**Research and the Telling Detail**

When I was in college, I didn't particularly like doing research. I appreciated its necessity, but it was something I didn't enjoy and would go out of my way to avoid. My primary major was Computer Science, in which research (as I understood it, more on that later!) often wasn't required; your code compiled or it didn't, worked or not, regardless of your citations and bibliography. My other major was Creative Writing, which also seemed promising lack-of-research-wise. We had to read some critical analysis for the literature courses, but the core courses were workshop-style, where we presented stories and had them critiqued. Ideal!

Fast-forward to more than a decade later (and when did *that* happen!) and I'm a full-time writer who does quite a bit of research. If I'd told past-me about this, he'd have been horrified, but honestly it's a lot of fun! Now that I know the big secret, I'm happy to do. The secret, which took me a surprisingly long time to figure out, is this:

Research is just reading books, and occasionally writing things down.

*Research and "Research"*

The problem with the research that I had to do in college is that I was taught to do it *properly*. That meant a bunch of administrative overhead -- tracking sources, making citations, getting multiple opinions, formatting a bibliography, finding appropriate quotes, and so on. And these things are important! They are the props that keeps the edifice of science, history, and literary theory standing.

But this is creative writing, and we can dispense with all that. That means that when I talk about "research" in this context, it's about finding things out, and somehow working them into your story. You don't have to keep track of where they came from, or even how likely they are to be true. No one is going to grade your bibliography or even see it. All that matters is whether the story works for the reader, and whether the research helps it work better.

Stripped of all the paraphernalia, research just boils down to reading books (or the internet, but books are still better, more later!) in search of interesting stuff. For me, this is a *lot* more fun. It helps that I'm the kind of person who can find anything interesting, but a) I think that describes a lot of writers, and b) it's a talent you can, and I would argue should, cultivate.

*Why Do I Need Research?, Part I -- It's All Fiction!*

I write fantasy, with occasional forays into science fiction. One thing you hear a lot in these genres -- I think mostly from people who have been conditioned, like me, to think of research as boring -- is that you shouldn't bother, because obviously you can make it all up anyway! If, in my world, I say that castle walls are twelve hundred feet high and gunpowder rockets can reach the Moon, then they can, and the heck with anyone who says otherwise. Science fiction is a little more divided, with one side insisting everything should be "hard" and completely plausible and the other side zooming around in starships powered by unobtanium shooting phasers at each other.

There are basically two answers to the question of "Why do I need research?" First, it can help you with *verisimilitude*, and second, it can help you with *detail*. Both of these apply to genre fiction just as much as anything else.

"Verisimilitude", in this case, means something like "believability". While you absolutely can make up anything you can imagine for your fantasy world, in order for the story to work as a *story* it all has to hang together. That means when readers ask questions, you need to have answers, or at least give the impression of having answers. If castle walls are twelve hundred feet high, the questions might be things like "how do medieval people build a wall that big?" and "why would anyone do that when a fifty-foot wall would do?" It is totally possible to have sensible answers to those questions! [Attack on Titan pic?] If there is a race of mega-giants that castles need to defend against, and wizards summon earth elementals to create giant walls, that works in the context of the story.

But that implies that this is a question you've thought about, and that it's important to your story. There are always going to be other details, things that *aren't* important but are mentioned in passing, and it's here that research can be helpful. What history, in particular, can tell us is not "this is the way things must be", but rather "this is a catalog of the way things *have been*." If our hero glances up at the castle as he rides through town and thinks about how tall it is, rather than coming up with the complex justifications described above, it's much easier to simply look up a real castle and assume they're pretty similar.

Most worlds, fantasy or science fiction, are not *completely* alien -- if they were, it'd be hard to get the readers interested. For starters, they mostly include humans, or at least other species that are sufficiently human-like in their mental faculties that we can understand them as humans. Readers have a good instinct as to how humans behave, how they form societies, how they interact with each other. History is a catalog of human behavior under various circumstances, and if you're looking for a safe default for a minor point, it's a great place to start. (But not to get obsessed over! More later.)

"Detail", on the other hand, addresses an uncomfortable truth: most of us have a fairly limited imagination. We have only one life experience to draw on, plus what we read and watch. And very few of us are aliens or elves or ninth-century French merchants! The role of research should not be to limit imagination but to inspire it; believe me when I say that truth is often much, much stranger than fiction.

This kind of research is less systematic and less about a particular problem. If you read history, or memoirs, or anything similar, it's more a matter of keeping an eye out for details that jump out at you. Old houses where the ends of beams are carved into leering faces. Tiny shrines almost obscured by tall grass. *Anything* that sticks in your mind. Odds are, if it's memorable for you, it'll have the same effect on your readers.

And then you steal it! That's the wonderful thing about history. Nobody owns it! This sort of thing can be a throwaway line to add local color, but in the best cases it can start you down unexpected roads that add a richness to your story. Why do they carve faces in the beams? Maybe they represent household gods, and the practice is now suppressed by the central temple. Which characters hold to the old beliefs? What does that so about them?

This kind of research tends to be a little more serendipitous, but you can guide it. Look for books with a lot of low-level detail. Memoirs can be wonderful for this, because the things that stick out in a person's memory are by definition the most memorable. Make sure the subject of your reading roughly matches up with the kind of culture you're writing about, and you'll be more likely to find things that fit your context. But let yourself wander!

*Why Do I Need Research?, Part II - Write What You Know*

"Write what you know" is advice given to new writers. I'm not sure how it got started, but I see the idea. You write what you know because writing what you don't know is hard; it's the same reason you don't start karate class with the triple jump-kick. And it's good advice in the sense that if there's something you know well, using it in your writing can be great.

But. My writing teacher, the late Hillary Masters, told us as freshmen, "Don't take 'write what you know' too literally. I don't want to read fifteen stories about broke college students who can't get laid."

The other group of people who don't think they can benefit from research are those writing in worlds they already know, which generally means literary, contemporary fiction, set in a place they feel comfortable with and using characters they understand. There's absolutely nothing wrong with this, but it only goes so far.

In particular, it's remarkable how the same physical place can reveal itself in different ways, through details, to different people. The things I (white, American, middle-class, male, straight) notice when I walk down a particular street might be very different from what a homeless woman pays attention to, or a Chinese billionaire in town for the afternoon, and so on. This kind of detail is very hard to get a handle on, because even when the physical setting is the same our experience of it is different. At the same time, having all your character be exactly like you is not ideal!

The solution is research, in a very loosely defined sense. If you're still in the academic mindset it's easy to think of research as something that involves studying works produced by historians, scientists, and so on, but it goes much broader than that. Anything that helps you get a better handle on your characters is great. First-person accounts or memoirs are gold -- by paying attention to the way a writer describes thing, you can begin to understand *what kinds of things* are important to person in their particular situation. As with fantasy and science fiction, the analogy between the work you're reading and the character you're writing about need not be exact. Everyone's experience is different, and nothing you write is ever going to be "true". But reading other stories can help you get the details that make your story work for your readers.

*How to Research*

This feels like it should be a longer section, but honestly it's pretty simple. You find books on the subject, and you read them! While reading them, either copy out pieces that strike you, put sticky notes in the book, or whatever method works for saving things.

Finding the right books can be more of a challenge. Wikipedia, surprisingly, can help. It and similar sources are usually too summarized for this kind of research, missing exactly the details you're looking for. But most Wikipedia articles have bibliographies at the bottom that are a great place to start reading. As always, your local library is your friend, especially since many books will only have a sub-section about the specific thing you're interested in.

Skim freely until you get to the stuff you want! You're a writer, not a historian or scientist -- you're under no obligation to be fair, complete, or even accurate in your research. "Whatever makes the story work" should be your mantra. I often come across little bits and pieces that seem unlikely, funny stories that probably never happened -- those are perfect! Where a real historian writing about, say, the Battle of the Somme would have to go through many sources, compare unreliable reports, etc, as a writer a single well-written memoir might supply all the grist you need.

*The Perils of Research*

The chief problem people encounter when researching is knowing when to stop. It's easy to get carried away, either because you're having fun, or because you're nervous. The former is not so bad, it's just a matter of tearing yourself away long enough to actually write the story, but the latter can be problematic.

The idea of being "accurate" can be a pernicious one. If you get too obsessed with minutiae, it's easy to drive yourself crazy looking up the circumference of every cartwheel and the weight of every backpack. Try to remember that you're looking for *telling* details, the things that a character, and by extension the reader, will find unusual and interesting. A cart is probably just a cart for a medieval character, in the way that for most of us today a car is just a car. If a character can peg makes and models at a glance, that tells us something about that character!

You can't get *everything* right, so you need to pick your battles. You should have at least a basic familiarity with whatever your story is about, and if there's a technical subject involved then knowing more than the average person is taught by Hollywood is probably a good idea. If your book involves a lot of gunplay by people who know what they're doing, then spend some time getting the terminology and descriptions right. If it involves people sailing around the world, do some work on sailing language and technique. It doesn't have to be a *lot*, just enough to let the reader suspend disbelief. Think of an old-fashioned movie set. It may be just a façade painted on cardboard, but as long as it looks okay *from wherever the camera is*, then it's fine! Just make sure that whatever is going to be in close-up can bear the scrutiny.

*Using Your Research*

One last problem of research is what to do with it when you're done. You'll have some stuff -- telling details, bits of dialogue, scenes or vignettes, locations, etc. The thing you now need to avoid is the temptation to shove *everything* in, because having found all this cool stuff the urge to share it with everybody can be powerful!

Remember that the reader, ideally, should not be able to tell the difference between a bit you swiped from a history book and something you made up whole cloth. Things you find should meld with the world you create from your imagination, be it SFF, historical, or contemporary. The needs of the story always come first. That means that a lot of the material you lovingly highlighted may end up on the cutting room floor, and that's okay! Save it somewhere. You never know where it might come in handy.

Reading with an eye for this sort of detail is definitely a skill, which takes time and practice to acquire. But in my mind, it's well worth it. Real life -- as filtered through the mind of a memoirist, historian, or whoever is writing about it -- is unbelievably rich and endlessly surprising. When we try to impart those same qualities to our writing, it only makes sense to go to the source!