From the World of Historical Fiction – Readers Share Their Perspectives
April 2012

The following report is based on a survey of 805 individuals conducted from March 14 to April 3, 2012. As the survey author and writer of historical fiction, I am delighted with the response rate. The data sheds light on preferences and habits of historical fiction readers and offers interesting insights to writers and others in the publishing world.

Each chart is presented with a few highlight notes. Further analysis will occur in my blog www.awriterofhistory.com. If you wish to reference information from the survey for your own purposes, please include my name and blog.

1. What portion of your reading is historical fiction?

	Response Percent	Response Count
Almost exclusively historical fiction	9.6%	77
50 to 75% historical fiction	31.6%	253
25 to 50% historical fiction	32.5%	260
Less than 25% historical fiction	20.0%	160
I almost never read historical fiction	6.4%	51

Highlights:
- 73.7% read historical fiction (HF) more than 25% of the time.
- 41.2% read HF more than 50% of the time.
- Only 6.4% rarely read HF.

Digging beyond the averages:
- 15.6% of men almost never read historical fiction. The equivalent number for women is 4.5%.

2. Have you always enjoyed historical fiction?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Since I was a child/teenager		69.1%	533
Since my 20s or 30s		16.7%	129
I've come to historical fiction later in life		14.1%	109

Highlights:
- 69.1% began reading HF in childhood.

Digging beyond the averages:
- Discovering historical fiction early in life makes a difference. Correlating question 2 to question 1 indicates that those who began reading historical fiction as children continue to read HF at higher rates (47% read more than 50% HF) than those who began reading HF later in life (33.6% read more than 50% HF).

3. Please tell us about your reading of historical fiction.

	A lot less	Somewhat less	About the same	Somewhat more	A lot more	Response Count
Compared to the past, I am reading historical fiction:	5.5% (43)	12.1% (95)	37.4% (294)	28.1% (221)	16.9% (133)	786
Compared to today, in the future, I expect to read historical fiction:	1.4% (11)	1.8% (14)	66.8% (507)	19.8% (150)	10.1% (77)	759

Highlights:
- 82.4% read historical fiction at the same or higher rates than in the past.
- Only 3.2% expect to read historical fiction less in the future.
- Almost 30% expect to read more or a lot more HF in the future.

Digging beyond the averages:
- 23.7% of men compared with 31.2% of women expect to read somewhat more or a lot more historical fiction in future.
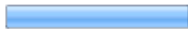
4. What are your overall book reading habits (please make one choice per row)?

	Less than 5 books a year	5 - 10 books a year	10 - 20 books a year	20 - 30 books a year	more than 30 books a year	Response Count
In the past	5.7% (45)	11.5% (91)	18.7% (148)	17.0% (134)	**47.1% (372)**	790
Recently	6.3% (48)	10.4% (79)	16.3% (124)	17.0% (129)	**50.1% (381)**	761
Plans for the future	2.1% (16)	6.6% (50)	15.8% (120)	19.1% (145)	**56.3% (427)**	758

Highlights:
- The far right column shows a steady increase in those reading or planning to read more than 30 books per year.

Digging beyond the averages:
- While men represent 16% of all respondents, they only represent 7% of those reading more than 30 books per year.

5. Why do you read historical fiction (select up to three choices)?

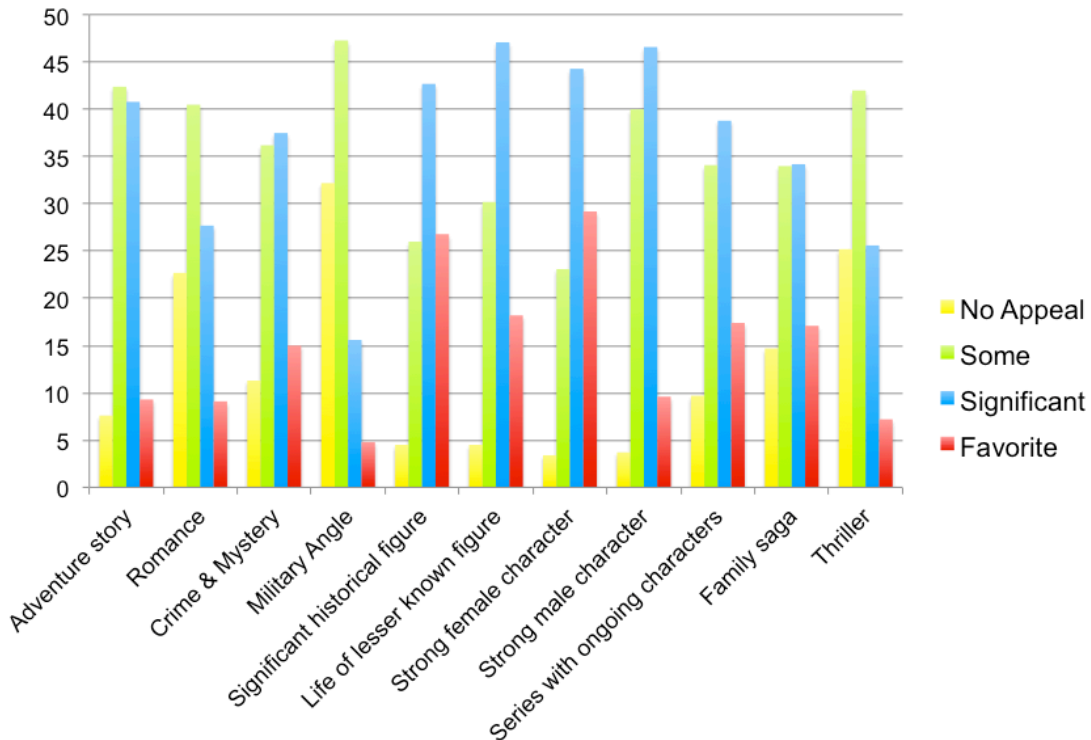|		Response Percent	Response Count
To understand and learn about historical periods without reading non-fiction		51.8%	403
To learn about real people behind the legends		36.8%	286
To build a connection with my own past		8.5%	66
To bring the past to life, appreciating how people lived and coped in very different times		76.3%	594
To understand the experience of those marginalized by history		18.4%	143
Because it's a great story.		61.6%	479
Because it's a form of time travel		35.9%	279
Because what was is more enjoyable than what is		9.6%	75
Because contemporary novels are too bleak or too sensational		11.4%	89

Highlights:
- The top three reasons for reading historical fiction are:

- To bring the past to life, appreciating how people lived and coped in very different times;
- Because it's a great story;
- To understand and learn about historical periods without reading non-fiction.

Digging beyond the averages:
- 79.3% of women select 'bringing the past to life' as their top reason for reading historical fiction.
- 65.5% of men select 'because it's a great story' as their top reason.

6. Within historical fiction, what genre/type of story appeals to you? Please rate each choice against the four options.
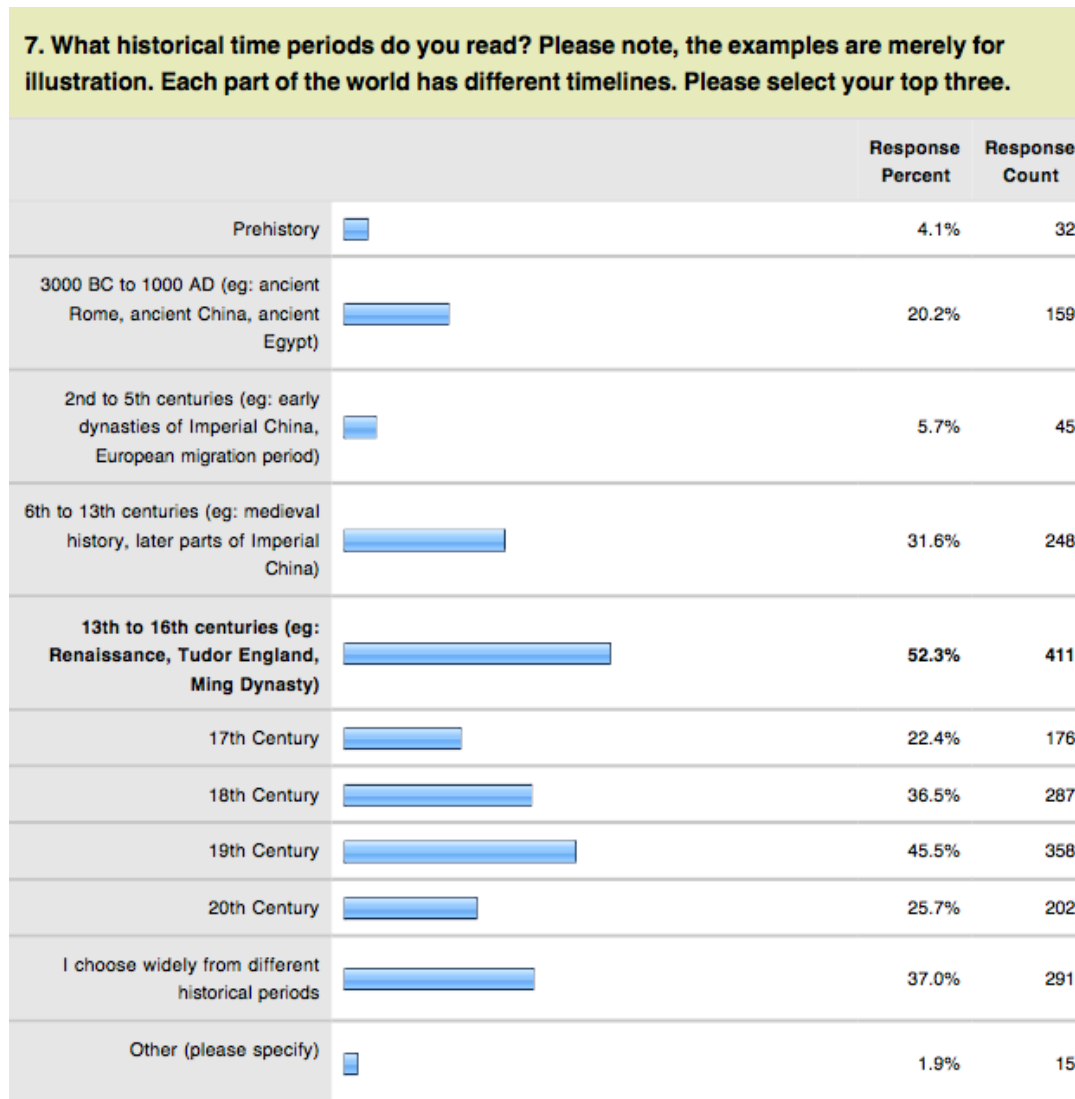
Note: I've used a different presentation format to make the data provided by the survey tool easier to understand.

Highlights:
- Adding 'significant' and 'favorite', the top three are:
  - Strong female character;
  - The life of a significant historical figure;
  - The life of lesser known historical figures.
- Least favourite story types are:
  - A story with a military angle;
  - Thrillers;
  - Romance.

Digging beyond the averages:
- The top three for men are: significant historical figure, adventure story and story with a military angle.
- Military stories are the least favourite for women.
- Romance stories are the least favourite for men.

7. What historical time periods do you read? Please note, the examples are merely for illustration. Each part of the world has different timelines. Please select your top three.

		Response Percent	Response Count
Prehistory		4.1%	32
3000 BC to 1000 AD (eg: ancient Rome, ancient China, ancient Egypt)		20.2%	159
2nd to 5th centuries (eg: early dynasties of Imperial China, European migration period)		5.7%	45
6th to 13th centuries (eg: medieval history, later parts of Imperial China)		31.6%	248
13th to 16th centuries (eg: Renaissance, Tudor England, Ming Dynasty)		**52.3%**	**411**
17th Century		22.4%	176
18th Century		36.5%	287
19th Century		45.5%	358
20th Century		25.7%	202
I choose widely from different historical periods		37.0%	291
Other (please specify)		1.9%	15

Highlights:
- Historical fiction readers have broad tastes. Many time periods appeal to more than 30% of respondents.
- On average, the dominant time period preferred by readers is the 13th to 16th centuries.
- Least favourite time periods are prehistory and the 2nd to 5th centuries.
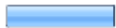
Digging beyond the averages:
- Although the 13th to 16th centuries emerged as the top time period overall (52.3%), men disagreed. Only 27.9% of men favoured this time period.
- Men selected 20th century stories (38.5%) at a much greater rate than women (23.3%).

8. What historical geographies do you prefer (please select up to three choices)?

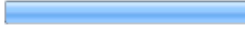|	Response Percent	Response Count
Europe	70.3%	549
Britain	67.3%	526
Asia	15.2%	119
India	6.1%	48
US	39.3%	307
Canada	7.6%	59
South America	2.7%	21
Australia & New Zealand	5.1%	40
Geography is irrelevant	25.7%	201

Highlights:
- Europe and Britain are of overwhelming interest regardless of where respondents live.
- Historical fiction based in US geography is significantly behind Europe and Britain despite the fact that 59.3% of respondents live in the US.

9. Do you choose books based on historical period, genre/type, geography or author?

	Response Percent	Response Count
I select mainly based on time period	27.2%	212
I select mainly based on author	18.3%	142
I select mainly based on genre/type	30.3%	236
I select mainly based on geography	2.3%	18
None of the above	21.9%	170
answered question		778

Highlights:
- Readers choose in varied ways. No single factor amongst time, author or genre dominates.

11. Where do you find recommendations for good books? Please check your top 3.

		Response Percent	Response Count
I get recommendations from friends		58.1%	454
I get recommendations from a few favourite websites and/or blogs		55.4%	433
I use Amazon and other online retailers for recommendations		37.5%	293
I use Facebook, Goodreads or other social media for recommendations		37.9%	296
I browse the bookstore		49.4%	386
I check the Books section of my newspaper		25.8%	202

Highlights:
- Collectively (rows 2, 3 and 4), the online world dominates as a source of recommendations.
- More than half the respondents get recommendations from friends.
- Half the respondents choose bookstores as one of their top three sources of recommendations.

Digging beyond the averages:
- Men use online sources for recommendations less frequently than women. For example, using websites and blogs: women 59.2%, men 36.7%.

12. Have movies, TV series or other media sparked your interest in reading historical fiction?

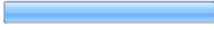|		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		45.2%	348
No		54.8%	422

From the written comments:
- Most frequently mentioned are: Downton Abbey, Tudors, Other Boleyn Girl, Braveheart, Game of Thrones, John Adams and Masterpiece Theatre.

13. Can you find enough historical fiction you like?

	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	78.2%	596
No	21.8%	166

Highlights:
- Almost 22% of respondents cannot find enough historical fiction.

14. How do you purchase/acquire books? Please check one.

	Response Percent	Response Count
Almost exclusively online	29.6%	235
Almost exclusively at the bookstore	11.0%	87
I borrow from the library	14.2%	113
I usually borrow from friends	0.8%	6
Many of these options	44.4%	352
answered question		793

Highlights:
- Historical fiction readers use many options to purchase books. 44.4% use a mix of options.
- Close to 30% have switched almost exclusively online.
- Historical fiction readers do not borrow from friends.

Digging beyond the averages:
- Library usage varies widely: Women 16.0%; Men 5.6%; those under 30 24.7%; US readers 18.6%; UK readers 8.3%

15. What format are you reading? Please check one.

	Response Percent	Response Count
Mostly e-books	11.3%	90
Mostly paper books	48.9%	388
A mix of both	39.7%	315
answered question		793

Highlights:
- Close to half of historical fiction readers mainly read physical books.
- The other half has switched partially or more completely to e-books.

Digging beyond the averages:
- Purchasing physical books: women 45.7%, men 65.6%, under 30 60.3%. By country: US 46%, UK 47.7%.

General observations:
- The past fascinates readers. Almost 75% of respondents read more than 25% historical fiction.
- SEX: Women and men differ significantly in their views of historical fiction.
- AGE: Those under 30 have different preferences for genre and time period and have different patterns of consumption and acquisition.
- GOING ONLINE: Social media and online sites play a very significant role for those consuming historical fiction.
- GEOGRAPHY: A reader's geographic location has less affect than we might expect on preferences.
- EDUCATION: Readers of historical fiction are very well educated: 46% have university degrees, 40.5% have completed graduate school.
- EARLY HABITS: Those introduced to historical fiction in childhood continue to read it at high volumes.

Caveats:
I am neither a statistician nor a survey specialist. However, I realize conclusions cannot be drawn from small numbers. In addition, some might suggest a built-in bias since the survey was initially posted at places that attract historical fiction readers. A few facts about those who responded:
- 668 women and 129 men
- 73 people under 30
- US 473, Canada 134, UK 86, Europe 48, Australia & New Zealand 33, Asia 24
- 211 read less than 25% historical fiction

A note of thanks:
I am grateful to Sarah Johnson who posted a link to the survey on her wonderful blog, Reading the Past.