



Why Historical Fiction?

History gives us a pair of powerful eyeglasses with which to examine our own times. It is hard to look directly at our present reality because we are both too myopic and too faint-hearted.

By KATHERINE PATERSON*

I can't remember when I wasn't interested in the past. Like many children, I loved to hear stories of my parents' childhoods. I referred to that time long past my imagining as "the olden days." When my own children began to ask about my childhood, they used a different expression: "Back when you were alive, Mom . . ." "I'm alive! I'm alive!" I'd exclaim, but my children were not convinced. The era of my childhood was as remote to them as the Ice Age.

A few years back I was reading a list of recommended historical fiction and found on it, not my novels set in twelfth- and eighteenth-century Japan or nineteenth-century China, much less nineteenth-century New England, but *Jacob, Have I Loved*. "How could Jacob be classified as historical fiction," I asked myself, "why that takes place back when I was alive." Well now, of course, even *Bridge to Terabithia* and *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, which are set in the mid-1970s are rapidly heading toward historical status.

Fortunately for me, and writers like me who continue to write years

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after they were alive, historical fiction is gaining a bit more respect than it had when I started out as a writer. It was not always so. I remember one conversation with a librarian who lamented that fact that *The Master Puppeteer* was set in eighteenth-century Japan. “If you’d just taken that same story,” she said, “and set it in this country, children would be able to enjoy it so much more.” I tried to imagine how I might have set a story that takes place in the Bunraku theater of eighteenth-century Osaka in today’s Chicago, but my mind boggled. I know Leonard Bernstein set *Romeo and Juliet* in twentieth-century New York City but that seemed different, somehow.

That conversation reminded me of another friend who chided me for making Gilly Hopkins eleven. “If you hadn’t given her a specific age,” my friend said, “so many more children could have identified with her.” Now my feeling is that there are certain givens in life, one of which is that everyone has a birthday. A character with no birthday cannot exist as a human being. If Gilly had had no birthday, no one would have been able to identify with her, because she would have been totally unreal. Real characters not only have birthdays, they live in real periods of history. The more details we seek to remove from a novel in order to keep it from seeming dated, the more likely we are to remove elements that make the story ring true to the reader. Futuristic fantasy or science fiction aside, if what I have written is real, by the time I lift my pen from the final page or type “The end” on the screen, my story is already on the way to becoming historical fiction.

This came home to me in the fall of 2001. In August I had sent a book to my editor, Virginia Buckley, which by my definition was contemporary fiction, set in Vermont in the summer, fall, and winter of 2001. I had no idea when I wrote it that the fall of 2001 would be a watershed of history—that any book set during those months would have to deal somehow with the tragic events of September the eleventh. But those events were so horrendous that they would take over the story, and the book I was trying to write would no longer be possible. So I took the easy way out. When I revised, I pushed my story back to the summer of 2000. I wasn’t ready to write about the effect of the terrorist attacks on children. That wrenching story would, no doubt, be tackled by other writers in the near future, but not by me in that particular book.

And if I look at the way I write, I most probably will not deal directly with the events that are so close to us. I will, instead, look at them through what I have called the spectacles of historical fiction. History gives us a pair of powerful eyeglasses with which to examine our own times. It is hard to look directly at our present reality because we are both too myopic and too faint-hearted. I began my career writing about

feudal Japan. My first two books are set in that momentous period of Japanese history when civil war is tearing the nation apart. It was a time of political intrigue, assassination, and corrupting power. My third book is set in a period of plagues and famines where the rich are becoming richer and the poor are rising up in violent street rebellions. These books were written between the years 1968 and 1975. Some of you can remember what was going on in our own country during that time. For those of you too young to recall those good old days, let me give you a brief review: The Vietnam War had become such a national nightmare that both Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy announced their intention to run against Lyndon Johnson for the Democratic nomination for president. On March 31, 1968, Johnson announced his decision not to run again. Four days later Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot. Within hours Washington, D.C., where I then lived, exploded into riots. Federal troops were ordered into Washington, Chicago, and Baltimore. We were still in shock when a Jordanian Arab assassinated Bobby Kennedy on network television. Soviet tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia and were met by rock-throwing students. In Chicago police and demonstrators clashed, disrupting the Democratic National Convention, somehow making the gallant warrior of the oppressed, Hubert Humphrey, seem like a villainous warmonger, and the country, writhing in what seemed like mortal agony, chose Richard Nixon to lead us into health and wholeness. And that, friends, was only the first year of that tumultuous period.

I've never written a book set in 1968. How could I? I can hardly bear to recite the events that occurred that year. But when I began my first novel, the book I was writing because I was homesick for Japan, I chose to set it in the middle of the twelfth century, a time of devastating civil disturbance and wasteful war. If I was writing out of love for Japan, why didn't I write about the eleventh century—the golden age of literature and the arts? I could have shared with young Americans the wonders of that period. But instead I set my books at the end of the Heian period when the sword had gained dominance over the chrysanthemum—when the warrior had more honor than the artist.

The word *Heian* is made up of two Chinese characters, both of which carry the meaning of the English word “peace.” And most of the Heian Era was peaceful and prosperous and represented the flowering of a great civilization. But I didn't choose to write about that, and the fact that I didn't betrays me. It wasn't Japan that I loved so much as it was my own country. My own country was tearing itself to shreds. Somehow, I had to look at that. So out of the history of Japan, I chose the periods that might help me make sense of my own time and place.

The same thing happened when I began to write about China. I was born in China and spent most of my first eight years there, but I wasn't ready to set a book in China until the early 1980s. So why, out of the more than 4000 years of Chinese recorded history, did I choose that brief less-than-half century of the Taiping Rebellion when I finally decided to set a book in the country of my birth?

Since *Rebels of the Heavenly Kingdom* is one of my least read books, perhaps I need to tell you about the Taiping Rebellion of the late nineteenth century. The Taiping were first of all a religious movement, a mixture of Christianity and native Chinese religions. They were opposed to any sort of oppression—slavery, footbinding, prostitution, polygamy. They did not kill, steal, use alcohol or opium, or bow down to graven images. They believed that every child, male or female, had a right to education and that women as well as men could own property and hold positions of leadership. All of this in 1850 when in America we were arguing whether or not God had ordained some to be slave-owners and others to be slaves.

I was fascinated by the Taiping. Where had they gotten these ideals and what had become of them? I was led into the tragic story of what happens when persons of high ideals take them into a holy crusade.

One of the early and basic declarations of the Taiping was: "You should not kill one innocent person or do one unrighteous act, even though it be to acquire an empire." When they embarked on their campaign to conquer China, which, of course, entailed the killing of many innocent people and the committing of untold unrighteous acts, they had to devise some justification of this behavior. The simplest justification was to regard their enemies as less than human, and therefore, outside the province of the High God. Chinese had traditionally regarded non-Chinese as less than human. The Taiping followed this old prejudice. The Manchu, and then whoever supported or sided with the Manchu Dynasty, were less than human, demons, in fact. One cannot be faulted for ridding the world of demons. They are by definition enemies of God, and whoever would honor God must hate God's enemies. Or so the reasoning goes.

I don't have to fill in for you the consequences of such thinking. History has supplied it over and over again. But this is not just the problem of the Taiping or, more currently, Islamic terrorists. Remember, I was writing the book back in the days when the Soviet Union was the "evil empire" and this appellation was justifying many covert operations by the CIA around the world. It sent us into Central and South America to overthrow governments. This is why we supported Muslim fundamentalist guerrilla fighters in Afghanistan, abandoned the devastated

populace once the Soviets withdrew, and reaped the whirlwind less than ten years later. Every person, as well as every nation, seeks to dehumanize the adversary. We kill the nameless foe and discover, all too late, as Oedipus did, that we have killed members of our own family.

In the novel *Lyddie* I moved from Asia to nineteenth-century New England. I began to write *Lyddie*, as I begin to write most of my books, because I was excited, not because I knew anything about Vermont in the 1840s or about the mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, during that period. One of the earliest dictums beginning writers hear is: "Write about what you know." But if I wrote only about what I know, I would never write. I write to find out.

The question people ask me most often is: Where do you get your ideas? And the answer is: Anywhere I can. Ideas are always a problem for me. I'm not like some of my writer friends who have drawers full of ideas—so many ideas that they will never live long enough to put them into books. When I finish a book, I think: "Well, that was a nice career—while it lasted." Then, if by some miracle an idea does flit across my mind, I snatch at it and examine it closely. "Is it worth all the trees?" I ask. Someone told me years ago how many trees it takes to issue a modest print run of a book, and I was so appalled I immediately forgot the figure. But I do remember that it was such a forest that I do not dare toss off any old thing. Trees are far too valuable to take their loss lightly.

And then there's my own life. When I turned sixty, my friend Stephanie Tolan sent me a birthday card that said: "On your One Hundredth Birthday with congratulations and best wishes for your happiness" and inside she'd written "What? You say this is not your 100th birthday? Sorry, My mistake! Put this card someplace safe until it is appropriate to the year."

Well, the appropriate year is getting closer all the time. So in addition to the trees that will be used up when my book is published, I have to think of the years it will take for me to write it. This cuts down considerably on the ideas I am willing to tackle. After I had finished *Park's Quest* and was searching for another idea that would meet my standards, I saw in the local paper a notice of a conference that looked promising. The Vermont Women's History Project was sponsoring a day-long meeting to encourage people to commit themselves to projects that would highlight the place of women in Vermont's history. Vermont would be celebrating its bicentennial in 1991, and the idea was that these projects would be published or presented in time for the Bicentennial Year. The current governor, Madeleine Kunin, was scheduled to be the luncheon speaker.

When I move to a new place, as I have more times than I care to remember, I'm always desperate for friends. I went to the conference, not only because Madeleine Kunin was to speak, but secretly hoping to meet congenial women and secondarily to learn more about my adopted state. But there was a tickle in the back of my mind that, maybe, just maybe, I might stumble upon a book worth writing.

One of the workshops was on the topic of primary resources. It was being co-led by a teacher in whose class I had spoken, so I knew she'd be nice to me if I came to her group.

During the course of the afternoon, one of the other leaders read some letters written by Vermont farm girls who had gone to the factories of Massachusetts and New Hampshire to work. They were wonderful letters, full of homesick longing for the mountains and farms of Vermont, and rich with vivid detail about their new lives. The spelling was what we call today "inventive." I heard those letters and my flesh literally crawled. Live young women jumped out of them at me.

"Why hasn't anyone written a novel about these wonderful women?" I asked myself, and then was very careful not to check *Books in Print* to see if anybody had. Well, excitement over a book idea lasts just until I hit the brick wall of reality, which for me is when I realize that this is a wonderful idea, for someone else—someone who knows something about the subject at hand. Time out for a few days of cleaning up the old mail pile or making pies while I wonder why I ever went into the book business. Then, with a deep sigh, I make a trip to the library to try to find out something, anything, about the subject. Also to prove to myself that living where I do, research will be all but impossible.

At this stage I have a terrible handicap. I cannot bring myself to discuss my project with another human being. So when I went to the library to begin to work on *Lyddie*, I could not talk even with the librarian about what I was looking for. This problem means I wasted a lot of time. It also meant that in the basement of the Pavilion building, I met Abby Hemenway, who related a story about a bear that got transformed into the bear story in *Lyddie*. No one would have sent me to that particular book if I could have explained exactly what I was looking for. So there is an upside to being dense and inarticulate. You find things quite by accident that turn out to be very valuable.

By making it as hard for myself as I possibly can, I do this research. Then I sweat through the initial draft. Now, the only way I can trick myself into doing the first draft of a book is to do it by hand or on a typewriter where I can allow myself to be horribly messy. A computer doesn't allow for messiness and mistakes. It's always seducing you to attempt perfection. "Just once more through," it whispers. "Then it will be perfect."

But in order to get through the blinking thing at all I have to say, “Look—Relax! This isn’t it. This is only the stupid first draft. It’s guaranteed to be awful. It’s supposed to be awful. The only requirement is to get it down at all—anyway you can do it is okay. Just get to the end. And, actually, any end will do for now. Just get there.”

There are days when I am absolutely stuck, either because the material is too painful or I am sure beyond a doubt that I am not and will never be worthy of this magnificent idea. Those days I just say, “Two pages—that’s all you have to do. No requirement as to quality. They do not have to be even remotely good. The margins can be as wide as you like. Just get down two pages and you can get up and do something else.”

Finally, by tricking myself on a regular basis, I’ve got this big messy pile of paper—this lump of a book. Now I know how awful it is, but by this time I’ve been working on it for a year—sometimes two—and my husband, John, has only vague hints even as to the general subject matter when I tremblingly hand it over to him to read. It finally dawned on me how frightening this occasion must be for John. I mean, suppose he has to come out of the den and announce to me that I have spent the last year or so of my life producing garbage? Well, anyhow, he didn’t. Not that time. Thank God. And, as my grandmother used to say, I speak reverently. But he did come out of the study with several pages of notes. I already had been to the Shelburne Museum and to the National Industrial Park in Lowell. But I will have to go back again to the American Textile Museum, where I will actually learn how to tie a weaver’s knot and go through the motions of starting a mid-nineteenth century loom.

All of the notes will set me on the rewriting that must be done before the book will be sent to Virginia Buckley, my editor—who doesn’t know anything about this book yet. I have managed to say I’m working on something, which because it is connected to Vermont’s bicentennial, I hope will be done in time for publication in 1991. That’s far more than she usually knows about a work in progress, poor dear.

When Virginia finally saw *Lyddie* she wrote me a letter—six full, single-spaced pages—in addition to all the notes written directly on the manuscript. I reread most of that letter while I was writing this speech and realized how much rewriting I did of this book. One thing I think I’ve learned over the last thirty-plus years is that historical fiction stands or falls on the rewriting. The more research you’ve done, the more you have to rewrite to bury that research. In the early stages the writer is still making the scene clear to herself, but the manuscript is very awkward—all knees and elbows sticking out. If the reader is impressed by the amount of research the writer has done, then the writer has, in a real sense, failed. I want the reader to be so caught up in the story—to

have people and place so alive to the reader—that she will race to the end of the book to find out what happens to these people. If she stumbles on the furniture, it won't matter if it's authentic—although she's sure to stumble if the writer is not comfortable or got it wrong.

And there always seems to be that one vital bit of information that no expert quite knows. I had to find out—the entire plot depended on it—when in 1846 the petition for the ten-hour workday was presented to the Massachusetts legislature. If any of the authors of the books I read knew, they weren't telling. No one at the textile museum knew. They sent me to the Massachusetts state library, who sent me to the state archives, who sent me to the state university. The document was in the archives—but without a date. I spent at least two days on the phone. Finally, the researcher at the university library said, “Well, you have to figure it was before May. Those were all citizen legislators. They'd have to go home to plant their crops come spring. There'd be no point in presenting a petition after the legislature had adjourned for the year.” This made perfect sense. The Vermont legislature is still run on this pattern.

And that is why Lyddie did not sign that petition after all. She would have if it had been presented in the fall. But I could not fight history.

After *Lyddie* I wrote *Flip-Flop Girl* which took me back to late-twentieth-century Virginia, but then, in those dark days of no ideas, a strange image came into my mind out of nowhere. It was the picture of a small child falling off a wagon and no one comes back to look for him.

After that book was finished but before it was published, a lady asked me what my new book was about. It was time, I realized, that I would have to start talking about my new book. I find being a grown-up in these matters exceedingly difficult, so I have to practice answering politely.

“So what's your new book about?” I shuddered, then pulled myself together. Okay, here goes, I thought, but the words didn't come out nearly as politely as I meant for them to. “I guess I have to start talking about it sooner or later,” I said. Now, oh dear, what should I say that won't make my beloved book sound totally stupid. “Okay,” I said, finally. “I guess I can tell you where it came from.” The questioner perked up with great interest, so I went on. “I had this image of a child tumbling off the back of a wagon and nobody comes back to look for him.”

“Oh,” she said brightly. “There's another book that starts just like that.”

I froze. See? That's why you should never talk about what you're working on. I was crushed. Another book that begins just like my dear, fragile, yet unborn one. How could that be?

She searched around in her mind for the title. “*Pecos Bill*,” she said finally. “Doesn't it begin just like that? The child falls off the back of the wagon, then is rescued by the coyotes and raised by them.”

I don't know what I said after that. At least there were no coyotes in my book. Ah well, the question of where a book comes from is not one that can be answered in a sentence or two. One idea, as I often say to school classes, one idea doth not a novel make. Not even *Jip*. It started with the boy tumbling off the back of the wagon, but that led into an investigation of why such a thing should happen. When I began working on *Jip*, I had the hope of writing an adventure story. It seemed to me, when I had on my critic's rather than my writer's hat, that there was a dearth of really good adventure stories around.

I went back to reread some of the classics—books the like of which we haven't seen for a long time. I started with *Huckleberry Finn* and went on to *Great Expectations*, *Treasure Island*, and finally to *Kidnapped*. It was *Kidnapped* that simply drove me back to my own book. What a story! Stevenson really knew how to do it. And for days I floated about, inflated with Stevenson's language, pacing, characterization, wild highland setting. I was little more than a Stevenson wanna-be.

But then I came thudding down to earth. I was not Robert Louis Stevenson. I could not write like him, nor, in truth, did I want to. As much as I admired *Kidnapped* I did not want to rewrite it. I wanted to write a book that only I could write. I wanted to set my book in the hill country of Vermont, not the Scottish Highlands. I wanted to bring to life that child who rolled off the wagon—the child no one came back to look for. Who was he? Why had he been abandoned? And why did he seem so precious to me? As I wrote I learned more of him, his almost mystical way with animals and people in need, his common sense, his hardworking nature.

And then, reading for setting and atmosphere, I met another person in the basement of the Pavilion building so compelling that I knew his story and *Jip*'s were meant to entwine.

I was reading a town history of Hartford, Vermont, when, in a section telling about the town poor farm, I came across a paragraph about a man named Putnam Proctor Wilson. Wilson was one of two "lunatics" for whom the town had built wooden cages. "These men," the writer says, "were raving crazy most of the time, and there caged up like wild beasts in narrow filthy cells, [I] often saw them and their pitiable condition, was impressed with the conviction that the inhuman treatment to which they were subjected, was sufficient of itself to make lunatics of all men. Poor old Put.[nam] had some rational moments and was always pleased to see children to whom he would sing the old song, 'Friendship to every willing mind,' etc., as often as requested."

So I took poor Putnam Wilson, named him Put Nelson, and gave him a new song and my already beloved boy *Jip*. I knew *Jip* would give Put not just pity but genuine love and friendship.

At some point, and I'm not sure just when it was, characters from my other Vermont novel quietly began to congregate. I was glad to see them again, of course, but since I don't write sequels, I felt the need to tell them that it wasn't their story, and there probably wasn't a place for them in it. They were very pleasant about it all, just hung around the edges and watched.

For a long time I worked, doing more research than actual writing, still unable to figure out where Jip had come from, and thus, what must happen to him for the mystery of his beginnings to be solved. One morning I woke up and I knew. At last, I had a plot. You'd think I'd rejoice. But no. My first reaction was surprised irritation—almost anger. How could that be the explanation? That would not be the rollicking adventure story I'd planned to write. I struggled against the revelation for a while and finally gave up.

People think writers have infinite choices to make when constructing a book. In truth, I feel that we have very few. Usually, the choice is whether to complete this story or not. I chose to write it. I was too much in love with Jip and Put to let them go. It was at this point that Luke Stevens and Lyddie Worthen stepped out of the wings, saying, in effect, "There, there, don't take on so. We're here. We'll help. And don't think of it as a sequel. This is Jip's story, not ours."

And finally, there's *Preacher's Boy*, my tip of the hat this time not to Stevenson but to Mark Twain, who happens to be my first cousin three or four times removed. When I began to write my America was in the middle of millennium madness. What, I wondered, was happening at the turn of the last century? I read memoirs of that time and went through so many newspapers on microfiche that my eyes blurred and my head pounded. What I found, sadly, was that many of the problems facing Vermonters in 1899 had not gone away in the past one hundred years of civilization's halting march. War, poverty, homelessness, ignorance, and all the attendant prejudices still flourished. The marvelous utilization of electricity, the telegraph, the telephone, even the automobile, had not made the world a better or safer place. I put my boy into the midst of that imperfect but hope-filled setting and gave him something every child needs but too few possess, a pair of wise and loving parents. His father is a preacher, and here I was playing against stereotypes. For not only are good fathers rare in today's fiction, a wise and loving Christian minister belongs to an endangered species. By the way, some of you may know that I am the daughter of a minister and that my husband is the son and grandson of ministers. I have been married to a minister for forty-two years. We have four children, all of whom grew up as children of a minister, but in case you're wondering, *Preacher's*

Boy is entirely a work of fiction, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

A young reader once asked me: What makes you write a book? Do you write it to make things happen, or do you write it for the people? On the surface, a writer who loves historical fiction might be thought to be more interested in the “what happened” of her books. Not me. No matter what it looks like, as I said to that student, you can put your money on it: I’m writing for the people every time.

Adults often object to me that young readers can only identify with characters like themselves, but that has not been my observation nor my experience. If the author is truly writing for the people, both those in the book and those who might read the book, identification happens across oceans, across centuries, even across species—consider for a moment *Black Beauty* and *Charlotte’s Web*.

Not long after *Preacher’s Boy* was published, I was invited to talk with a group of young people about the book. In response to a question, I spoke about Robbie’s tangled attitude toward his brother, Elliot. How could his parents love Elliot so much? He, Robbie, was bright, funny, handsome, everything a parent could wish for. Shouldn’t they love him more than they love his damaged brother? Wasn’t he more worthy of their love?

Later, when no one else could hear her, a lovely articulate fifth-grade girl spoke to me. “You know what you said about Robbie and Elliot? My brother is autistic. I know just how Robbie feels.”

So this finally is my answer to those who ask why I write historical fiction. Yes, I wrote about Japan and China because I lived there, and about Vermont because it is the place I now call home. Yes, I write about particular times in those settings because I want better to understand my own country and my own time. But most of all, I write historical fiction for the same reason I write any story: for the people I meet there.

If I hadn’t written about ancient Japan, I would never have met the orphaned Muna or vain Takiko or ambitious Jiro. If I hadn’t written about nineteenth-century China, I would never have met Wang Lee the peasant who turns into a zealot, or brave Mei Lin or San-niang, the glorious woman warrior. If I hadn’t cared about nineteenth-century Vermont I wouldn’t know my wonderful, stubborn Lyddie or gentle Jip or beloved Put or even my rascally Robbie, and I would be immeasurably the poorer.

I would like to believe that these people I love have the power to enrich other lives as well, but that is not something I can control. You are the readers. Their lives are in your hands.