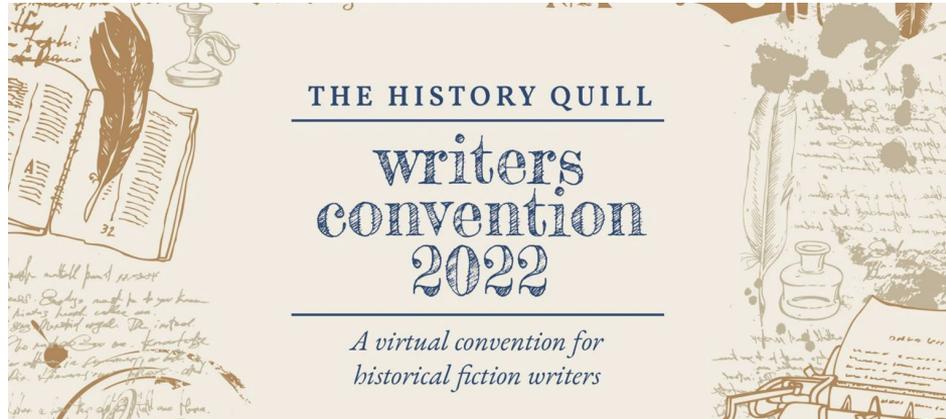


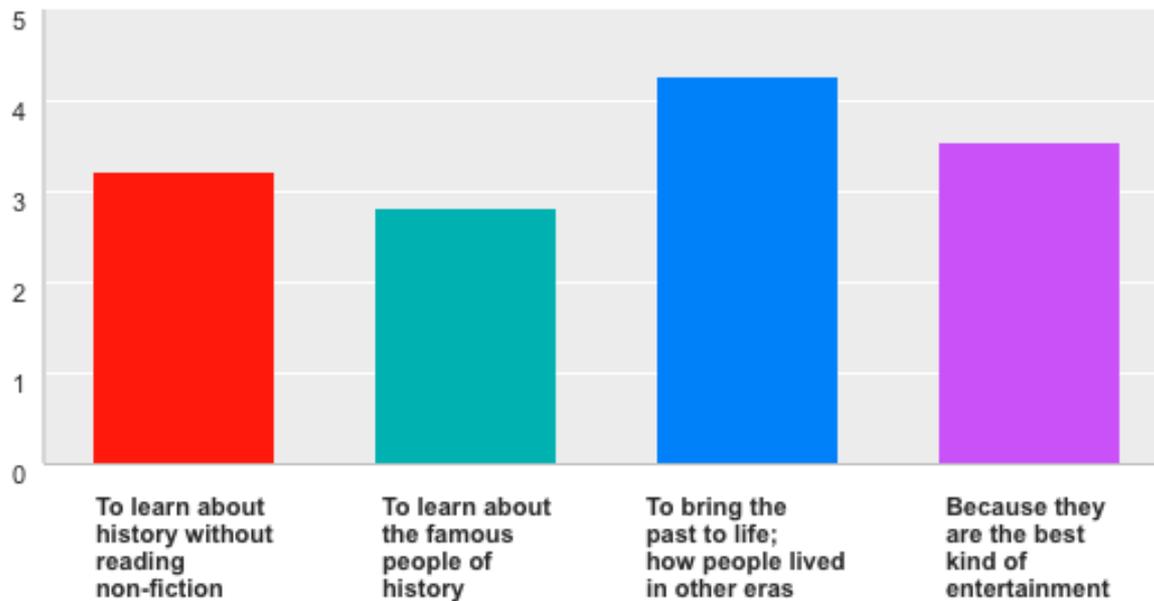
# Women in History

Gina Buonaguro and M.K. [Mary] Todd

Day 5: Sunday 6 February 2022: 14:00–15:00 (GMT)/09:00–10:00 (EST)



# Why do readers read historical fiction?



# The Purpose of Historical Fiction

*Fiction is about us. It captures our condition. It confronts us with our fears. It celebrates our human joys and triumphs. It's a mirror, a telescope, a microscope, a record and a reminder. In it, we discover what drives us apart and what binds us together. - Donald Maas, Writer Unboxed*

**So historical fiction specifically must...**

- offer a **portrayal of recognizable human character** within a specific set of circumstances
- provide **insight into the minds** of those living in the past
- allow us **to contemplate social, religious, and political change** and how **the events of history have an impact on today**
- **educate readers about the past**

**What does this have to do with portraying women in history?**

# The balancing act

The goal of good historical fiction is to balance **accuracy** and the **reality of the time period** with making the book **approachable** and **understandable to the modern reader**.

This can be especially difficult when writing about **women in history**.



# The seven elements key to the balancing act



## Element 1: Character

- Your mission as writer is to **reveal the people of the past.**
- Whether real or imagined, characters should **behave in keeping with the era they inhabit**, even if some of them push the boundaries.
- And that means **discovering the norms, attitudes, beliefs and expectations of their time and their station in life.**

## Element 2: Dialogue

- **Dialogue that is cumbersome and difficult to understand** detracts from readers' enjoyment of historical fiction.
- **Dip occasionally into the vocabulary and grammatical structures of the past** by inserting select words and phrases so that a reader knows s/he is in another time period.
- **Don't weigh the manuscript down** or slow the reader's pace with too many such instances.
- And **be careful**. Many words have changed their meanings over time and could be misinterpreted.
- **Do not use modern words or phrases**. Look up the year that words were introduced to make sure they are in the ballpark. ("in the ballpark" dates from the 1950s)
- **Interior monologue is also dialogue** - it's a powerful mechanism for understanding the values and norms of the past

## Element 3: Setting

Setting is **time and place** and even **why** they happen.

Historical fiction must **bring the past to life by transporting readers in time and place** beginning with the opening sentence.

Use **female spaces** to illuminate the lives of women OR **women in traditionally male settings** and how they adapt.

Setting begins with the first page and ideally the **opening sentence**.

*“My house stands at the edge of the earth. Together, the house and I have held strong against the churning tides of Fundy. Two sisters, stubborn in our bones.” - Ami McKay, **The Birth House** (about a midwife in Nova Scotia)*

## Element 4: Conflict

Conflict is essentially **the problems faced by the characters** in your story..

**Conflict must be realistic for the chosen time and place.** Readers will want to understand the reasons for the conflicts you present and the historical context.

Different types of conflict:

- Central or major conflict
- Underlying or chronic conflict
- Internal character conflict
- Transient conflict

## Element 5: Plot

- **Plot is the overarching story arc.**
- Consider **how much agency a woman has within her time period**; in other words, the plot has to make sense for the time period.
- **Plot will often be shaped around or by the historical events** taking place at that time. This is particularly true when writing about famous historical figures.
- When considering historical events, **remember that you are telling a story, not writing history.**

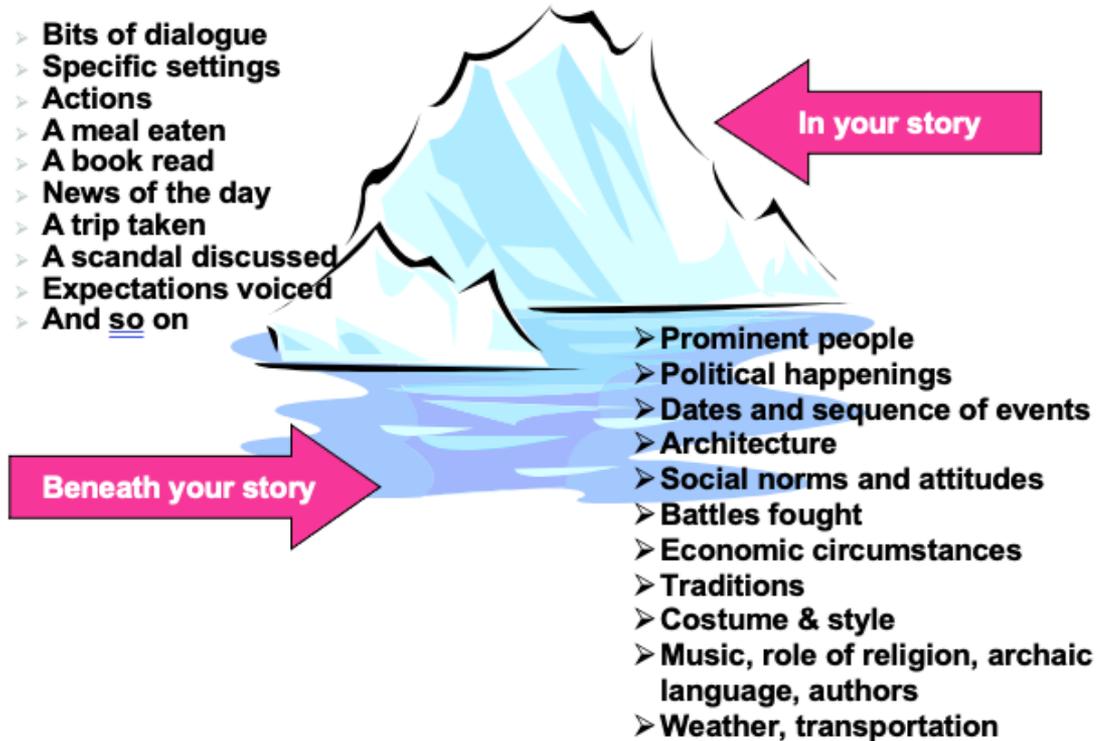
## Element 6: World-building

- **Every novel builds a world for readers**
- Hence the **customs, social arrangements, family environment, governments, religious structures, international alliances, military events, physical geography, layouts of towns and cities, and politics** of the time are relevant.
- For the female characters of your novel, the world in which women live is important, **so pay attention to female spaces and the sources of female power**
- “The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there.” Source: *The Go Between* by L.P. Hartley; *not only do, but think differently*

## Element 7: Theme

- **Theme generally transcends history.**
- And yet, theme must still be **interpreted within the context of a novel's time period.**
- Your theme might centre around ambition, loyalty, deception, revenge, love, temptation, power, fate/destiny, heroism, hope, coming of age, death, loss, friendship, patriotism
  - What is loyalty for a woman in 19th century China?
  - How does coming of age differ for a young 12th century girl and a young girl during WWI?
- **Are some themes more female-centered than others?**

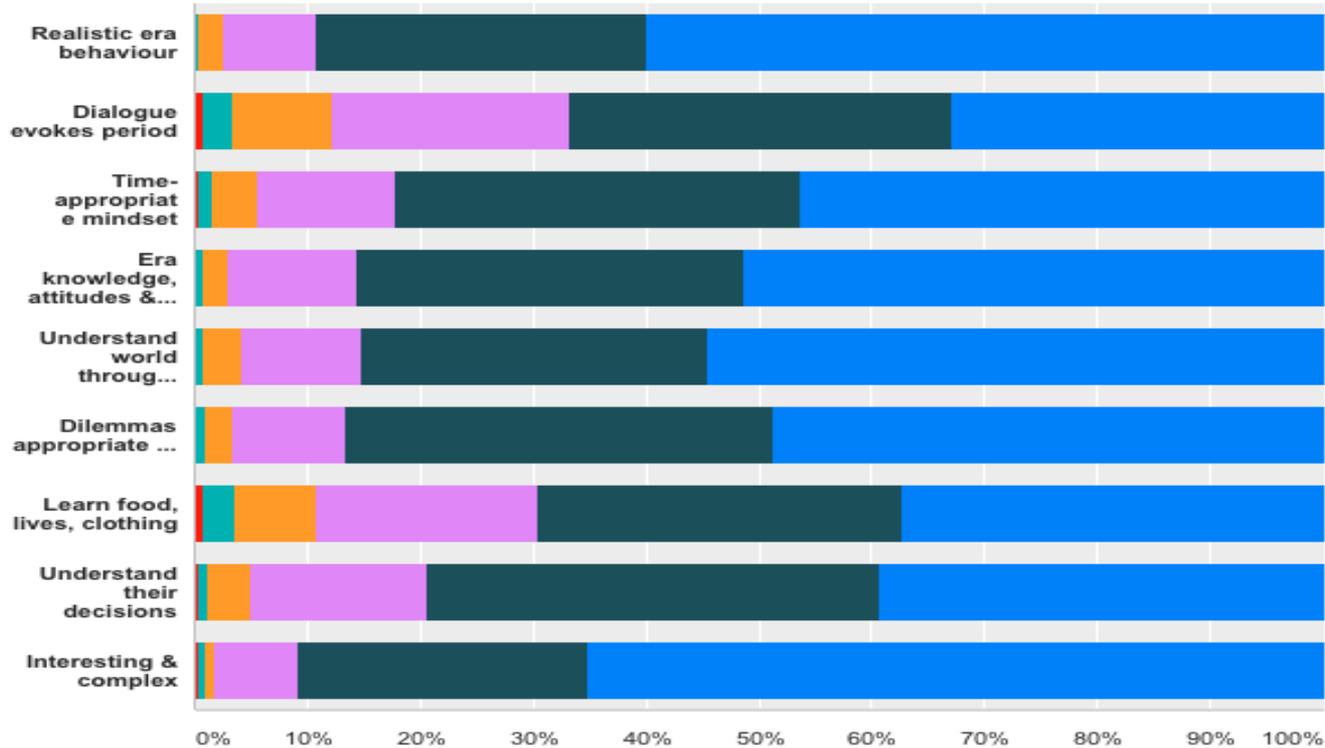
# Research- a perspective



# Research Tips

- Look for the small details
- Consider all the senses
- Cast a wide net - dive into other topics as you write
- Research 'with your feet' if at all possible
- Allow research to enhance your plot
- Historical timelines help paint the broad picture
- Sometimes understanding comes later
- Patience is required
- Go well beyond page 1 of a Google search
- Read academic articles
- Less than 5% of your research will 'make it' into your novel
- Be alert for the unexpected - serendipity will strike!

# In closing ... factors that make characters come alive



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# Questions?

**Gina Buonaguro contact info:**

<https://ginabu.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/GinaBuWriter>

[ginabu@gmail.com](mailto:ginabu@gmail.com)

**M.K. (Mary) Tod contact info:**

<https://awriterofhistory.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/mary.tod.3>

[mktod@bell.net](mailto:mktod@bell.net)

Presentation will be available on our websites as well as through The History Quill.