

What follows are the notes for a series of talks I gave at the “Wrangling With Writing” conference 25-26 Sept, 2010. These notes are *not* the talks I gave. There are points made in these notes that I didn’t talk about, and I talked about things that aren’t in these notes. Here they are, for what they are worth, as I promised the folks who attended I would post them. As I plan to revisit and rework this material at some future date, I don’t plan to keep this material posted forever.

RMA

Sat, 25 Sept 2010

2:30-3:30 pm Workshops & Interviews

Using History to Enhance Your Manuscript—[Roger MacBride Allen](#) - Are you addicted to the History channel? Do you wish you could add History to your manuscript and make it as interesting as some of their programs? Our Sci-Fi Jedi Master is also a History Buff, and an expert in making history fascinating. Learn how he researched, wrote, and published a history book that is captivating readers.

First and foremost, I didn’t write the promo copy, and it’s news to me I’m a Jedi Master.

Second, just to be clear, do not sign up for an interview with me in hopes of pitching a book to the teeny publishing house I run. We publish reprints, not new fiction. There is zero chance of my accepting your manuscript for publication.

Anecdote re interview and color of light sabre.

I stand ready to talk about two topics here. I can talk about doing historical research – really any kind of research -- for a book. I can also present my argument that every story takes place in three different times – or at least, that every story can be viewed from three separate perspectives.

Stories and Perspective

I have never written historical fiction, but I think I can tell you a few things. First and foremost, any story, written anywhere, any time, is set in three times: the time the author wrote it, the time in which the story is set, and the time in which the reader reads it.

Example August 10, 2009 New Yorker Malcolm Gladwell piece on *To Kill A Mockingbird* I found to be an incredibly smarmy piece in which Gladwell implicitly explained that he, Gladwell, was a better person than the fictitious Atticus Finch because Finch was imprisoned by the worldview of his time and place, and was incapable of the acts of heroism that Gladwell felt Finch should have accomplished. Gladwell has made *To Kill A Mockingbird* not only about Gladwell’s time – but about Gladwell.

Another completely unrelated example: in *Foundation & Empire*, the second of Asimov’s Foundation trilogy, there’s a sequence of scenes wherein all the men went off to war, and so the women were all working away doing something unspecified in the defense factories. Asimov was writing about a far-future time, based very loosely on thousand-year-old Roman imperial history – but he was writing in 1945, obviously projecting the social and political conditions that produced Rosie the Riveter into the far future. We here in 2010 see Asimov’s 1945 ideas about social organization in the far future as outdated.

The same sort of thing, of course, happens in other sorts of fiction. I’m going to reach for Shakespeare because most of you will be familiar with the examples I cite – and if not, you can quickly

and easily check them yourself. For similar reasons, I'm going to reach for movies, rather than book, to cite some examples, as it more likely we've all seen the same movie.

Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* took place in more or less Shakespeare's own time, but in a place he had never visited and knew very little about – and one could make the argument that his Venice was really just Shakespeare's London with a few exotic touches thrown in. By setting the story in another country, he could play more freely with law and custom. The play's treatment of Shylock the Jew has made it one of the “problem” plays for contemporary theaters. Shylock's slimy greed, the presentation of him as a foreigner, an outsider, in his own city, and, above all, his forcible conversion at play's end, are all immensely uncomfortable for modern audiences, and are generally played in such a way as to diminish or make ironic the impact of the words and actions – for example, the characters onstage might offer the equivalent of a nod and a wink at the audience, to signal that they are just pretending to force Shylock's conversion in front of the authorities, and will take it all back later. There are similar problems with *The Taming of the Shrew*. Katherine's speech about being a good wife at the end, taken at face value, seems to turn the story upsidedown, if played straight. Nowadays it is usually played with the same sort of nod and wink. She's pretending to surrender – but just wait until she gets Petruchio home.

There's a more general way that modern audiences are thrown off by Shakespeare's stories. A good example is at the end of the text of Hamlet. There, as everyone is dying, we get a lot of discussion about Fortinbras, who has been discussed occasionally, but offstage for virtually the entire play. Hamlet predicts the “election” will fall on him, and then dies. Fortinbras picks that exact moment to show up, obliquely (at least to modern ears) announce that is the new king, order Hamlet to be carried off, and then deliver the last line of the play. (See thewoostergroup.org/projects/hamlet/Q1Q2F.html to see all three source versions of Hamlet side by side.)

No one in a modern audience cares at all about Fortinbras or who gets to be king after Hamlet. For us, Hamlet's Denmark is a completely imaginary place, really no more than the stage setting for the play itself. Denmark vanished when the curtain falls. We don't have any interest in this guy who is wheeled in just at the end of the show.

To the intended original audience, in London, with Queen Elizabeth getting old and the issue of who would be crowned when she died not at all clear, things were very different. The closest comparison might be if a Washington D.C. audience saw a show where the president, the vice president, the speaker of the house, and the next three or four people in the line of succession all dropped dead in the last scene. You couldn't end the show without making clear who takes over.

King Lear and Macbeth likewise take time out from their ending to establish who succeeds to the throne, for similar reasons.

In a larger sense, Hamlet is just one of Shakespeare's plays, all of which follow a pretty reliable rule. If everyone dies at the end, it's a tragedy. If it's a tragedy involving royalty, everyone dies except the new king. If the good guy gets crowned king at or near the end, it's a history. If everyone gets married at the end, it's a comedy. There's a whole theory of the chain of being and restoring balance and harmony that I could go into, but the short form is that Shakespeare knew instinctively that those were the events that would signal a satisfactory end to the show. There were rules to the game, and he followed them.

At the end of Hamlet, Fortinbras directs that Hamlet be carried off stage. This was necessary because the theaters of the time had no curtain – and you couldn't have all the dead bodies suddenly wake up and walk off by themselves at the end of the show. Therefore either people die off stages or are carried off after they die. This convention was imposed by the physical structure of Shakespeare's stage. The other elements were imposed by the social and political structure of Shakespeare's life.

Similar forces teach us what a “good” ending is today. On a classic TV sitcom, no matter how loony things have gotten by the second commercial, by the time the end credit role, everything is back to normal. In a chick flick or romcom, the two people who have hated each other all through the movie, even though we can tell they were Meant For Each Other, suddenly realize the truth and fall into each other’s arms. In a kid’s cartoon, the dumb grownups lose and the kids get to do things that real life kids never get to do, or else they get away with murder. Either way it’s childhood wish-fulfillment. The kids in the movie have power. In a war movie, there’s one last Big Danger, one last Big Explosion, and one last wry remark as the two buddies wander off into the sunset.

The problem comes when we in 2010 watch a movie about the Civil War that was shot in 1914 -- during World War I but before the US got in – when we were congratulating ourselves for staying out. D.W. Griffith invented all sorts of film techniques in *Birth of a Nation*, and it has been called the most important film ever made, largely because it showed what film could do. Yet, today, less than a century after it was made, we find it almost unwatchable, thanks to its content – and also thanks to some pretty over-the-top silent-film acting. The good guys in the film are the Ku Klux Klan. Their big triumph is in preventing the bad guys – black people – from voting. Twenty-five years later, *Gone With the Wind* didn’t dabble as much in politics, but it was certainly more sympathetic to the Confederate cause than would be likely in a film made today. Neither of those films could be made today, because the producer would know they’d be box-office suicide.

Let’s take it one step further – and let’s go back to the written word, and away from plays and movies. I’m going to ask questions, but not provide answers. That will be up to you. Here’s the challenge: Imagine writing a story about Atticus Finch’s great-grandfather, fighting for the Confederacy. Imagine writing it so would appeal to someone who saw and loved *Birth of a Nation* in 1915. Now imagine the same story being told to Scout by Atticus Finch himself in the 1930s. How different would those versions have to be? Now imagine the adult Scout in the 1960s retelling what Atticus has told her thirty years before. (That’s the narrative structure of *Mockingbird*.) Imagine that story being written in the 1960s as a straight narrative, without the complex framing of Adult Scout interpreting what she remembers of Child Scout listening to her father. Imagine the story being written not in the 1960s, but today. Now imagine someone reading any one of those stories a hundred years from now. How will they react?

The time it happens, the time it is written, and the time it is read. Keep all three in mind when you tell your story.

Research

My father and I wrote a book called *Mr. Lincoln’s High-Tech War*. It was very well received and got lots of positive mentions and landed on a lot of top-ten lists of one sort or another. We were told that it was a new take on the Civil War, that we had managed to see the war from a new and useful viewpoint. Someone asked me where I did my research for it. I pointed to the attic and said “upstairs.” A pile of books and a fast Internet connection were all I really needed. But that was something of a special case, because so many of the primary documents concerning the Civil War are available online. That won’t be as true for other periods or other events.

The point is, as I have said elsewhere, we are in the dawn of a new and golden age for finding things out. The danger in this golden age is in being too easy on yourself, in letting all the wonderful tools and sources we have make you lazy. So here are some tips on research.

Do it yourself. Don't delegate research, except on the most grunt-work level of, say, hiring someone to add up columns of figures or retyping notes. Research is personal. You are telling the story. You are interested in what you're interested in. A hired researcher will go off on tangents that you don't care about, and, worse, fail to go off on what seem to be tangents to the researcher, but are really the clues leading you toward the story you want to tell.

Understand the difference between a lead and a source. Wikipedia is a lead. It can point you toward things. It is not reliable enough, or close enough to the source material, to be the basis for a definitive statement. The original draft of the Declaration of Independence would be a source. So too would be a careful and precise transcription of that document, or a photograph of it. But even a photograph would be a secondary source. There would information in the original – ink composition, the texture of the paper, other physical clues – that would be lost to you. You can get very close to original texts, and the text by itself, if you deem it reliable, is a source but that does not mean you have all the information that was in the original.

Backtrack sources. Thanks to the Internet, this is a lot more possible than it used to be. You can often find enough of a book to look at its source material – or even the whole text – online. If book A cites book B, if it is at all possible, track down book B and find the source of the citation. You'll often find more detail, a longer quote – or else discover that the author of book A was sloppy or worse, and misquoted or took out of context whatever he cited. Book B can lead you to Book C – and Book C might well cite an original source document that has all the juicy details. Better still, the older the book, the better the odds that it is in public domain, and thus the odds are better that the complete text is online.

Document your sources. Again, computer have made this so easy it's madness not to do it. If you have looked up fact 1 from source A, the odds are very good that you'll want to consult source A again to find fact 2 through 27. I won't get down into the weeds of what software to use for this sort of thing, but suffice to say keeping up a good list of sources, and linking them to your text, is a good idea.

Cite your sources in your first draft work. Even if you are writing fiction, the odds are good that you'll want to double-check something, or that an editor will ask you to verify it a year later. You can always delete the footnotes and endnotes later on, when it is time to submit. But retain a copy that has can point you directly back to the source material when you write the sequel.

Don't trust websites. First and foremost, don't trust them to be there a year later – or tomorrow. Don't trust them to retain the same content. Don't trust the content of a personal website without evaluating it carefully. When researching Mr. Lincoln's High-Tech War, I encountered a website called The War for States Rights at civilwar.bluegrass.net. It is still up as of 21 Sept 2010, and still argues that there never was a "civil" war, but a dispute between two countries – and strongly implies that both countries still exist. It has links to defunct websites for the Southern Party, ("A real choice for the people of Dixie") and one or two items that suggest the website's owner has a clear viewpoint.

All that being said, it did link me to other sites and did have fascinating information about a particular ship. Unfortunately, some of that information was dead wrong – but was based on highly respected sources that simply got the facts wrong. It wasn't wrong because the website's owner let his politics get in the way. It was wrong because he didn't double and triple-check his sources – a point to which I will return.

There are ways to save a website to your home computer. Again, I won't go into the weeds, but for example, you can tell Adobe Acrobat – not the reader, but the full program – to save multiple levels of a website as a single big PDF file. Do that, or do something else, but work up a procedure to preserve

source material that could go poof. When you refer to a website and give a citation, note the date on which you viewed the material.

Don't trust a single source. There will almost always be multiple books, articles, websites, original source documents and so on concerning a particular fact or detail. Come at the question you are researching from multiple angles. Part of this is simple fact-checking, but part of it is also getting a deeper, more instinctive feel for the material. Get to know your material in depth, and you'll be able to evaluate sources and leads more carefully.

Seek out primary source material. If six books quote a document, go find it for yourself.

Look for primary sources, like letters, inventories, ship's logs, eye-witness accounts.

Don't trust the Internet. Just because there is a lot there, that doesn't mean everything is there. Go to archives. Go to libraries. Find books. Do interviews. Walk the ground where things happened. Stand where the historical figures stood.

Don't trust a quote just because it is quoted. Find out when it was said or written, and who set it down, and when he or she did so. Lincoln is quoted as saying a lot of things I very much doubt he ever said. A quote set down from memory in a book forty years later is not to be trusted as much as something taken down verbatim at the time. You will likely find variations on many a famous quote, and/or ellipses or omissions that alter the meaning of the words, sometime subtly, sometimes hugely. Again, seek out multiple sources for the quote, and evaluate the differences between the versions carefully.

Don't trust your memory. You forgot a detail, and you remembered one key point incorrectly. Double-check. Look it up again. You made a note of your source and citation, right?

Save interesting off-point material for later. Again, the Internet has made it far too easy to collect lots of neat information. Develop a system for saving stuff you don't need now, but might want later. It is often harder to find something the second time. Save it the first time you find it.

Beware the academic with a theory to prove. I was going to write "academic with an axe to grind," but let's be a bit more polite. Watch out for the gay researcher who proves Lincoln was homosexual, or the medical expert on Globner's disease who proves Lincoln was dying of Globner's disease, or the black liberation scholar who proves the ancient Egyptians were black, or the anti-semitic who proves that Israeli agents blew up the World Trade Center. Sometimes these are honest true believers who mistake leads for sources, or focus only on sources that support their theories while rejecting all other evidence.

It is almost always possible to find a hint, a discrepancy, an innocent mistake, or a false lead and proclaim to be proof or fact. My favorite along these lines was the JFK assassin theorist who came across a quote from Lee Harvey Oswald saying he had spent time in North Dakota. This turned into a whole monstrous theory of two Oswalds – for convenience the researcher calls them Lee Oswald and Harvey Oswald – who share one identity and swap places with each other as required by the plot developed by the researcher. Unfortunately, the whole theory was based on a misreading of an abbreviation in a reporter's notes. The notes from the interview didn't say N.D., but N.O. -- New Orleans, where Oswald spent a great deal of time.

The axes being ground aren't always that loony or obvious. A writer might have some fairly obscure point he or she is trying to prove. The researcher might even be partially or completely unaware of bias. But if all the evidence in a source points in one direction only, be suspicious. That's doubly true if the conclusion reached is remarkable. Check other sources.

Don't trust fiction. The TV show MASH was a great TV show. It was not anywhere near being an historically accurate presentation of life in a frontline hospital during the Korean War. Jane Austen wrote wonderful books. They are not accurate accounts of what life was like back then.

Don't trust TV documentaries. They throw away doubts and uncertainties. They pick the most visually interesting version of events. They reenact things they have the budget to reenact. They make mountains out of molehills, and pretend that mountains of solid proof are tiny anthills of theory. They treat the most absurd and outrageous speculations and theories as serious theories or even as fact. Nostradamus was a phony. There was no Da Vinci code. The alien autopsies were hoaxes. Elvis is still dead. Queen Elizabeth didn't disguise herself as Kit Marlowe in order to write Shakespeare's plays. I don't think I have ever seen a History Channel documentary on a subject about which I am knowledgeable that wasn't guilty of some egregious technical, historical, or factual misstatement.

One final piece of advice, on what you do with the results of your research: go where the facts lead, and not where your theory says they should lead. Don't you go putting Lee Oswald in North Dakota.

Even you're writing historical fiction, frame your story inside accurate facts. The more solid, accurate, and believable the background of your story, the better your story will be.

Sunday, 26 September

9:15-10:15 am Workshops & Interviews

Investigate Strange New Worlds—[Roger MacBride Allen](#) - In a galaxy, far, far, away, Investigate strange new worlds in this Sc-Fi workshop. Learn about the Sc-Fi genre from the Jedi master who wrote a three of the Star Wars books.

First off, I have to catch a flight back to Mexico City, of all places, at 1:05 pm, so I have to rocket out of here after the talk.

Secondly, I didn't write the promo copy for this talk, and I am not a Jedi Master, whatever that might be in real life. And, by the way, no one in the business calls it Sci-Fi. The socially acceptable shorthand is SF.

I have written over twenty science fiction novels, and a modest number of short stories. I know the genre pretty well. I could talk about it for well over an hour – but the topic of this panel is so broad that I scarcely know where to begin.

So, maybe I won't. I could go on and on and on about various theories and ideas about SF – or I could talk about whatever you members of the paying audience want to hear – or I could just spend an hour answering questions.

Let's get a sense of the meeting and see what you people want.

SF as subject matter

SF, as a subject matter, is a superset of fiction. In other words, it includes conventional fiction completely, but also extends beyond it.

Conventional fiction takes place in the factual, real-life present, the slightly altered present, the historical, real-life past, and the slightly altered historical past. It takes place in known places or very close analogs of real places. If Dickens invented a new street and stuck into London, that wouldn't make his story SF. The characters are real human beings, with perhaps animal companions.

SF can take place in any of those settings, but also in the imagined past, present, or future. It can take place in real places, altered real places, or wholly imagined places. The characters can be human, or otherwise.

A Few Inadequate Definitions

I was kicking ideas around with my agent one day, and she laid down a very solid rule for the ending of a story I was doing. It was an science fiction mystery. She told me the solution had to be science-fictional. If the answer to the puzzle was something that could have happened in a non-SF setting, then all we were doing was dressing up a conventional mystery story. To put it more broadly, a science fiction story must depend on plot, setting, or character elements that are integral to the SF setting, and which could not be transplanted to a conventional setting. Two spacemen standing face to face, ready to

pull their disintegrated-beam rayguns on each other is no science fiction. It's a Western dressed up in SF clothing.

Fantasy stories are not SF, and vice versa.

Fantasies take place in a variant of our world, or in a different world, where the rules are substantially different. To put it too broadly and too crudely, they are times and places where some form of magic works – and stories where the working of that magic are central to the story. SF takes place in our world or an alternate world where one or more plausible extensions of existing or predictable science or technology or history makes the story possible. Alternately, some piece of plausible but impossible technology or science is central to the story – the classic examples being a faster-than-light drive, or time travel.

SF as a publishing genre and TV/Movie genre

As a business, SF is a teeny tiny wedge of the publishing world. Many works that might arguably qualify as SF are not marketed as SF for various reasons. *The Hunt for Red October* involved the invention of several imaginary technologies that made the Russian sub more dangerous, and had several other quasi-sf elements. Dr. Strangelove also involved new technologies in ways that skirted science fiction.

On the other hand, a lot of things that aren't SF are presented, marketed, and/or perceived as SF. One could make a pretty good argument that the Star Wars films are not SF, but fantasy. You've all heard about the connections to Joseph Campbell and the hero's journey. You could take vast swathes of the Star Wars saga, replace the space ships with sailing ships and horses, leave in the monsters, and tell much the same story in a mythic setting. The stories not only have the feel of myth – they could be presented as myth, with Jason and the Argonauts playing in the next amphitheater over in the Multiplex Athenia. However, I don't think you could pull the magic out of the stories and have them work. Luke's force is magic. Han's blaster is just a six-shooter with better special effects.

SF has become accepted enough that its integrity as a genre is threatened. A quick glance at the current top ten movies in the US shows that at least three are inarguably SF to one degree or another. But a quick peek at the NYT paperback bestseller list shows no SF titles – but at least four in the top twenty are fantasies – mostly jumping on the various vampire and other icky fantasy bandwagons. These stats are about where I expected them to be.

Once again, I am overgeneralizing to beat the band, but for the most part, “best-seller” SF is written by people who don't write SF all the time, and/or as part of some media tie-in operation. When Star Wars was hot, the SF bestsellers were Star Wars books. Now that icky vampires are hot, those are the media tie-ins.

SF from the Writer's Perspective

There are still lots of SF writers who have developed loyal audiences and who sell enough books to make a living. I am not one of them. For various reasons of luck and choice, I haven't been doing much SF work in the last few years – but I am hopeful – and perhaps delusional – about getting back into the game. Science Fiction publishing is, like publishing as a whole, in turmoil. I would be at all surprised to find out that we are in the early phases of conventional publishing's death spiral. People like books. People read books. People buy books. But the publishing industry seems to have no clear idea at all about

how to sell them the books they want. The existing business model just doesn't make any sense. Nor does what they are working on to replace it. About six months ago I sat in on a talk given by a very smart woman who knew all about book production and what it costs to do all the jobs needed to produce a book. She had a whiteboard where she was toting up the expenses associated with publishing a hardcover, a paperback, and an ebook.

She demonstrated, to her own satisfaction, that, based on what the publishers spent, a paperback "ought" to have a cover price of 7 to 8 dollars, while a ebook version of the same title "ought" to cost about \$15.00. It didn't seem to enter her head that people weren't likely to pay twice as much for an intangible object that could vanish with a hard drive crash, that they couldn't read in the tub, and that they could give away, donate, or sell when they were done with it. The same very smart women blandly stated that publishing was a mature and very efficient business. Roughly a third to a half of the copies of a print run for the average paperback are never sold, but are simply discarded – after having been shipped, stocked, removed from the shelves, and deliberately mutilated – all of that work done by hand. This is efficient?

At the same time, publishers are firing or laying off more and more staff, hiring (and then firing) younger and more inexperienced staff (my father is working to promote his book with a publicist who didn't know what ragged-right text was until he told her). I won't mention names, but I recently ceased doing business with a publisher that assigned me to six different editors, one after the other. The first left for a better job. Each of the others was fired or laid off, one after another, and I was assigned each time to a more junior surviving editor. Six editors. All gone. Any knowledge of the business, any experience they developed, gone with them.

There are glimmers of a business model that makes more sense. It isn't here yet. In the meantime, writers will have to endure and survive the death-throes of the giant publishing dinosaurs.

However, SF – and fantasy – have something going for them that few other fields do. There is still a modestly active, strongly influential market for short fiction. Writers can learn their craft writing for the magazines.

SF as a community.

Just as the norms of SF have burbled up into the world of non-genre fiction, so have the cultural inventions of the SF community burbled out into the larger world. SF conventions. The conference we are at right now has science fiction conventions in its DNA. The conventions are not as big as they used to be – but you could argue they had gotten too big. It is possible – even easy – to find a good-sized convention running somewhere nearish any fairly populated point in the U.S. at least every couple of months, and probably more frequently. You can talk shop, see what's coming, listen to actual editors and writers, and get much more plugged in than most aspiring writers could ever hope to be.