



# CLOSE-UP: RESEARCH

---

Glimmer Train Close-ups are single-topic, e-doc publications specifically for writers, from the editors of *Glimmer Train Stories* and *Writers Ask*.

---

## RESEARCH

---

### PAUL GRINER:

Research is seductive. The second-most common form of shrapnel found in soldiers wounded during the battle of Stalingrad was human teeth. D.W. Griffith, in the days before movie cameras had sophisticated irises, created fade-outs by slowly raising a cigar box lid in front of the camera lens. In 1944, as German V1 and V2 bombs began decimating London, Londoners, exhausted and afraid, found that food was surprisingly far easier to come by, and oranges—which hadn't been seen in the city for five years—were suddenly plentiful; the sight of orange peels on city streets was immensely cheering.

Even as a child I loved discovering such things, and now as a writer, I often get to use them. In fact, one of my favorite parts of work is researching things I need to know—the medical capabilities of a German WWI field hospital on the Eastern front, in order to determine what a nurse might have on



[Submission Calendar](#)

hand in an emergency, or the daily routine of a WWII London Air Raid Warden, to make a character's life seem realistic, or the ins and outs of movie-making in the 1920s and '30s, to grasp how a director of the time would think. Aside from the fun of learning odd new things and the need to understand my characters, research is important because certain images or facts will flesh out scenes.

I was a history major in college, so I often have a general idea of times I'm writing about, but of course to really understand them I have to research extensively. **I'll turn to history books first, but mostly for the footnotes and bibliography; I find that memoirs, letters, and diaries are the best sources, as they're filled with the minutiae that history books often don't have time for:** what the weather or cityscape was like, what scents were likely hanging in the air, the compromises large and small that people had to make in order to survive not only bombing but rationing of food and clothing and fuel. The internet has in some ways made this easier, though I still love the old-fashioned thrill of stumbling across unknown books in the stacks, because it's the unknown that often leads to greater understanding.

I tend to write and research in alternate bursts: sketching out a scene, knowing that I'll need realistic details to fill it out, putting the work aside as I go off to find them, then returning to the scene, working them in and often changing many of the events (and the characters' thoughts and feelings) because of them. And I almost always find more material than I can (or should) use; I put most of it in, then revise heavily, using as a general rule the idea that **if the details are merely fun, they don't belong; they have to serve the story, not slow it down.**

The great danger for me, because I so like research and because the actual writing can be so difficult, is that while researching, I can tell myself that I'm working and therefore don't have to sit down and write that troublesome chapter; I'll get to it when I know a few more facts. And that, of course, might mean reading two or three more books, jotting down notes as I go... **This is a real danger. Researching isn't writing, finally, no matter how crucial it may be,** since that difficult chapter isn't going to write itself no matter how many fun facts you might have assembled for it. When I find myself putting off writing for too long, I make myself sit down and do it. Still, I find research a crucial part of writing—getting it right is part of the seduction, after all—and when research and writing work together, the results can be wonderful. ■

**MAILE MELOY**, interviewed by Joshua Bodwell:

*Your stories—as well as your novels—span the globe and time. In addition to your many present-day and domestic settings, in your two collections of stories we experience retired men in Paris, a soldier in London during World War II, diplomats in Saudi Arabia, aristocrats in South America, and a Connecticut power plant in 1975. These stories carry the authority of experience. Can you talk a bit about your research process, as well as how you push beyond the maxim, “Write what you know.”*

**I think you have to find an emotional connection to the story, to make anyone else care about it, but I would find writing only what I know to be limiting.** All of the stories you mention above came from fragments of things people told me—about pranks on the pager phones in a power plant, for example, or about inheritance in Argentina. I start with those details, which feel real, and seem promising, and start writing around them. I tend to write what seems like the emotional story between the characters first, and then check the parts I got wrong, and add more details later. I’ve been thinking about a novel lately that would require more advance research than anything I’ve done so far, and I don’t know how that process might change if I do it. ■

**BARRY UNSWORTH**, interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:

*You’ve said that each work presents its own technical difficulties. Do your contemporary novels, such as *The Greeks Have a Word for It* and *After Hannibal*, pose different kinds of problems than your historical novels, such as *Morality Play* or *Sacred Hunger*?*

I think novels are always difficult to write. The degree of research required doesn’t really add to the difficulty. It’s an accompanying activity that takes time, and for which you need to have some talent and some interest in doing. Otherwise you don’t choose to write that kind of novel. Beyond that, I don’t think the degree of research involved makes any difference to the inherent difficulty of writing good fiction. The problems are always the same. You have to give life to the form. You have to try to make some sort of statement—not a didactic statement, but some statement about the condition of human life. Those are perennial problems, and find a variety of solutions. The difficulty is always the same. You are dragging the work from your own being. You are trying to do this transmutation, which is what fiction is all about. You’re trying to do it from within, and you can’t

ever be sure that the next time, or even this time, you are going to have the energy and the capacity of imagination to bring it off and pull it through. It's a strain accompanied by, in my case, self-doubt, failures of confidence, lapses, and so on. Perhaps this has more to do with the state of my liver than anything else. But I don't think that research in itself adds to the difficulty. I like doing it, and I'm rather sorry when I have to stop doing it and start writing the book. To go on researching forever would be quite pleasant.

*How have your research methods changed over the years? Do you research before you begin a novel, or do you research as you write?*

Always, there's a huge volume of research that never gets used, a tremendous amount of wastage, because, as distinct from the historian proper, you don't know what you need or what you're looking for. **As a novelist, you're not trying to prove anything, in that sense, but only trying to support your own falsehoods, really. It's a messy business.** You accumulate a lot of stuff, and then throw it away, but I think I've become more deliberate in my research techniques over the years. Even calling it research is a way of dignifying the thing. It's all background reading. One just reads what one needs and tries to accumulate the sort of information that can be transferred without showing signs of transference. You try to keep it seamless.

*That seems like one of the more difficult aspects of writing fiction set in the past. How do you blend fact and fiction so that the research doesn't take over the life of the narrative? Have there been cases when the research has gotten in the way?*

I think there is a risk in that. Perhaps it doesn't alter the essential form of the narrative, but if you stumble on something that seems intriguing, you naturally think, "Well, I'll incorporate that even though I hadn't the original intention of incorporating it." Quite a bit of research goes on, parallel with writing the book. As you're writing, you realize more and more fully the requirements that you have. You are constantly involved in a process of fleshing out the characters and amplifying and enlarging on the action and so on. Fresh needs arise as you go along. And it's quite an exciting thing to stumble on the unexpected. I was doing research in Sweden when I was writing *Sacred Hunger*, and I found, quite by chance, a crew list of a slave ship. It was a ship that set off from Liverpool in exactly the period I wanted. On this crew list, there was an Irish fiddler. I hadn't any intention of having an Irish fiddler on my slave ship, but suddenly it seemed a wonderful thing to do. The fiddler was involved in what was called "danc-

ing the slaves,” and giving them exercise, so that even in their chains they would be kept alive until they got to the market. That kind of discovery is constantly happening. There is sometimes a danger that you begin to feel superstitious. ■

### ERIC WASSERMAN:

The most common trap writers who incorporate research into their narrative can fall into is that their story is so laden with factual information that a loss of content control takes place and it becomes a story of ideas instead of people expressing those ideas through experience. I know this all too well because I just completed my first novel, and it required a vast amount of research.

Fiction writers can easily write themselves into a corner. For the writer of the researched story it almost inevitably happens when the details cease to be attached to characters, particularly when writing historical fiction, which is what I have been engaged in for a number of years. My manuscript reached over 1,000 pages at one point. Of the 450 pages I cut, the majority were sections where I had fallen in love with my research. I had to accept that while I am fascinated by every aspect of the early days of the House Un-American Activities Committee, Old Hollywood, and late 1940s anti-Semitism in Los Angeles, **readers care more about people affected by history than they care about historical facts.** ■

### ARIA BETH SLOSS:

I'd never done research for a story before this one [“Toward a Theory of Blindness” in *Glimmer Train* Issue 70]. I was always a big believer in the idea that you could imagine anything, but it became clear very quickly that I couldn't imagine the names of the trees in Madagascar or the kinds of crops Malagasy farmers grew. What was incredible for me was to feel how deeply the pictures I found through my online research affected me; working with words, it can be easy to forget how much we rely on sight.



Photo: Mark Ostrow

As fate would have it, I developed an allergy to my contacts right as I

started revisions on this story and had to start wearing glasses 24/7 for the first time. Like anything I try to pretend isn't there, my vanity pressed right down onto the fiction; Nick's a myopic character, and the idea that blindness might work thematically in this story in more ways than one made sense.

In the end, I felt like maybe I'd been partly right: You can't imagine all the physical details of anyone's life or home, but I do think that the bigger things—the fears and anxieties, the dreams and neuroses—are common property. **Writing is nothing if not an act of borrowing what's in plain view.** ■

### ABBY GENI:

I began “Captivity” six years ago, on a snowy day. After finding refuge from the cold in the public library, I wandered between the rows of books, and after a while I found myself thumbing through Jacques Cousteau's *Octopus and Squid: The Soft Intelligence*, a funny little treatise on his love for creatures with tentacles. I did not realize I was brainstorming a new story until I went home and wrote five pages about an octopus specialist. **My best stories come out of research like this. I tend to find my characters through their passions.**

As a writer, I am always researching. When I am lost without a new idea, or else stuck in the middle of an unfinished piece that began well but has since died on the page, I do research. It is the *other* that fascinates me. My characters have interests far beyond my own experience. They were raised on continents I have never visited and subscribe to religions I know little about. As people, they are generally unlike me; I tend to write from the point of view of a blind gardener in his sixties, a teenage runaway, or the adoptive parent of an autistic child. All of this requires still more research.

In the end, of course, it is my own story I tell, as all writers do. I discover mine by traveling away from myself. In reaching for the unknown—in that middle realm, somewhere between what I understand and what I have never before imagined—I feel the spark of inspiration begin to glow.

For my stories, I have studied ostrich farms, the stages of pregnancy, the lives of missionaries, schizophrenia, the history of the city of Karachi, the various types of drowning, and slugs. I have read about the Kel Tagelmust—“the people of the veil”—and the battles fought by Shalmaneser III

in Syria and Palestine. I ransack libraries for information on sharks. I buy books about hieroglyphics, earthquakes, and Indian cooking. I interview aquarists. I interview twins. I stay up late on YouTube to find videos of the Nigerian delta. This research may or may not make it into the finished draft. It is the searching that matters. Through the analysis of tarantulas and giraffes, ballet and gardening, my stories are born. **Some people say that you should write what you know, but I am driven to write what I learn.** ■

### GEORGE RABASA:

The creative writer unwittingly manages to make a mess of the ordinary thinking process: memory, imagination, and something approximating objective reality are all mooshed together into a dark, rich stew. **The fragrant mess is being constantly stirred, the recipe changing, if not hour by hour, certainly from one week to the next: memory agitates, imagination warps, new stuff is learned and enters the mixture.**

When the pursuit of new knowledge becomes systematic and purposeful, rather than a random gathering of tidbits, it's called research. And research is serious business in the writing of fiction; most stories of whatever length will require at least a little.

Research is as much a part of the creative process as memory and imagination. When I'm asked what an aspiring writer should study in college, I advise going easy on creative writing and literature, saving time for history, geography, biology, anthropology. Dig up courses that teach stuff. The more stuff a writer learns, the richer the soup.

For me, research and writing are commingled in an adventure of discovery. Just as I sometimes begin a story without knowing exactly where it's going, I often do research with no clear idea of what I'll do with the knowledge. ■

### TRAVIS HOLLAND, *interviewed by Jeremiah Chamberlin:*

*You're a boy who grew up in Florida and went to school in Georgia, yet you're writing about Stalinist Russia. Was that history background what drew you to this topic?*

Absolutely. Not only the background in history, but the discipline of the historian. Once you set your mind on a particular subject, it's the discipline

of how you go about learning as much as you can about that subject. So for me that consisted of using both secondary and primary sources, and that was something I learned when I was studying history as an undergrad.

*The book is certainly an act of preservation, an act of salvation. I was also impressed by the risk a writer takes going into a project like this and saying, "This is Babel." My guess is that one has to enter with a great deal of humility, and a great deal of trust and intuition. But certainly there must have been moments when you worried, or thought to yourself, "How do I get this right?"*

Yes. That's absolutely hitting it on the head, because I did feel both great humility and trepidation and a responsibility. I don't think a day went by when I was working on this book that I didn't say a little prayer to myself. A little prayer to the gods who watch over us as writers. "Let me get this right." It seemed to me so serious a duty.

*How many years was this process?*

Probably five years. It took me quite a while.

*It took even longer than that if you go back to those original stories.*

Exactly. It did have quite a hold over me. I did go in with the sense of trying to get it right. And I think that's one of the reasons why I did a tremendous amount of research for this book. I read about aspects of Soviet history—the revolutions, the Civil War, things that never show up in my book. I immersed myself in the Bolshevik Revolution. I tried to understand this notion of what the revolution was about, what the revolution had promised. ■

**COLUM McCANN**, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

With *Dancer*, I was going to write hundreds of different characters. I would go to every country in the world and learn all of these things. **Then I started writing and realized that if it bored me, then it was really going to bore a reader.** There comes a stage when you just have to let it go and say, "That's it. I've done the best I possibly can do, and it's time to move on." For me, in terms of research, one thing I love about it is that with each book I sort of go to university. I spend three or four years seeping myself into what that culture is, what that idea is, reading all the way around it. For Nureyev, I obviously tried to read stuff about dance, but most dance writing was boring to me. I also read Red Army pamphlets and things like

that, Russian poetry, getting to know Nadezhda Mandelstam, reading these great Russians and finding documentaries about psychiatric institutions in Russia, all sorts of stuff.

You surround your life with it. I have my own life, which is an ordinary sort of middle-class, white, immigrant life, and then I have this other life, which is in this room, or in whatever room I happen to write. That's when I travel these days—when I sit still. That's part of the joy of it, because you really feel like you're experiencing things. ■

**MELANIE RAE THON**, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

**Sometimes I have to stop doing research because it limits my imagination and keeps me at a distance from my people. But I love research!** As I write, I study photographs of lizards whose tails regenerate and buffalo that once traveled in herds twenty-five miles wide and fifty miles long. I learn about glacial movement, silver mining, tuberculosis, polio, diabetes, hurricanes, Haitian immigrants, the murder of Emmett Till, ivory carvings made by the Inuit, the battles of Song Be and Dalat, the lives of vireos, the appetites of coyotes. I've witnessed an autopsy and climbed in the Absaroka Mountains. Whatever my characters remember or experience, I too must understand.

*How do you handle all the material when it's time to edit?*

That's the desperate part. Many times I realize I've made the process so complicated for myself that I can hardly work through it. Sometimes I put aside all those notes for a while and try to remember the most important pieces. I try to see my people in time and place. I try to imagine what's most important to them, what each one would notice, how each person's memory would spin between past and present. Then I try to write a rough draft before going back to my notes to see if anything else is usable. I cut the story "Little White Sister" from two hundred pages to twenty. I made four hundred pages of notes before I began writing "Necessary Angels." So much can be discarded in the end; but for me, exploration is an essential part of the process. ■

ERIC WASSERMAN:

## *Incorporating research into a fictional narrative*

In 2002 I was working on a short story that required a bit of research concerning bone-marrow transplants, something I knew nothing about. Author Frederick Reiken made me realize where I had gone wrong. I had been so convinced that I had to stack the story with details to solidify my credibility that I had lost focus of the characters and their emotional struggles. I've never forgotten Reiken's advice: If your story requires research, you only need selective facts to establish believability. I removed eighty percent of the researched details and my story started coming together.



Photo credit: Jeannette Palsa

The most common trap writers who incorporate research into their narrative can fall into is that their story is so laden with factual information that a loss of content control takes place and it becomes a story of ideas instead of people expressing those ideas through experience. I know this all too well because I just completed my first novel, and it required a vast amount of research.

Fiction writers can easily write themselves into a corner. For the writer of the researched story it almost inevitably happens when the details cease to be attached to characters, particularly when writing historical fiction, which is what I have been engaged in for a number of years. My manuscript reached over 1,000 pages at one point. Of the 550 pages I cut, the majority were sections where I had fallen in love with my research. I had to accept that while I am fascinated by every aspect of the early days of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), Old Hollywood, and late 1940s anti-Semitism in Los Angeles, readers care more about stories about people *affected* by history than about untethered historical facts.

Here are two ways to look at research incorporated into fiction:

Go to Chapter 37 of Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code* (if you have the trade paperback skip the first part and start reading on page 158). While Brown is a wonderful storyteller, he has very little control over his content because he is stacking his research in a way that provides no movement for his characters and the reader is essentially provided an academic lesson

on the Knights Templar with two characters, Langdon and Sophie, simply standing around chatting. Brown's story stops cold because the researched components are not attached to his characters—Langdon and Sophie disappear from the narrative.

Contrast this with Glen David Gold's wonderful debut novel, *Carter Beats the Devil*. Read pages 146-147 (hardcover edition) and you will see two characters, Carter and Annabelle, in incremental but constant motion. They are doing something quite simple—walking up San Francisco's Telegraph Hill in the 1920s. All of the researched details placing these characters in the past reflect on who they are and what they are talking about—the narrative always hinges on Carter and Annabelle.

In draft after draft of my own novel I had mistakenly followed Brown's model. Once I eliminated those moments, I trusted myself more to see that with fewer details I could say far more than I could by including all of the historical facts that informed the writing.

**When fiction that incorporates research becomes a vehicle for facts, the magic begins to dissipate and readers are no longer invited to release themselves to an imagined world beyond their own. However, when research allows the writer to enliven characters' lives, that imagined world presents limitless possibilities. ■**

**VALERIE MARTIN**, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

*Aside from being familiar with Robert Louis Stevenson's novel, what other types of research did you conduct while working on Mary Reilly?*

I think I chose the Victorian period unconsciously, not realizing how much I knew about it. I've always enjoyed Victorian novels, reading about politics and the whole class structure of England, particularly life in London during that time. I did go to London halfway through the book, mostly to figure out some scenery. I was looking for a house that, in my imagination, would be Jekyll's house. I did find one.

I also found some diaries written by people from that period. One was written by Hannah Culwick, who was a servant of a lawyer and who married her employer. They had a strange and kinky relationship. She always wanted to remain a servant. She was resistant to any notion, including marriage, that implied that she should not be valued for the work she did. She took great pride in the fact that she was strong and could do

manual work. I was thinking of that type of character.

I also found a cook who kept wonderful diaries. Having access to their food, she did mean things to the people she worked for. She was different from Hannah. A lot of people at that time were documenting the lives of the working class. I found hundreds of books on the period at Mount Holyoke, where I was teaching at the time. I discovered in one of those books a photograph of an anonymous housemaid who I think of as Mary. I also found a schedule of a maid's duties, hour by hour. It was quite killing, the amount of work she had to do: up at five a.m. and a full day until nine p.m., with every hour accounted for. ■

**CHARLES BAXTER**, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

*How did you research the scientific element of Dorsey's character [in First Light]? Did you know much about astrophysics?*

I knew nothing about it. I don't like research much, but I couldn't put a character in a book and say that she's an astrophysicist or a cosmologist and not show that she has any idea what these things are. I did a lot of reading, mostly popularizations of contemporary physics. I took some physicists out to lunch and talked to them. I read accounts of Oppenheimer and the Los Alamos atomic-bomb project. The physics is cobbled together from what I read and what I thought Dorsey might think. There are places where she is too ambitious, where an actual, practical physicist is not likely to have thought what she thought. The novel does take some liberties with that material, but I think it's reasonably close to the sensibilities of a young and fairly gifted physicist. The physics—missing mass, for example—gives, I hope, a metaphorical dimension to her life. ■

**MYLA GOLDBERG**, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

*You incorporate cuttings from contemporary and older newspapers, conversations among soldiers, and documents pertaining to the present day fate of Wickett's Remedy, such as letters and newsletters. Are any of these artifacts real, or are they all invented? What does the narrative gain from this chorus of voices?*

All the newspaper articles are real. There were one or two really boring ones that stated some facts that I couldn't find, so I just wrote those

articles, but anything that is really striking came from actual newspapers. That was a total joy. I didn't know when I set out that I would be incorporating newspaper articles, but reading period newspapers was part of my research. As I was reading, I was coming across these amazing things and I realized I had to use them. They were so good. ■

LEE SMITH, *interviewed by Susan McInnis:*

**Our lives are all changing so fast. I think it is terribly important to capture family histories, not necessarily for publication, but for ourselves and family, to have a record of things.**

*Do you any have advice for getting started?*

You just have to call Aunt Ida up and say, "I want to come and visit. I want to come talk to you." You will be amazed. Before I began doing this kind of thing I thought Aunt Ida would be hard. She would say, "Don't bother me." I thought it would be hard to get her to speak up, that she would be put off, particularly by the tape recorder. But what you find is you can't shut Aunt Ida or anybody else up. People are just waiting to be asked. Old people in particular have a lot of stories to tell and nobody to listen to them.

There's no technique. I teach oral history classes, but there's nothing really to teach. The main thing is that you should be *really* interested. Not just ask questions, but get involved; talk back and say, "Oh yes, I remember Mama talking about that kind of cake," or whatever it is. React, very enthusiastically, and that will really get them going.

Don't plan to get Aunt Ida's whole story in an afternoon. Twenty or thirty minutes is probably enough. After you leave she'll think of everything she forgot to say. A couple of days later, she'll have a flood of things to tell you and you will have listened to the tape and thought of many more things to ask. In three or four conversations, you'll learn a great deal.

*Is this just great fun for you?*

It is. It's really fun for me, and it's wonderful for Aunt Ida. I have had people call me up and say, "I want you to come back over here." Or, "I want you to go talk to Olive." I have never had a problem with reticence. But then, I'm just learning things, documenting things for myself. Sometimes I'll learn things or hear stories that I will weave into fiction. Which makes me think if you plan to publish your interview, or you hope to, you should

tell them at the outset, “If these conversations turn out to be as interesting as I think, you know, I may want to type them up and show them to you, and see if I can get them published.” It’s only fair. To publish without their consent or their understanding is an invasion.

*I asked a bit earlier whether you ever worried you’d run out of stories. I’d think you’d worry there wouldn’t be time enough.*

I think that’s more the case. Ideas just trigger ideas. I was recently visiting my aunt Millie in a retirement complex in Florida and that was fascinating. This country is full of people over seventy-five still living very complicated and interesting lives. Not only do they have stories of their past to tell, but the lives they’re living now. There’s a whole new culture of the old that could inspire a novel set in a place like Aunt Millie’s. But when is there time? **There’s much more to write than time to write it in. ■**

**ANN PATCHETT**, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

*How does research fit into your writing?*

**Research is, for me—as it is for a lot of writers—the La Brea Tar Pits of the novel. It’s a great place to sink.** For *Bel Canto*, I did a lot of research on opera because I knew nothing about it. I felt like I had to understand and have a passion for it to write this book. And yet, at the same time, I was lying on the couch all day listening to opera and reading libretto. My friend, Karl, would go to work in the morning and say, “What are you going to do today?” and I would say, “Well, I’m going to read the libretto for *Alcina*, and then I’m going to read it while listening to the opera, and then I’m going to listen to it one more time without reading the libretto.” When I finished, it was time for dinner. ■

**ANDREA BARRETT**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*At what point do you stop your research and start writing?*

Usually after the initial subject matter has suggested itself, I’ll have to read pretty hard for a while just to get my feet under me. It’s hard to write something about Gregor Mendel if you don’t know what decades he lived in and you don’t know what city his monastery was in. You have to get a sense of the period and the place in the most general way. But often I can start when I have only that general sense, because the research is very specific

for the story or the sections of the novel. When I get to a part in *The Voyage of the Narwhal* where the men sail off on a ship, suddenly I realize that I don't know anything about how ships are built or where the stove is. I have to stop everything, and go learn about ships. As the ship comes up past Newfoundland to the edge of Greenland, I realize I don't know anything about Greenland. I don't know when the Danes went there or who administered what or what the Inuit peoples were doing or what the weather was like or what the coastline was like. The research lurches along stepwise.

*It takes you on a journey of your own.*

So much so. **There's a hidden map of each story, and each novel that exists beneath the story,** and which is the map of my own path through all these different areas of inquiry and exploration and learning.

*How do you manage all of this historical information in a narrative, and what is the effect you want the history to achieve in the narrative?*

**I want the history to be correct in so far as it can be, but I also, ultimately, want it to be subordinate in the sense that I am writing a novel and not writing history.** After the first draft or two, a lot of my efforts in further drafts and revisions are to take out much of the factual material I earlier worked so hard to learn and put in. I always put in too much. There are always long digressions and ponderous passages and things that no person would actually say to another person.

*Do you hate cutting them?*

I do initially. I'm always glad in the end that I did. I always get used to it. I tend not to miss them soon after I've cut them, even though, each time, I think, "Oh, that was so interesting. I wish I didn't have to take that out."

But you asked how I managed all the information, and maybe you meant that in a more literal sense. It's evolved over time, and it's still evolving, and I don't have a perfect system. I keep thinking I'll find one and I never do. For various books and sets of stories I've used various cumbersome, not very well-organized combinations of three-ring binders full of notes, index cards, hanging files, smaller files, larger files, boxes, tubs, tins, maps on the wall. There's always a ton of paper around. It's hard sometimes to remember what's where and be able to get my hands on the stuff I need about, say, a ship's berth. I used to take notes on yellow pads, so there would be heaps and heaps and heaps of yellow sheets piled in folders all over. I'm trying to do some of this on the computer now, but I'm just learning that. ■

ALLEN MORRIS JONES, *interviewed by David Abrams:*

*Did you have to do a lot of research for Last Year's River?*

I read a bunch of books, mainly in three different areas: New York in the 1920s, France during World War I, and Wyoming in the twenties. New York and France were both very, very easy to research—certain areas of the library, you'd turn around twice and knock over a half a dozen books on the subject. But Wyoming in the twenties was much harder. I ended up going through a lot of old newspapers and spent time at the local libraries going through microfilm.

And then I spent time walking around in the hills, taking photos. I bought bird and plant identification books. I'd hike around next to the river and see what kind of flora was growing there. So research is really all a kind of melange of resources—some of it's experiential and some of it's traditional library stuff.

*Did you feel like you needed to put yourself in Henry's environment—walking around where he would have walked—to get a better feel for it?*

There's no question about that. I can't imagine writing about a place without having seen it or physically experienced it. ■

ANN PATCHETT, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

*Did you get anything useful out of the research [for The Magician's Assistant]?*

Nothing. Of course, anything you want to know about magic, you can't find out in a book about magic. What I discovered was that magic was all about authority. I read one book by Harry Blackstone Jr., in which he said—and not in any condescending way—that the reason there are virtually no female magicians is that a woman cannot command the authority in a room. There are always going to be men and women who won't give their total suspension of disbelief to a woman the way that men and women will give it to a man. **Magic is about dominance in a way. Unless you have complete authority over the room, and every person believes you—because they're fighting it, everyone is looking for the trick—unless the magician can dominate the whole room, the magician can't succeed.** And women can't do that because there are both men and women who will never take women seriously.

That was such a fascinating thing to me. I realized that writing is a lot like magic. It's about dominating your audience, and making them believe what you say is true. What I ended up having to do was write the scenes in which Sabine is performing the acts with such confidence that it would be reasonable to the reader that she was not saying to herself in her narrative, "And now I'm doing this. Now I'm doing that." When you're reading it, you're thinking that she just totally knows what she's doing. That's the way writing is. You have to command the reader's belief, which I completely believe that women can do in books. It makes a perverse kind of sense to me that they can't do it on stage as magicians. ■

**CHARLES JOHNSON,**

*interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

Nobody had ever written a novel about Martin Luther King Jr. This shocks me. There are libraries of nonfiction, and I looked at as much of that as I could. I spent two years reading and looking at documentaries and speeches before I wrote a word because I didn't know who King was. It astounded me that a figure of King's magnitude had not been in our imaginative literature. Now I understand why this was probably so. King is hard to write about.

And by the same token, there was no novel about the slave trade until *Middle Passage*. There was nothing that put people on the boat and took the reader through the daily routine of what happened on the ship with specificity and detail. *Middle Passage* was actually the second of the six books I wrote in two years. I wasn't ready to handle it properly, and I told it from the wrong viewpoint. But I had begun the research, and I kept it up. I continued to learn about the Middle Passage. When I returned to the book in '83, I didn't need to do any more research on the slave trade. What I didn't know was the sea. So I spent six years looking at all of Melville and Conrad. I looked at nautical dictionaries and films relating to the sea. I took copious notes about what was on board. As they say in theater, how do you dress the set of a slave ship? What are the props? Everything has to be as exact as you can possibly make it. These are stories that need to be written. Fiction writers need a little time to catch up on these matters. And they will.

I want the next thing I write to be that kind of book. My questions right now are: What is civilization? Where are we? **What does it mean to be American these days? Do we have shared values, or are we all coming**

**from different Balkanized places? Are there many Americas? And what does that bode for the future? These are pressing questions.**

*How does writing historical fiction differ from writing about history? How are they related?*

To write a novel, you have to know the history, and then you have to make up a story. I truly admire what historians do because fiction writers base what they do largely on that. But as a novelist, you have to know everything. When I tackled a figure as eminent as Martin Luther King, I had to learn many things about him. I didn't know, for instance, what his favorite sermon was, and it was important for me to learn that.

*I didn't know that he smoked.*

Many people never knew that because he never let the camera take a picture of him while he smoked, except once or twice. There's one picture of him where he's leaning forward at a bus station, talking to Andrew Young, and there's a cigarette in his hand. When he died, there was a cigarette in his hand and somebody took it out. He had gone out on the balcony to smoke, and that's when he got shot.

As a writer, I need to know these things. One thing I couldn't discover was the brand of cigarettes he smoked. I needed to know the ordinary, everyday things. How did he shave? All of these things characterize an individual. Writers need to know those details about a fictional character. For historical characters, it's great because the historians have already done all the work for you. But what you have to have is a story. History is made of stories. History and fiction are means of interpretation based upon narrative—beginning, middle, and end—which, of course, is an artificial structure. You choose a piece of time that you want to work with. In that respect, the historians and the novelists are like brothers and sisters in their efforts.

*Do you think fiction writers are able to enter history in a way that historians cannot?*

One thing I like about *Africans in America*—which is the product of a ten-year project of historians working under the direction of Orlando Bagwell—is that it is the first history book I've ever seen that has short stories in it. It would be great to see more historical books like this because fiction writers can get into the moment and sink the reader into it in a way that historians can't.

I've talked to the historian Stephen Oates about this. I truly admire his *Let the Trumpet Sound*, which was one of my touchstone books for *Dreamer*. He said that he always wanted to go further with his book on King, but he felt that as a historian, one hand was tied behind his back. He had restraints that I didn't have. I could be speculative. I could connect things. One of the things I was delighted with about *Dreamer* was that I figured out what paper King was writing for a college course when he met Coretta. I could have her ask him what he's doing, what he's working on, and he could say, "Well, I'm working on this paper about..." There are a couple of episodes in *Dreamer* like this.

King didn't have a religious conversion as a child. It was in Montgomery during a night when he couldn't sleep and was wondering if he should bail out of the movement that he heard God talking to him. King gives this event only three or four sentences in his writings, but I wanted to spend some time with it. There are possibilities grounded in the historical record, but a historian might not reference these events and put them in larger contexts. One of the things I want to do as a novelist is look at all the pieces, come to some decision, and connect things. It's all there if you want to do the work. ■

**SUSAN ORLEAN,**

*interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

*Do you know Mark Derr's book, History of the Dog?*

I know the book. I don't have it. I have to get it. I tend not to read that kind of material that much—although that will be good research, now that I think about it.

*I must say it's a well-written, anecdotal, sensible account, and he does pursue the country/city switchover.*

That would be useful. Some of this, I just have to get the numbers. That's one I should read. I start getting very squeamish about reading stuff I want to be writing. I don't want to read something that is too much like what I am writing—not to have it in my head. I don't want to inadvertently or advertently suck too much of it in. So I am trying to look at sources that are more primary, if I can. ■



Photo credit: Gaspér Tringale

ANN PATCHETT, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*Were you a big opera fan before you wrote Bel Canto?*

I was not an opera fan at all. I knew nothing about opera, but I knew that I wanted an opera singer in the book, and I knew that the situation was operatic. I liked the idea of structuring the novel like an opera. I liked the idea of flirting with melodrama; you always hear that melodrama is something you should avoid. I buckled down and tried to learn about opera, and after many false starts, I found a book by Fred Plotkin, called *Opera 101*, that was the greatest book I've ever gotten my hands on. It explained everything to me and set me on my course. ■

CHANG-RAE LEE, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*Each of your novels seems to have required research of some kind. For example, Native Speaker must have required research about spying and speech therapy and inner-city politics; A Gesture Life required research about the Japanese comfort women, as well as research about the details of life as a soldier and medic; and Aloft required research about flying, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, and pregnancy, among other things. At what point do you conduct your research, and how do you go about finding what you're looking for?*

*A Gesture Life* took the most research, and in that case the research happened first. In the other books, I backed into it. With Jerry Battle I researched the plane. Both *Aloft* and the *Native Speaker* feature landscapes I knew quite well. With Henry Park, once I discovered who he was, I had to go back and learn more about industrial spies, or speech therapy. **Research is important, but it's not terribly important. Except for in *A Gesture Life*, which partly focuses on a historical period. I wanted to make sure that I had that period right so that it would be as accurate and authentic as possible.** ■

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*The Hours was the working title that Virginia Woolf used for Mrs. Dalloway. Specimen Days was the title of Walt Whitman's autobiography. How much research or immersion in the writers' works did you do before you began your own writing process?*

I did a great deal of research and reading for *The Hours*, less for *Specimen Days*. In the former book, I wanted not only to be as true as possible to the particulars of Woolf's life that day in the early twenties, though nothing I describe actually happened, but to write in my own voice, as influenced by hers as possible, without attempting to actually *do* her voice. Once I started writing I never referred back to Woolf's writing again, to avoid the temptation to imitate rather than interpret. I did do considerable research for the first third of *Specimen Days*, which is set in New York City in 1865, and I wanted to get that right. Unlike *The Hours*, though, I took the novelist's prerogative and played a little fast and loose with the facts. Nothing truly major, just little things. There weren't really any buildings taller than six stories in 1865. Stuff like that. The biggest violation on my part involved the climactic scene, the fire at what's meant to be the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, which didn't actually occur until 1911. I needed that calamity. I debated about whether to just go ahead and call it the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, and never mind about those forty-six years, but compromised and called it the Mannahatta Company instead. It was a violation of strict chronology, but not a violation of the spirit of the times—it's not as if the Triangle Shirtwaist fire was the first accident in which workers were killed. I felt honor-bound to put a brief apologia at the beginning of the book, to the effect that the worlds I portrayed were not entirely accurate, which may have been overkill, but I figured we get lied to enough already, why not err on the side of candor. ■

**ELIZABETH McCracken,**

*interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

*Does your experience as a librarian make you more apt to get lost in research?*

There's nothing better than the microfilm department of a library. I can get in trouble flipping through back issues of *Variety*. I try at a certain point to stop and forget a reasonable percentage of what I've learned so that I can deviate from it. **When I began the book that I'm writing now, I panicked and thought, "It's 1932 and I don't know if there was a vaudeville house open in that town at that time." It seemed essential that I be accurate, but at some point, I thought, "Who cares?"**

*Is it through research and constant reading that you write about even minor characters so distinctly?*

God knows that I have an absolute obsession with minor fame. My brother's corollary of Andy Warhol's "Everybody will be famous for fifteen minutes" is that every person is famous in some circle. I love to read in the newspaper about child prodigies and circus performers. This is probably directly tied to being a librarian. I like it when the record of a person is ephemera, when there's only an autographed picture or one newspaper article. Those documents resonate. I see a name on a vaudeville bill and think, "This may be one of the only records of this person." My interest in minor fame is directly traceable to that burst of excitement when I realize that maybe nobody has thought of this person for twenty years.

I did some research at the University of Iowa library, and there was this bizarre, random vaudeville archive. I found a stage manager's notes detailing what he told the performers, including the things they were not allowed to say on stage, the parts of their acts they had to cut. There were things like, "Tell comedian that he must cut the joke about the Ku Klux Klan and the Knights of Columbus playing a softball game," which is a reference that I've put into my novel. I have no idea what that joke was. That's what I like about research, the sense that nobody has figured it out yet. I take the easy way out because I'm not a good researcher. In order to connect the steps, I make them up. ■

**MARY GAITSKILL,**

*interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

*Veronica contains references to artists, music, the modeling business, and Paris, to name a few topics of interest. How much research did you have to do, and how did you go about it?*

**Most of the research I did involved the modeling world, about which I knew nothing. I was amazed at how different it was from what I pictured.**

In my original draft, before I did the research, Alison became a model when she was twenty-eight. That would never happen; that's when she would be quitting. A model starts her career between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, and realizing that changed things quite a bit. I talked to models. I read books written by models, some of which weren't bad. I read about the modeling industry. I talked to a photographer and a hairdresser who'd worked on modeling shoots. I went to a couple of shoots and a go-see.



Photo credit: Joe Gaffney

*How did you find all these things?*

A friend knew a couple of the models I spoke to, and they introduced me to others. Once I knew them, I asked them if I could go with them to a photo shoot or a go-see. ■

**MYLA GOLDBERG**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*Both Bee Season and Wickett's Remedy required research about everything from spelling bees and Jewish mysticism to Boston in 1918, the influenza epidemic of that same time period, and autopsies that were performed in the early twentieth-century epidemic. How do you go about conducting your research and at what point in the writing process do you begin?*

There are two levels of research for me. First there's the meta-research, which is the big questions, such as historical era, how people thought, what was happening in the world. That's where research happens in a very traditional mode for me. I'll sit down and read five or ten books and then go to the library and immerse myself in the archives they have there. Both *Bee Season* and *Wickett's* were research intensive, but *Wickett's* was more research intensive because while there were aspects of *Bee Season* that were removed from my personal experience, there was a lot that I already knew. With *Wickett's* I didn't know anything. I had to start from scratch. The whole book began with research, which was a weird place to start a book. *Bee Season* had been organic, inspired by an essay I read. I did do research in as much as I went to a national spelling bee and observed it, but as far as knowing what a Jewish family was like, I knew that already. I didn't have to do research there. I did spot research for the Hare Krishna information, and the Jewish mysticism. I took a class in college on Jewish mysticism because it sounded like a cool, funky, somewhat psychedelic concept. I had no idea at the time that it would be helpful for anything down the line. It was there that I first learned about Abraham Abulafia. The guy just stuck in my brain.

With *Wickett's* I had to get into the whole mind frame of that era. It was a five-year process, writing that book. For the first two and half or three years I did not read any modern writing. I only read books, recreationally as well as for research, that had been written before 1945, because I wanted to know how minds were working then, and also, whatever I'm reading always influences what I'm writing. I didn't want the writing to feel like it had been written in the 21st century. I wanted to go for a timeless voice.

By immersing myself in that period, I could eject the more modern, spare sentence structures we have now for the more ornate punctuation they had back then. That was one aspect of the research. Then there was a lot of reading about the influenza epidemic. There were experiments on humans at the end of the novel, and I tracked down the actual government documentation that talked about those experiments at the Library of Congress. That was really fun. I love libraries. That's all the large-scale stuff. I was reading newspapers and magazines and secondary documents written by historians.

The other kind of research that's really fun is the nitty-gritty research, and that's where the internet is a savior for the modern writer.

*How did you use the internet to do this type of research?*

The autopsy material in *Wickett's* I tracked down online. In the days before the internet, if I'd been trying to track that down, I'd have to set aside an entire day to go to the library to see if I could track down a book in which that sort of thing might be talked about. Here, I went to Google and I typed in "autopsy 1900s," and I got this site of a modern-day medical examiner who is also into the history of autopsies. I emailed him and told him that I was writing a book and there was going to be an autopsy set in 1918 and I wanted to know what would be different from what he'd described on his website. Within a week I had my answer. I didn't have to do anything. Later on I needed to know the weight of a fluid-soaked lung. I went to Google and once I figured out the right words to type in there, I found the weight of a fluid-soaked lung. In *Bee Season*, the internet was perfect for figuring out what the television prime-time lineup was in the eighties. **The Library of Congress website is also wonderful for historical research.** They've uploaded so much. They've got a rich online collection. I was able to find, online, a recording of a guy sitting around a campfire in Texas, singing about an influenza epidemic in the thirties. They'd uploaded it to their digital archives. I could sit in my home in 2003 and listen to this song. ■

**ALEXANDER PARSONS**, *interviewed by Andrew Scott*:

*What kind of research have you done for your novels? Did you interview prisoners for Disneyland and WWII veterans for Shadows?*

To take the last part of the question, yes and yes. For *Leaving Disneyland*, the interviews, especially with the man I modeled Doc after, were crucial to

capturing speech rhythms and sensibility. Interviews weren't as helpful for *In the Shadows of the Sun*, in large part because so much time had passed between the events I was writing about in the early 1940s. Instead, manuscripts (journals, notes, and books) written nearer to the dates of the war, before memory had a chance to come in and neaten things up via retelling and retelling, were the best way to find the details and sense of events that I was looking for. **An unpublished journal from a POW camp where virtually every entry is centered around portions of food or how to *quan* a piece of garlic gives a real sense of what it's like to be slowly starving.** And, too, it's one thing to write a book about one's experiences as a prisoner knowing the outcome of the war, and quite another to document it without such knowledge.

In addition to this sort of research I watched documentaries and drove through those areas where the books were set to shoot photo sequences that I'd return to when drafting scenes. Hearing sound arc over the high walls of Leavenworth with the eye of an armed guard in a gun tower trained on you, or noting that there are two cemeteries in a small town—one Hispanic, one white—gives you very suggestive material to shape. I also pretty much interviewed anyone who might have even a glancing connection to the material. For example, in writing *In the Shadows of the Sun*, I interviewed a geologist and a rock hound in the area to get a sense of the mining history and composition of the land. I also collected mementos—everything from rocks, shotgun-shell casings, bits of radioactive glass, fence staples, self-published books on the history of various towns, archival photos, and bark. All of this stuff would sit out on the desk and I'd just sort of stare at it while I was writing, trying to get into that fugue state where you feel like someone is channeling the words through you. ■

**D.B.C. PIERRE**, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

*What kind of research did you conduct for Ludmilla's Broken English? Is it true that you visited the region with Doctors without Borders?*

They took me for about a fortnight to the borders in the Caucasus where the refugees were. It was amazing. **I had already drafted the scenes in the novel dealing with this and wanted to go to see how close I was. I immediately had to downgrade Ludmilla's lifestyle. I had given her a hard life, but the reality is far too brutal to describe in fiction, even too vulgar for me.** There are a couple of emblems in the novel of how brutal it is, but

nothing near the real thing. It would have been too ugly for any kind of comedy. That's for nonfiction. So I downgraded her character, put her back in coach. The setting, the pace, and the smell of it is from that trip. ■

**SIRI HUSTVEDT,**

*interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

The book I'm writing now [*What I Loved*] is narrated in first person by a sixty-eight-year-old man who was born in Berlin. I've been reading about the Jewish community in Berlin in the twenties and thirties. Most of this will never appear in the novel. It's just background for the story to take place in New York many years later. But I want to know; I want to have it right even if it's never mentioned. I think sometimes hiding behind the curtains of a book is that knowledge. I know I'm not going to get it wrong. I even found an apartment in Berlin; I went there and have it in my mind. ■

**ANDREA BARRETT,** *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

*How were you able to create the setting of the Arctic region [in Voyage of the Narwhal] with such clarity and specificity? How were you able to conjure this place in your mind and in your senses?*

Most of it was from reading. In those Arctic expeditions, everyone was keeping diaries: the ship's doctor, the ship's naturalist, sometimes several of the officers, almost always the captain, sometimes the crew. So there's a lot of material available from a lot of expeditions, and a lot of specificity in those materials, and also in the letters—descriptions of the weather, of the cold. Those were a huge help. I was actually able to go to the Arctic and see it for myself when I got a Guggenheim fellowship between the second-to-last and last drafts. I went up to the north coast of Baffin Island for a couple of weeks and looked at the sky and the plants. It did help. The book was the better for that. ■

**MARK SALZMAN,** *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

*Before you really got into the writing of Lying Awake, you did a year of research, reading up on the cloistered life, and then you decided that you had to meet some of these people. What did it feel like when you first decided that you needed to do that? Were you excited or thinking, Shoot, what was I*

*thinking? Why would they talk to me? And then, after that, what was it like to meet them?*

Well, absolutely, the idea seemed daunting. For one thing, I figured here are these people who don't—obviously don't—want to be disturbed. How am I going to get an introduction without being intrusive? And then I would have to be right upfront about the fact that I'm not Catholic. And here I'm writing about a woman who has a neurologic disorder and perhaps mistakes what she experiences...

*It might seem disrespectful.*

Yeah, it just seemed to me that they would have every reason in the world to just pass on the opportunity to take their time to help me out. It was daunting. So I went about it the long way. I sent out my feelers as far as I could and finally got an introduction to an abbot, a male contemplate who is the head of a monastery in Santa Fe. He has an email address, so we started emailing back and forth, and, because of this person who introduced me to him, he was willing to hear me out. Well, he was very welcoming. He said, Listen, why don't you come out, visit our monastery for a while. First of all, we have a guest house; you're welcome to that. That'll give you a sense of the day-to-day life. It applies, male or female doesn't matter. Then let me do my best to try and help get one of the nuns to come and talk to you. So I flew out there, rented a car, stayed at a little motel, drove out there, and there at the end of a seventeen-mile dirt road—well, it had rained the day before and I started on this dirt road, and before a mile passed the car sank in the mud. It was real panic because I was in the middle of nowhere.

*Waiting for the dirt to dry.*

Yeah, so I dug the car out and knew I wasn't going to try to drive another sixteen miles through that. So I backed out and decided to wait 'til the next day. Next day, same thing. Three days in a row, got washed out. And they don't have a phone, so I couldn't tell them, and here they were expecting me. I felt really bad. And angry—what a waste. So on the last day I decided to go out walking, and I just wandered around from near where I was staying. All of a sudden I looked up and there's a sign that says Mt. Carmel Rd. And I thought, Well, what a coincidence. Under it was another sign that said Carmel Light Monastery. Now, I knew that there was a Carmel Light Monastery in Santa Fe. I'd heard about it, but I didn't know it was there. I had no intention of just walking up and knocking on their door. But that is

exactly what I did, because at that point I was so frustrated, and it seemed so wild that that would happen that I figured, Well, I'll tell them. So I went up and buzzed this little buzzer near this round metal thing that you can't see through, and a few seconds later a little voice said, "Praise be Jesus Christ, may I help you?"

*Wow.*

I told my story to this voice. Then she said, Wait a moment, I'll speak to our prioress. Then another voice came, and after she heard me out she said, Step through the door to your right. So I did, and there was a little parlor and a curtain. A few minutes later, the curtain opened—the little finger pulled it across. She looked at me. She said, I thought a novelist would be older. So that was her first impression of me. That I was too young. But anyway, she was fabulous. From the first minute I looked at her and talked with her, I felt comfortable with this woman. From the start she seemed to think that there was a reason that I had come up that road, and she was convinced that she should do everything that she could to help. She could not have been more helpful, more enthusiastic. She let me borrow so many reading materials and answered all my questions. It was so fruitful that I ended up going back several times more and spending time with her. And then going early in the morning and sitting in the chapel on the other side of the screen from them, listening to them do the chanting. That's what got things going in the right way. Not only getting an authentic feel for what's going on, but also having that personal connection with a woman who impressed me so deeply, that really raised the bar on how respectfully to treat this whole world. Once I met her, I wanted these characters to be sympathetic. I wanted them to be warm. I wanted them to be interesting.

*You wanted them to be real.*

Yeah. Because she was so deeply kind and generous and she was extremely revealing and trusting. It was just great. It was a deep satisfaction to be able to send her the book, and to get a letter, right away, back. She really enjoyed it, and that's satisfying. She seemed to have unshakeable confidence that the book was not going to be exploitative. And I thought so, too, but how could I tell her that? You can't just say, Well, it won't be. ■

**ALLEN MORRIS JONES,**  
*interviewed by David Abrams:*

*Did you have to do a lot of research for Last Year's River?*

I read a bunch of books, mainly in three different areas: New York in the 1920s, France during World War I, and Wyoming in the '20s. New York and France were both very, very easy to research—certain areas of the library, you'd turn around twice and knock over a half a dozen books on the subject. But Wyoming in the '20s was much harder. I ended up going through a lot of old newspapers and spent a lot of time at the local libraries going through microfilm.

And then I spent time walking around in the hills, taking photos. I bought bird and plant identification books. I'd hike around next to the river and see what kind of flora was growing there. So research is really all a kind of melange of resources—some of it's experiential and some of it's traditional library stuff.

*Did you feel like you needed to put yourself in Henry's environment—walking around where he would have walked—to get a better feel for it?*

There's no question about that. I can't imagine writing about a place without having seen it or physically experienced it. ■

**ANDREA BARRETT,** *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

*What are you working on now?*

I'm just starting a novel after a long time of initial research. It's a new period for me, set in 1916 and 1917, just before the U.S. enters World War I. It takes place in Saranac Lake, which is where "The Cure" is set, and it's about Leo Marburg, the grandfather of the Marburg sisters, who's in a sanatorium there. I've never written about the early twentieth century, and I know the period very poorly. It's taken me almost two years to move myself out of things Victorian and up a handful of decades. ■

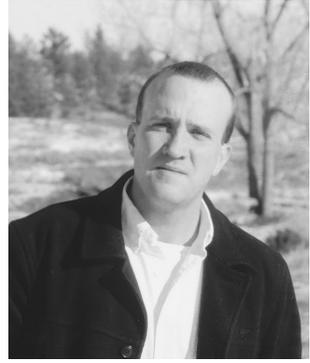


Photo credit: Mark Jones

**HA JIN**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*How much research do you typically have to do?*

It depends. For instance, my next book [*War Trash*] is set in Korea. The whole book is told by a prisoner in the American prison camps, so I had to do a lot of research about everything from clothing to food in order to create the material sensations. Once I wrote a draft of this story, I realized there were things that I had to understand better, so I read a lot of books and looked at pictures to find the right details. It's a very laborious process, but it helps me understand the characters and find the small details of the world they inhabit. Whenever I come across a good detail, I feel pleased. ■

**SANDRA CISNEROS**, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

*In weaving this story [Caramelo] you include what seems to be factual information about Mexican history, Mexican-American history. Some seems not quite believable. For example, you describe conquistador Hernando Cortez, when asked by the king about the topography of a particular part of Mexico, crumpling up a piece of paper and tossing it on a table. That was a wonderful description, but when I thought about it I was skeptical about whether that was a real event. It seemed too dramatic.*

He did. [*Laughs.*] According to the story, to my source, that's what he did to describe the landscape of Oaxaca. I was so startled. I found it in one of these old travel books, these guides to Mexico from the thirties, forties, and fifties. It was a footnote.

*What I am speaking to is how you discern, in a novel, what is fictitious and what is factual. Did Elvis Presley really...*

See, there is another one. Elvis Presley really allegedly said that.

*Presley was quoted, when he was making a movie in Mexico, as saying he wouldn't kiss a Mexican?*

Yes, the newspapers reported that he said that. Whether he really said that is subject to debate. But was there a big national boycott? Yes! Did everyone get up and get pissed? Yes! That is true. ■

**ANDRE DUBUS**, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

For this Western, for instance, the next thing I have to do is call a music store and find out what would be a nice waltz to play on the gramophone in 1891. There's not a lot of necessary research in my work, but if I have to, I do it. There's always somebody to ask, and people like to tell you about their work. ■

**MARIA FLOOK**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*How much research do you do before you write?*

I research things as I write. When I'm working, I'm already immersed in characterization and in the story map, and I sort of know where I'm headed, but I often stop to work on some fact checking, finding the technical word or identification for something. For instance, today I called the Harvard Map Library to find out the correct name for those raised, three-dimensional maps. They're called *tactile relief maps*, with the molded topography.

Other times I might do more complex research that will actually steer my narrative into a new and exciting bend. In my first novel, I contacted the Chrysler Historical Archives to get the specs on the maiden Plymouth Duster. They sent me 8x10 glossies and their ad campaign from that year; their slogan was "Plymouth Makes It!" I've visited many spots—coast guard stations for *Open Water*, a plastic-flower warehouse, a motorboat show room, the Arrow Shirt Company's corporate offices on Madison Avenue, and for the memoir, I was in touch with Naval Base Norfolk. I had to find out what ships were in port when my sister lived there. I had to know more about the carrier, the *Independence*, that she went on, and I researched what was happening in Vietnam at that time. ■

**BARBARA SCOT**, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

*You did a great deal of research. There is a lot of history in Prairie Reunion.*

As a historian, it saddens me that more of it couldn't have been included. I could have filled my first draft with footnotes; I found out so much about the area. I was trying to understand my mother, and then I had to understand my father, the man she'd loved, and to understand them, I had to understand the Scotch Grove Presbyterian Church that was the basis of the

community for all of us. That turned out to be such an experience. Their thoroughly intact records go back to 1887, which is not that unusual. I highly recommend anyone, whether they're interested in their own family history or the history of place, to check into their little church records. It's just amazing what is there. Now you would have to raid psychiatrists' offices to get what I found out in that church. ■

**ELIZABETH COX**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

When someone suggested that I write a novel, I knew that I would not read a book on the novel, at least not at first. First I took a course in the sonata and symphony at Duke University. I studied the way a sonata develops the statement, development, and reiteration of that form, and how reminding phrases come back all the way through. I wrote my first novel, *Familiar Ground*, listening to symphonies and sonatas—Beethoven, Dvorak mostly. With my second novel, I took a course in astronomy and physics, and incorporated some of the astronomy into the book. At first I incorporated too much. When I showed it to a friend of mine she said that she “just skipped over those parts.” So I took most of it out.

*Did you find that the bigger idea of it gave you a lens through which you could look at what was happening in your story?*

Yes. Exactly. I find that I understand complexities by looking at something larger. For my third novel, I read nature writing and biology, and I used much of my research in *Night Talk*. In this next novel, I'm reading about string theory in physics. Difficult reading, but Brian Greene, an expert on string theory, makes the ideas more accessible. Basically I love the idea that particles are divided into electrons, protons, and neutrons, which are made up of quarks, then upquarks, downquarks, neutrinos, then, finally, strings. Everything in us and around us is vibrating. Isn't that a beautiful thought?

*It goes back to the symphony idea that you started with.*

Right. It goes back to music. I can't imagine how I will use any of my reading this time, but I'm learning something. ■

**ANDRE DUBUS III**, interviewed by John McNally:

I do find myself doing a lot of research. It's a tricky area for writers: How do you incorporate all you've learned without bogging down or killing the

story? When do you do it? Should you do it?

For me, I tend to research as I go along and only once I've written myself into a corner of life about which I'm completely ignorant. After *House of Sand and Fog* came out, I wrote what I thought was a new novel. My imagination, for whatever weird reasons of its own, brought me a character who had been raised on a dairy farm. Well, I don't know jack about dairy farms, and don't even drink milk! So I called dairy farms, visited one, visited a feed-and-grain store, learned a lot. Research material tends to give us a lot to work with and can even send the story down a much truer and deeper path. I got pumped up and wrote and wrote and wrote. After two years, I had over two-hundred handwritten pages and was feeling a bit lost, a normal feeling, like I'd stumbled off the trail and would never find it again. Whenever that happens, I stop writing and just read the whole thing from the beginning, telling myself I've never seen one word of this thing before, reading it like a reader and not the writer. What I found was eighty straight pages of the dullest prose ever about dairy farming! Elmore Leonard said once, "Try to leave out the parts the reader skips over." All that dairy-farm life I needed to know, but the reader didn't. I cut it all, except one page, and ended up with a forty-seven-page story called "The Bartender" [published in *Glimmer Train Stories*].

So that's one of the dangers, but I do believe strongly it's something writers need to do. If I read of an East Coast birch tree in an Arizona desert, it's going to stop me and kill that dream the writer's working so hard to cast. I also think taking the time to find the real tree, if there is one, will help the writer go more deeply into the story in a way he or she could never have foreseen. I've just finished the draft of a new novel, and, for the first time, am spending weeks researching the next one because I know next to nothing about that world I'm about to step into. I'm getting all pumped up again, which means I'll probably make the same mistake as before and put in all this stuff I'm going to have to cut! ■

**JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

The only research I do with my books is to immerse myself in the music of the time, to look at the popular culture of the time, to look at the icons. ■

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*The Farming of Bones is a love story amidst the 1937 massacre of thousands of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic, on orders from the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. How did you go about conducting the research for this book?*

I visited the places where the story takes place. Even though it was many years later, I went to read testimonies and talk to people. I read a lot, even unrelated things that were written in the same year so that I could get a sense of the period and imagine myself there. I needed physical details about what kinds of cars they were driving, what kinds of clothes they were wearing. I did research like that for about a year and a half before I started writing. A story in *Krik? Krak!* began to visit that time, but in a very different way. I didn't have the novel until I had the main character, Amabelle. I was reading an old issue of *Collier's* magazine with a story of the massacre. It was about a Dominican colonel who killed his maid at the dinner table to prove his loyalty to Trujillo, the president of the Dominican Republic. I realized the maid was Amabelle, but she lives. Once I had that, and all the research, I could enter the story. ■





# CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

[www.glimmertrain.org](http://www.glimmertrain.org)

**ABRAMS**, David. Interviewer. Published in *Esquire*, the *Readerville Journal*, the *Missouri Review*, *Greensboro Review*, *North Dakota Review*, *Fish Stories*.

**BARRETT**, Andrea. Story collections: *Ship Fever*, *The Voyage of the Narwhal*, *Servants of the Map*. Novels: *The Air We Breathe*, *Lucid Stars*, *Middle Kingdom*, *The Forms of Water*, *Secret Harmonies*.

**BAXTER**, Charles. Novels: *The Soul Thief*, *Saul and Patsy*, *Shadow Play*, *The Feast of Love*, *First Light*. Story collections: *Gryphon*, *A Relative Stranger*, *Through the Safety Net*, *Believers*, *Harmony of the World*. Books on writing: *Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction*, *The Art of Subtext: Beyond Plot*. [charlesbaxter.com](http://charlesbaxter.com)

**BIRNBAUM**, Robert. Interviewer. Editor-at-Large of the literary and cultural website [IdentityTheory.com](http://IdentityTheory.com)

**BODWELL**, Joshua. Interviewer. Work in *Threepenny Review*, *Ambit*, *Poets & Writers*, *Art New England*, *Fiction Writers Review*.

**CHAMBERLIN**, Jeremiah. Interviewer. Work in *New York Times Book Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Fiction Writers Review*.

**CISNEROS**, Sandra. Novels: *Have You Seen Marie?*, *Carmelo*, *The House on Mango Street*. Short-story collection: *Woman Hollering Creek*. Poetry: *My Wicked*, *Wicked Ways*, others. [sandracisneros.com](http://sandracisneros.com)

**COX**, Elizabeth. Novels: *The Slow Moon*, *Night Talk*, *The Ragged Way People Fall Out of Love*, *Familiar Ground*. Story collection: *Bargains in the Real World*. Wofford College. [elizabethcox.net](http://elizabethcox.net)

**CUNNINGHAM**, Michael. Novels: *By Nightfall*, *Specimen Days*, *The Hours*, *Flesh and Blood*, *A Home at the End of the World*. Nonfiction: *Land's End*. [michaelcunninghamwriter.com](http://michaelcunninghamwriter.com)

**DANTICAT**, Edwidge. Novels: *Breath, Eyes, Memory*; *The Farming of Bones*; *The Dew Breaker*. Story collection: *Krik? Kruk!* Travel: *After the Dance*. Memoir: *Brother, I'm Dying*. Two novels for young people.

**DUBUS**, Andre. Six story collections, his last being *Dancing After Hours*. Novels: *The Lieutenant*, *Voices from the Moon*. Essays: *Broken Vessels*, *Meditations from a Moveable Chair*.

**DUBUS**, Andre III. Story collections: *Dirty Love*, *The Cage Keeper*. Novels: *The Garden of Last Days*, *Bluesman*, *House of Sand and Fog*. Memoir: *Townie*. [andredubus.com](http://andredubus.com)

**FLOOK**, Maria. Novels: *LUX*, *Open Water*, *Family Night*. Nonfiction: *Invisible Eden*, *My Sister Life: The Story of My Sister's Disappearance*. Emerson College. [mariaflook.com](http://mariaflook.com)

**GAITSKILL**, Mary. Novels: *Veronica*; *Because They Wanted To*; *Two Girls*, *Fat and Thin*. Story collections: *Don't Cry*, *Bad Behavior*. Syracuse University. [marygaitskill.com](http://marygaitskill.com)

**GENI**, Abby. Story collection: *The Last Animal*. Work in *New Stories from the Midwest*. [abbygeni.com](http://abbygeni.com)

**GOLDBERG**, Myla. Novels: *The False Friend*, *Wickett's Remedy*, *Bee Season*. Essays: *Time's Magpie*. Stories in *Harper's*, *McSweeney's*, *failbetter*. [mylagoldberg.com](http://mylagoldberg.com)

**GORDON**, Mary. Novels: *Pearl*, *Spending*, *Final Payments*, *The Company of Women, Men and Angels*, *The Other Side*. Also a book of novellas, *The Rest of Life*; a story collection, *The Stories of Mary Gordon*; a book of essays, *Good Boys and Dead Girls*; and a biography, *Joan of Arc*. Memoirs: *The Shadow Man*, *Seeing Through Places*. Barnard College.

**GRINER**, Paul. Novels: *The German Woman*, *Collectors*. Story collection: *Follow Me*. University of Louisville. [paulgriner.com](http://paulgriner.com)

**HOLLAND**, Travis. Novel: *The Archivist's Story*. Stories in *Five Points*, *Ploughshares*, *The Quarterly*.

**HUSTVEDT**, Siri. Novels: *The Summer Without Men*, *The Sorrows of an American*, *What I Loved*, *The Blindfold*, *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*. Essays: *A Plea for Eros*, *Mysteries of the Rectangle*, *Yonder*. Poetry collection: *Reading to You*. [sirihustvidt.net](http://sirihustvidt.net)

**JIN**, Ha. Novels: *War Trash*, *Waiting*, *The Crazed*, *In the Pond*. Story collections: *Under the Red Flag*, *Ocean of Words*, *The Bridegroom*. Three books of poetry. Boston University.

**JOHNSON**, Charles. Novels: *Faith and the Good Thing*, *Dreamer*, *Middle Passage*, *Oxherding Tale*. Story collections: *Dr. King's Refrigerator*, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. Nonfiction books include *Turning the Wheel*, *Being and Race*.

**JOHNSON**, Sarah Anne. Interviewer. Editor of *Conversations with American Women Writers* and *The Art of the Author Interview*. [sarahannejohnson.com](http://sarahannejohnson.com)

**JONES**, Allen Morris. Novel: *Last Year's River*. Co-editor of *Where We Live: The Best of Big Sky Journal*.

**LEE**, Chang-rae. Novels: *The Surrendered*, *Native Speaker*, *A Gesture Life*, *Aloft*. Princeton University.

**LEVASSEUR**, Jennifer. Interviewer. Editor, with Kevin Rabalais, of *Novel Voices: 17 Award-Winning Novelists on How to Write, Edit, and Get Published*.

**MARTIN**, Valerie. Novels: *Trespass*, *Property*, *Italian Fever*, *Mary Reilly*, *The Great Divorce*, *A Recent Martyr*, *Set in Motion*, *Alexandra*. Story collections: *The Consolation of Nature*, *Love*. Biography: *Salvation*.

**McCANN**, Colum. Novels: *TransAtlantic*, *The Soul of a City*, *Zeli*, *The Great World Spin*, *Dancer*, *This Side of Brightness*, *Loti*. Story collection: *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, *Everything in This Country Must*. [colummccann.com](http://colummccann.com)

**McCRACKEN**, Elizabeth. Novels: *The Giant's House*, *Niagara Falls All Over Again*. Story collection: *Here's Your Hat*, *What's Your Hurry*. Memoir: *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination*. [elizabethmccracken.com](http://elizabethmccracken.com)

**McINNIS**, Susan. Interviewer. Center for Distance Education, Fairbanks, Alaska.

**MELOY**, Maile. Novels: *A Family Daughter*, *Liars and Saints*, *The Apothecary*. Story collections: *Both Ways Is the Only Way I Want It*, *Half in Love*. [mailemelo.com](http://mailemelo.com)

**ORLEAN**, Susan. Nonfiction includes *Rin Tin Tin*, *My Kind of Place*, *The Orchid Thief*. Staff writer for the *New Yorker*. [susanorlean.com](http://susanorlean.com)

**PARSONS, Alexander.** Novels: *Leaving Disneyland, In the Shadows of the Sun*. University of Houston.

**PATCHETT, Ann.** Novels: *State of Wonder, Run, Bel Canto, Taft, The Magician's Assistant, The Patron Saint of Liars*. Memoir: *Truth and Beauty: A Friendship*. [annpatchett.com](http://annpatchett.com)

**PHILLIPS, Jayne Anne.** Novels: *Quiet Dell, Lark & Termite, Shelter, MotherKind, Machine Dreams*. Story collections: *Fast Lanes, Black Tickets*. Work in *Granta, Harper's, DoubleTake, Norton Anthology of Contemporary Fiction*. Brandeis University. [jayneannephillips.com](http://jayneannephillips.com)

**PIERRE, D.B.C.** Novels: *Lights Out in Wonderland, Ludmilla's Broken English, Vernon God Little*. [dbcpierre.com](http://dbcpierre.com)

**RABALAIS, Kevin.** Interviewer. Editor, with Jennifer Levasseur, of *Novel Voices: 17 Award-Winning Novelists on How to Write, Edit, and Get Published*.

**RABASA, George.** Novels: *The Wonder Singer, Floating Kingdom, The Cleansing*. Story collection: *Glass Houses*. [georgerabasa.com](http://georgerabasa.com)

**SALZMAN, Mark.** Novels: *Lying Awake, The Laughing Sutra, The Soloist*. Memoirs: *Iron & Silk, Lost in Place*. Nonfiction: *True Notebooks*.

**SCOT, Barbara.** Books: *The Violet Shyness of Their Eyes: Notes from Nepal, Prairie Reunion, The Stations of Still Creek*.

**SCOTT, Andrew.** Interviewer. Fiction: *Modern Love*. Work in *Writers Chronicle, Tipton Poetry Journal*. Ball State University. [Andrew Scott website](http://AndrewScottwebsite)

**SLOSS, Aria Beth.** Novel: *Autobiography of Us*. Work in *Harvard Review, Martha Stewart Living, Paris Review* (online), *FiveChapters*. [ariabethsloss.com](http://ariabethsloss.com)

**SMITH, Lee.** Twelve novels, including *Guests on Earth, On Agate Hill, The Last Girls*. Story collections include *Darcy and the Blue Eyed Stranger*. North Carolina State University. [leesmith.com](http://leesmith.com)

**THON, Melanie Rae.** Novels: *The Voice of the River, Sweet Hearts, Meteors in August, Iona Moon*. Story collection: *In This Light: New and Selected Stories*. University of Utah.

**UNSWORTH, Barry.** Novels included *The Quality of Mercy, Sacred Hunger, Land of Marvels, The Ruby in Her Navel, Morality Play*.

**WASSERMAN, Eric.** Interviewer. Story collection: *The Temporary Life*. Chapbook: *Brothers*. [ericwasserman.com](http://ericwasserman.com)

Glimmer Train Press publishes both  
*Glimmer Train Stories* and *Writers Ask*.

Co-editors: Susan Burmeister-Brown  
and Linda Swanson-Davies

Typesetting and layout: Paul Morris

This publication's name and logo and the  
various titles and headings herein are  
trademarks of Glimmer Train Press, Inc.











