



*Sometimes, the story chooses you.*

# Writing Historical Fiction

## (OR HOW RESEARCH AND CREATIVITY GO HAND IN HAND)

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Beginning novelists are often advised to write what you know, and, on the surface, this makes sense.

How straightforward it would be for a doctor to write medical thrillers. How tidy for an art historian to publish the next *Da Vinci Code*. But what happens if you'd rather not write about something you know? What if you can't? Because, as many writers have come to realize, sometimes it's not possible to choose the story you write. Sometimes, the story chooses you.

In my new YA novel, *A Death-Struck Year*, seventeen-year-old Cleo Berry's life is turned upside down when Spanish influenza ravages her city. The idea for the book grew organically, stemming from a love of coming-of-age novels and a fascination with disease fiction—a fascination I choose not to examine too closely. When I first started writing Cleo's story, I knew next to nothing about the 1918 pandemic or World War I or how people lived, ate, and dressed in early-twentieth-century Portland, Oregon. There was plenty I didn't

know, which meant one thing. It was time to visit the library.

Research often gets a bad rap. It's boring; it's dry. And anything that is boring or dry fails to resonate with students of any age. But when traditional library sources are enhanced by various outside (and tangible) experiences, research can be a prime example of immersive learning. The process, rather than being tedious, can be very, very fun.

A few examples:

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*For me, researching historical fiction has always been equal parts investigation and imagination.*

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**Maps and Architecture:** Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote, “The author must know his countryside, whether real or imaginary, like his hand; the distances, the points of the compass, the place of the sun’s rising, the behavior of the moon, should all be beyond cavil” (Hill 1978). My heroine was born and raised in Portland. It was important that I understood the streets and buildings and neighborhoods as well as she did. Armed with old maps unearthed from the Oregon Historical Society and Portland City Archives, I explored. I visited the old train station, the Skidmore Fountain, the historic residential neighborhood of King’s Hill, even Yamhill Street, where a sprawling public market once thrived. A great deal of time was also spent wandering aimlessly, knowing Cleo’s story could only be made better as I became more familiar with her world.



Ford Model T

**Transportation:** A century ago, Henry Ford’s Model T was the most ubiquitous car in America.

(Customers were told they could order the automobile in any color, so long as it was black.) Therefore, it was easy to choose a car for Cleo to drive. Then I wondered: how did you drive a Model T? How did one drive in general? Did they even have traffic lights back then? I wasn’t going to torture my readers by including an info dump on early automotive history, but because Cleo spent a great deal of time in her car, these were answers I felt I had to know. I found step-by-step driving instructions in Robert Casey’s *The Model T: A Centennial History*. Afterward, I dragged my family with me to visit one classic car show after another so I could study “my” car up close and personal. A good resource was the Model T Ford Club of America, which keeps an online calendar of regional and national car shows.



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**Clothing:** I knew that women wore skirts and dresses and fancy hats. I knew that men wore crisp suits and handkerchiefs—and that was the extent of my knowledge about fashion in the 1910s. Luckily, JoAnne Olian’s book *Everyday Fashions, 1909–1920, As Pictured in Sears Catalogs* was invaluable. I also watched plenty of period dramas (and, yes, okay, *Legends of the Fall* was one of them). Also helpful was a peek at the vintage costumes on display at the McConnell Mansion Museum here in Moscow, Idaho.



Antique  
candlestick  
phone

**Technology:** How did one make a phone call in 1918? What did a bathroom look like? A kitchen? A washing machine? The devil is in the details. I started with *Gadgets and Necessities: An Encyclopedia of Household Innovations* by Pauline Webb and Mark Suggitt. I followed up by visiting the Campbell House in nearby Spokane, Washington, a fascinating museum arranged to look like an early twentieth-century home. Visitors can wander about a period kitchen, baths, bedrooms, closets, a garage, even an early version of a man cave.



James Beard Foundation <[www.jamesbeard.org](http://www.jamesbeard.org)>

**Food:** Every region has its distinct culinary flavor; the Pacific Northwest is no exception. Luckily, I stumbled upon a resource that could explain it all to me in fantastic detail. James Beard (1903–1985) was a famous chef who grew up in Portland. In *Delights & Prejudices*, he not only offered readers a first-person account of life in the City of Roses, but also reminisced about the culinary

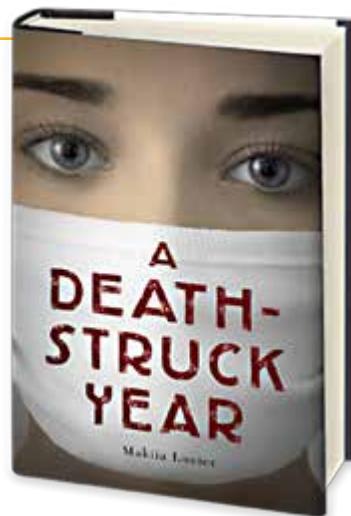
experiences that shaped his career: shopping at the Carroll Public Market, picnics, a subpar dining experience at the city's top hotel. After I had read Beard's book, I spent a fair amount of time sampling what the city had to offer, much of it seafood, from vendors ranging from food carts set up

on almost every street corner to Jake's Famous Crawfish, a historic landmark.

For me, researching historical fiction has always been equal parts investigation and imagination. Research doesn't have to be a dreaded experience:

the hapless student surrounded by dusty tomes and small print. With a little creativity, research can be more of a treasure hunt: a clue-sniffing bloodhound with his nose to the ground and his tail wagging high, following a trail that always begins in a library but rarely ends there.

**Makiia Lucier** grew up on the Pacific island of Guam. She received a Bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Oregon and a Master's in library studies from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where she studied literature for children. She's had plenty of jobs, mostly in libraries, and currently resides in the small college town of Moscow, Idaho. Her debut YA novel, *A Death-Struck Year* (HMH Books for Young Readers 2014), is a selection on the American Booksellers Association Spring 2014 Indies Introduce New Voices list. Visit Makiia at [www.makiialucier.com](http://www.makiialucier.com).



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