



Writing Historical Fiction or What I Learned from Writing a Historical Novel
Guided Exercise from Larissa Lai

This workshop consists nine short preambles followed by exercises. It is sequenced to help you write a piece of historical fiction. This document lays out the exercises.

1. Writing from a Particular Location

This first set of exercises asks you to make notes in response to a few questions. This is preliminary note-making work. There's no need to produce polished, beautiful work at this time. These exercises are more about getting ideas down and helping you focus on a possibility or two for a project. Make notes as fast as the thoughts occur. Don't worry about grammar or correctness. Just get it down.

Exercises:

Why do you want to write historical fiction?

I'd suggest not taking longer than five minutes to do so.

What historical moment calls to you, and why? Make notes for five minutes.

What memories do you carry through family-- chosen or biological? Make a list. You don't have to flesh them all out now.

What memories do you carry in the body? Again, make a list.

2. Facts and the Knowable Past Exercise:

What are the known facts that you will have to be true to in your project? Where will you go to seek those facts? How do the social and political interests of the fact recorders shape the way the facts are recorded? How will you address the problem of source bias? Make some notes.

3. Non-Text Sources Exercise:

What are the nontextual sources you could draw from? Are there people you might talk to? Photographic archives you could examine? Web sources-- reliable or not? Maps? Make some notes.

4. The Work of the Imagination/ Listening for Voices Exercise:

If you wish, light a candle or a stick of incense and put on some music that you think might invite voices into the room. Or engage another ritual that you think might work for you. Set an intention to hear the voices of the past as they move through all that research you just did, and as they move through your body. Can you hear anyone speaking? If yes, write down what you hear. If no, set a timer for five minutes. Put your pen to the page or your hands to keyboard and make some marks at least until the timer goes off. If you get something, you get something. If you don't, don't worry about it, but try again tomorrow. This exercise may work or not in any one instance; it's productive with practice, over time.

5. First Draft

With the notes and lists you made from considering your own motives and interests, researching the past, and listening for voices, you're ready to write a first draft. Within in the frame of this workshop, because it's a single episode podcast, I'm going to allow you to do this on your own. You might wish to pause the podcast for a day, a week, a month, even a year, until you have a draft that is ready for revision. Or maybe you already have a fully drafted piece of historical fiction in your desk drawer. The second half of the podcast will give you a set of practices to help you approach some of the ethical issues that might confront you once you have a first draft.

6. Cringy Critters: Characters Who Say and Do Dodgy Things Exercise:

What are some of the dated thoughts and behaviours that your characters engage? How are they necessary to the story? Are they, in fact, even driving the story? Who could reflect these to a contemporary public in contemporary terms? Overtly? Implicitly? Do the "listening for voices exercise" to see if you can hear a character who might fill this reflective role. Write down what you hear.

7. Responsibilities Exercise:

What are the risks your project takes? Where do its contradictions lie? Are these contradictions you can live with? How will you respond to readers' concerns about them? Make some notes.

8. Beta Readers Exercise:

In your current project, what are the representations you've made that you're worried about? Who could you ask (and remunerate) to help you get those right?

What kinds of flaws and contradictions can you place with your characters in order to make them round and complex? How will you avoid slipping into stereotype? Or, if you deliberately decide to go there, how might you address the problem?

9. Thank you for participating!

I hope you enjoyed this podcast and found it helpful for your writing practice! Feel free to pass comments on to the organizers.