacts about daily life – remedies for disease, what houses in Egypt might have looked like, roads in Canaan. It was easy to get overwhelmed. I had to stop a lot and tell myself that I didn’t need to become an expert on this. I just needed the details that serve my plot.”

I'm afraid I also like to buy books and keep them handy. One of the first I got was Persia Woolley's *How to Write and Sell Historical Fiction* from the Writer's Digest Books series. Woolley does a masterful job of sorting through how much fact and how much fiction is appropriate for what kind of tale, how to go about researching questions and organizing the answers. Another source is the Oxford University Press, "the world's largest publisher of reference works" with hundreds of historical titles including an excellent series called *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt* (Rome, Greece, etc.) which provides an encyclopedic overview of government, military, religion, trade, and everyday life, among other topics.

For military research, I turned to Osprey Publishing. Want to know what a Roman auxiliary unit from Thrace wore and used for weapons? Check out Osprey. They offer hundreds of beautifully illustrated titles. I search on-line bookstores, specialty mail order catalogs, and museum bookstores, as well. To keep the lid on my book budget, I frequent the sale section of my local mega-book store and used bookshops where I pick up reference works at steep discounts.

Although print matter is a good place to start, in today's world you can't ignore the Internet. But there are two problems: quantity and quality—too much of the former and not enough of the latter. Unlike traditionally published books, which have to go through some screening process (in academic circles that can be quite rigorous), anyone can put anything up on the Net and pass it off as truth. So what's a good historical fiction writer to do?

Stick to sites that have some stake in maintaining their reputation for accuracy such as universities and historical, archaeological and professional societies. Many sites not only update articles, but blog and tweet as well. Others aggregate the news. The Archaeological Institute of America has a daily update of archaeology in the news. When you find an interesting site, subscribe to their RSS feed, get email alerts or tweets when new information is posted. Google Scholar ([scholar.google.com](http://scholar.google.com)) is a great tool for searching professional and scholarly literature. Many newspapers and local government organizations are digitizing their archives and can be a great source of primary material. (Remember your best friends the research librarians? Tap them for help on accessing those databases.)

Academia.edu is a new share site where scholars from all over the world share their articles and research. Sign up and you can get alerts in areas you're interested in.

Entering a keyword in a favorite search engine (Chrome, Yahoo, Bing, etc.) will yield tens of thousands of hits. That's where sites like ResearchBuzz come in handy with essays on how to do Web research, reviews of search engines and data bases, and links to "ask the expert" sites. And speaking of sources, beware of "experts" in chat rooms, forums, or Wikipedia. The web is a wonderful experiment in

crowd sourcing knowledge, but not all sources are created equal. Universities and some high schools do not accept Wikipedia citations as valid for bibliographies or footnotes. Check the footnotes and sources of any Wikipedia article to make sure it is referencing legitimate sources before using the data. A safer source is ProfNet, a database created to link journalists and writers with university professors and other expert sources.

A fun way to make contact with professors and other experts is to take an online course in your subject of interest. There are many free MOOC's (massive open online courses) available. I've taken two archaeology courses from FutureLearn (<https://www.futurelearn.com/>). The one on Portus, Rome's sea port provided me with invaluable information on Roman ship design, sea routes, and traveling times. The course site had videos, stills, academic papers, maps, and—best of all—direct access to the researchers and staff for all my questions. Another good source for MOOC's is Coursera.

A cool tool I've found invaluable for transportation questions in the Roman Empire is ORBIS: The Stanford Geospatial Network Model of the Roman World. It reconstructs the time cost and financial expense associated with a wide range of different types of travel in antiquity. You can control a variety of variables including season of travel, priority (fastest, cheapest, most direct), surface (road, river, coastal and open sea), mode (foot, oxcart, porter, horse, etc.). It's supported by Stanford University and you can get into the guts of the model checking out its assumptions and data sets.

If you're not traveling in the Roman Empire, another good tool is Google Maps. I've used it to plot a 1C Roman expedition from the Kushite capital of Meroe to the Great Sudd (a swamp in modern Southern Sudan and an 18C family's trek along the frozen Main River in Germany. You can get a satellite view of the countryside today; get distances and estimates of walking and cycling times, and zoom in on details in cities and villages. If you can't visit a site in person, Google Maps is very handy.

With the advent of cable and satellite TV, even couch potatoes can do research on anything from WWII, biographies, and Roman troops to the history of underwear, courtship or plumbing. If you don't see what you need, search their Web sites for shows on video or on-demand download, companion books, speeches, trivia, and extensive links to other sites related to your historical time period or topic. However, I'd take a page from our journalist friends and make sure there are two independent sources for your facts. I've found many history shows that take more than a little "artistic license."

Researching in books, on the Web, and on TV can turn you into a hermit, so get out of the house! Especially, if you're writing local or more recent history, take advantage of the experts in your own backyard. Christine Wiltz interviewed over one hundred people for her biography of Norma Wallace *The Last Madam: A Life in the New Orleans Underworld* set primarily in the early half of the Twentieth

Century. “I met so many incredible characters and I learned a lot from them. They led fascinating lives but some are very old and not doing well. There are some wonderful materials that just didn’t make it in the book.” If interviewing people seems daunting, go to DoHistory.org, a Website with a case study; downloadable forms; and an excellent series of essays on how to organize a research project, use primary sources (diaries, newspaper accounts, public records), and conduct oral histories.

Visit museums where you can see the art and artifacts of your chosen time period. There’s nothing like seeing a gold torc worn by a Celtic warrior, studying an ancient Egyptian tomb diorama of a slaughterhouse, or wondering at the realistic beauty and sartorial detail of portraits to inspire that specificity that makes your story stand out from the crowd.

Want to visit a Revolutionary War tavern, watch a barrel being made, or tramp through a whaling ship? There are hundreds of historic villages, farms, and ports with working artisans (who live to answer questions about their craft) scattered across the U.S. The American Association for State and Local History has an extensive listing of historical societies at their Web site. Renaissance fairs, battle reenactments, and local festivals also offer a chance to have fun in the name of research.

The site visit is still the ultimate in historical research. John Jakes, author of the best-selling *Kent Chronicles*, said, “I travel largely to check out geography: what does the area look like? How’s the weather? Are there hills? How high? Back when I was researching the first of the Kent novels, and didn’t have much money, I decided I had to go to Boston anyway...The site of the Boston Tea Party turned out to be an office building with a plaque on it...So I work judiciously between written sources, photos, old engravings, and visits to places if I think it might help fill in details.”

If you do plan a site visit, keep in mind that the farther back in time your story, the more likely there will be changes in geography, flora, fauna, commerce, and climate. Woolley in her *How to Write and Sell Historical Fiction* gives an excellent step-by-step guide on how to get the most out of your trip with everything from contacting local experts to what and how to pack. And don’t forget to keep all your receipts—when you sell your book, your expenses are tax deductible!

***This is a 2017 update of my article “Buttons & Books: Tips on Historical Research,” which appeared in Byline magazine in March 2002.***

## Resources:

**Academia.edu** is a platform for academics to share research papers. The company's mission is to accelerate the world's research. Academics use the site to share their research, monitor deep analytics around the impact of their research, and track the research of academics they follow. Over 53 million academics have signed up to Academia.edu, adding 19 million papers. Academia.edu attracts over 36 million unique visitors a month. Sign up with your interests and they will send you emails when a paper is posted. (<https://www.academia.edu>)

**The American Association for State and Local History** started in 1904 as a department within the American Historical Association. They provide services and assistance to over 5,000 institutions and individuals who work in the field of state and local history. The AASLH site provides links to regional museum groups, state associations, national resource organizations, and state historical societies. (<http://www.aaslh.org/>)

**The American Institute of Archaeology** promotes a vivid and informed public interest in the cultures and civilizations of the past, supports archaeological research, fosters the sound professional practice of archaeology, advocates the preservation of the world's archaeological heritage, and represents the discipline in the wider world. Daily updates (<http://www.archaeology.org/news/>) on archaeology in the news are available. (<https://www.archaeological.org/>)

**DoHistory** is built around an interactive case study of an 18th Century midwife. Go to the “on your own” section for an excellent series of essays on how to organize a research project, use primary sources (diaries, newspaper accounts, public records), and conduct oral histories. Many of the essays contain downloadable forms. Created by Harvard University and hosted by George Mason University. (<http://dohistory.org/>)

**Google Scholar** provides a simple way to broadly search for scholarly literature. From one place, you can search across many disciplines and sources: articles, theses, books, abstracts and court opinions, from academic publishers, professional societies, online repositories, universities and other web sites. (<https://scholar.google.com/intl/en/scholar/help.html>)

**MOOC's** (massive open online courses) offer free online courses in any subject imaginable with college professors. The archaeology courses I've taken included access to Q&A blogs, video, academic papers and all participating scholars at the site. The two I am most familiar with are FutureLearn (<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses>) and Coursera (<https://www.coursera.org/>)

**ORBIS: The Stanford Geospatial Network Model of the Roman World** reconstructs the time cost and financial expense associated with a wide range of different types of travel in antiquity. The model is based on a simplified version of the giant network of cities, roads, rivers and sea lanes that framed movement across the Roman Empire. It broadly reflects conditions around 200 CE but also covers a few sites and roads created in late antiquity. (<http://orbis.stanford.edu/>)

**Osprey Publishing** specializes in illustrated books on military history with well-researched series from ancient to modern warfare. Its output includes 140 new titles each year and a backlist of over 1500 titles. Osprey's series such as *Men at Arms*, *Campaign* and *Fortress* are world famous and essential reading for military enthusiasts. (<https://ospreypublishing.com/>)

**Oxford University Press**—"the world's largest publisher of reference works"—has a well-organized site featuring general reference works such as Oxford Companions, illustrated histories, anthologies, atlases, encyclopedias, and scholarly and professional works on almost any historical topic imaginable. (<https://global.oup.com/academic/?lang=en&cc=us>)

**ProfNet** created a collaboration of information officers linked by the internet to give journalists, bloggers, and writers free and convenient access to expert sources. They have sources in organizations of every type in North America and Europe: colleges, universities, corporations, think tanks, laboratories, medical centers, non-profit organizations, government agencies, and PR agencies. (<http://www.prnewswire.com/profnet/>)

**ResearchBuzz** covers the world of Internet research by providing daily updates on search engines, new data management software, browser technology, web directories and more. (<https://researchbuzz.me/>)