

# M.K. TOD'S 2013 HISTORICAL FICTION READER SURVEY

... by M.K. Tod  
author of Unravelled and blogger at [www.awriterofhistory.com](http://www.awriterofhistory.com)

with support from Richard Lee  
Founder of the Historical Novel Society

## From the World of Historical Fiction Reader Opinions Revealed

January 2014

This report contains results from the second comprehensive historical fiction reader survey. The survey reached 2,440 participants (83% female, 17% male) and was conducted between October 16 and November 11, 2013. While many questions are identical to the 2012 survey, this year's survey includes additional topics such as pricing perspectives, factors considered when selecting a book, readers' views of indie books, and the attributes of favourite historical fiction, effective book reviews, and favourite reading blogs and websites.

Each chart that follows is presented with a few highlight notes. Since the survey software application reports to one decimal point, I rounded the percentages up or down as follows: .5 to .9 rounded up, .1 to .4 rounded down.

Sign up to follow A Writer of History ([www.awriterofhistory.com](http://www.awriterofhistory.com)) and receive future analysis on topics such as favourite authors, favourite online sources, gender differences and so on. Information and analysis from the 2012 survey is also available on A Writer of History.

### **A note of thanks:**

I am very grateful for the support of Richard Lee, founder of the Historical Novel Society ([www.historicalnovelsociety.org](http://www.historicalnovelsociety.org)) and to a number of bloggers, authors and others in the reading community who contributed ideas and publicity for this year's survey.

### **THANKS TO EVERYONE WHO TOOK THE SURVEY !**

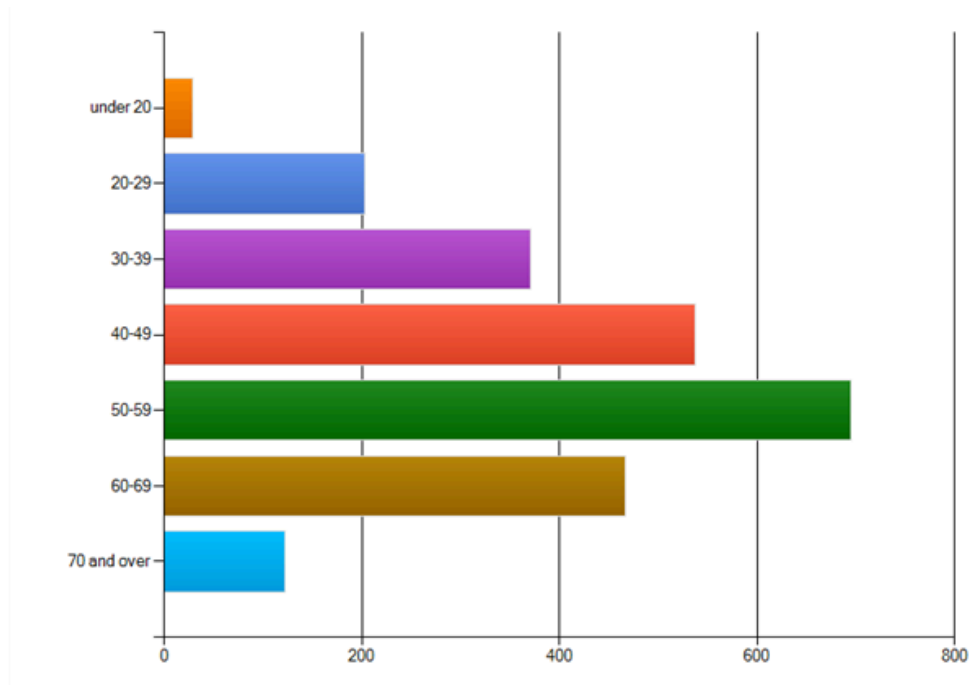
*M.K. Tod writes historical fiction and blogs about all aspects of the genre at A Writer of History ([www.awriterofhistory.com](http://www.awriterofhistory.com)). Her debut novel, **UNRAVELLED: Two wars. Two affairs. One marriage.**, is available in paperback and e-book formats from Amazon (<http://www.amazon.com/Unravelled-M-K-Tod-ebook/dp/B00EIJPJ5U>) and other e-retailers.*

*Mary can be contacted on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/MKTodAuthor>) Twitter (<https://twitter.com/mktodauthor>) and Goodreads ([https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/7181549.M\\_K\\_Tod](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/7181549.M_K_Tod)).*



## 1. DEMOGRAPHICS

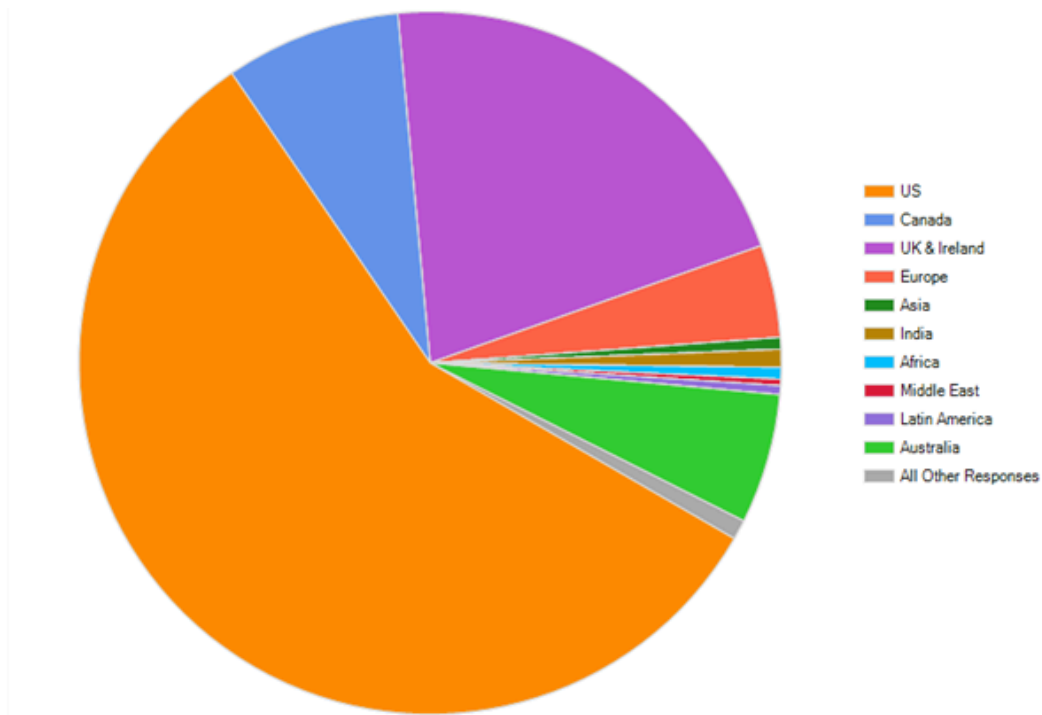
### How old are you?



#### Highlights:

- PEOPLE OF ALL AGES RESPONDED – solid distribution of age ranges; sufficient at all levels except under 20 to correlate differences on other questions
- UNDER 30s CAME TO THE PARTY – proportionally more participants under 30 than in the 2012 survey, which will enable further age comparisons
- AGE DISTRIBUTION IS SIMILAR FOR BOTH SEXES

## Where do you live?



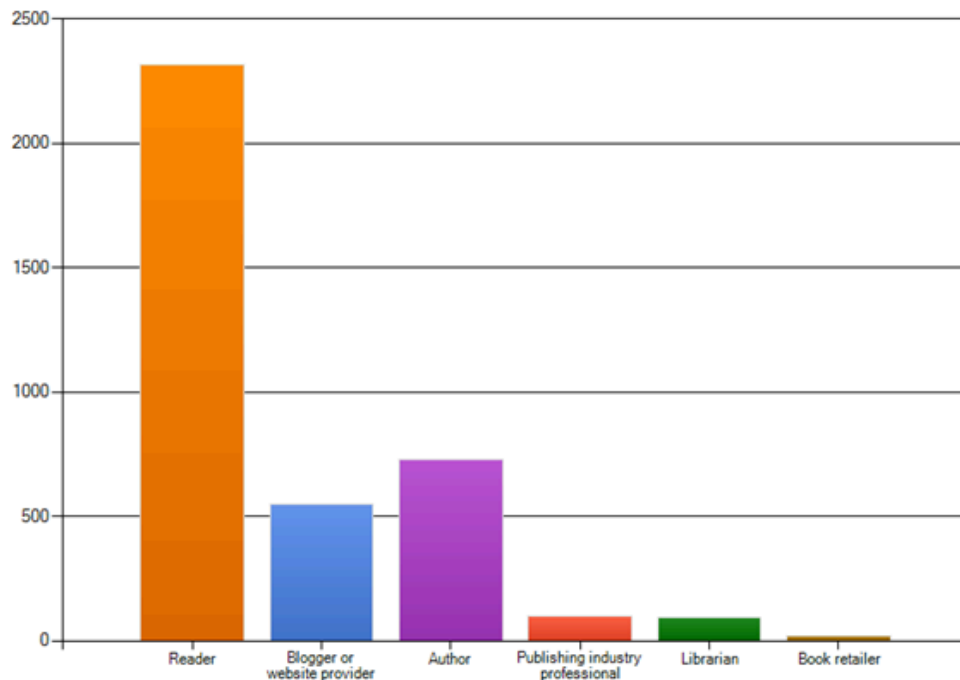
### Highlights:

- NUMBERS BY GEOGRAPHY: US – 1383, Canada – 196, UK & Ireland – 510, Europe – 103, Asia – 13, India – 20, Africa – 13, Middle East – 7, Latin America – 10, Australia – 145, New Zealand – 22, Other – 14
- US PARTICIPATION DOMINATES – however this year's survey includes 21% from UK & Ireland compared with 10% in 2012, which allows for a more robust comparison between these regions of the world. In addition, Canada, Europe and Australia have numbers sufficient to explore differences.

### Digging beyond the averages:

- GENDER DIFFERENCES – amongst women, 61% are from the US and 17% from UK & Ireland; amongst men, 38% US and 39% UK & Ireland
- AS FOR INDIA – despite working very hard to encourage participation from India, only 20 people responded

## Who are you?



### Highlights:

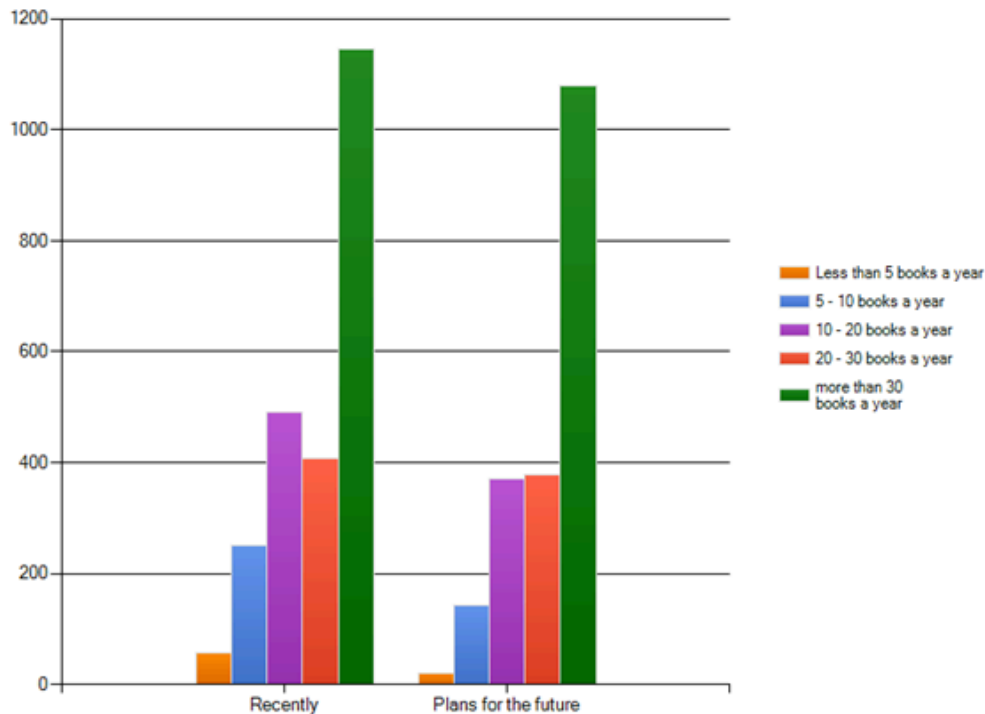
- WE'RE ALL READERS – almost everyone considers him/herself a reader
- AUTHORS AND BLOGGERS ABOUND – 549 bloggers/website providers responded; 730 authors responded which represents 30% of participants
- AUTHORS ALSO BLOG – 343 authors (47%) are also bloggers/website providers

### Digging beyond the averages:

- GENDER DIFFERENCES – authors are 77% female, 23% male while bloggers & website providers are 83% female, 17% male

## 2. GENERAL BOOK READING HABITS

On average, how many books do you read each year?



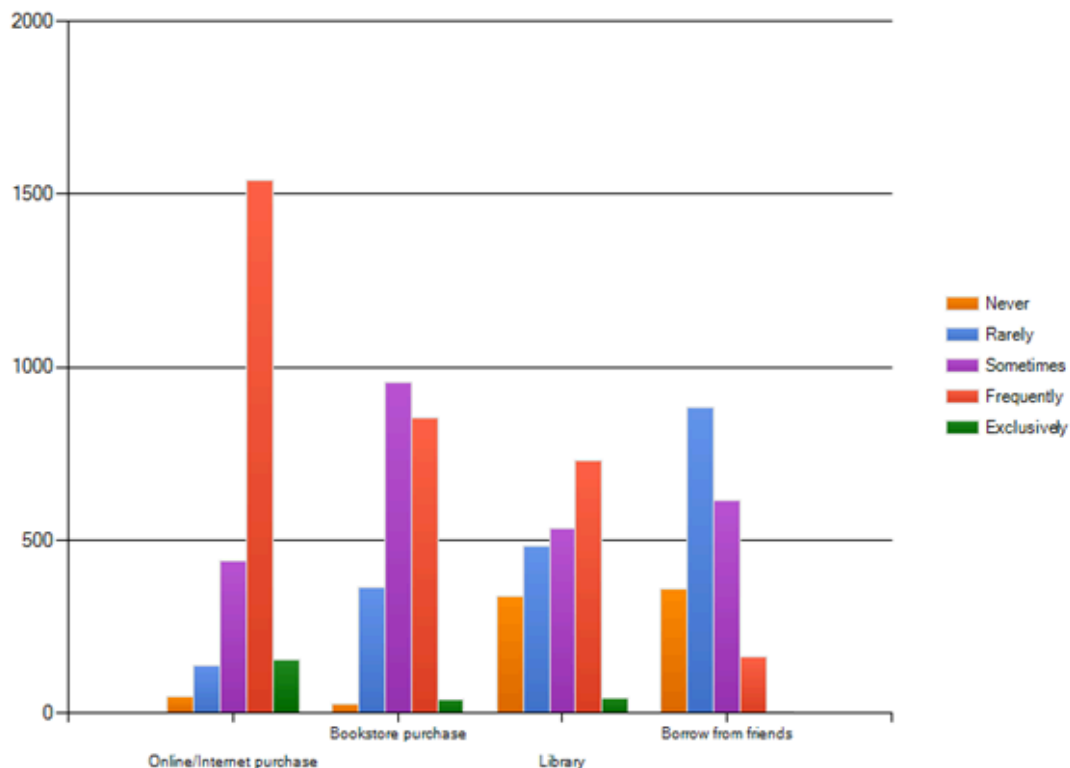
### Highlights:

- **VOLUME READERS** – 66% of participants read more than 20 books a year. Given the significant number of authors and bloggers/website providers, survey participation is likely biased towards those who read more than the average citizen.
- **FUTURE INTENTIONS** – 73% of those responding plan to read more than 20 books in the future compared with 66% currently reading at that volume (similar result in 2012 which might suggest that people always hope to read more).  
Editorial note: the bars aren't as high for 'Plans for the future' because fewer participants answered that part of the question.

### Digging beyond the averages:

- **WOMEN READ MORE THAN MEN** – 51% of women read more than 30 books a year compared with 34% of men
- **YOUNGER READERS** – 'Under 30s' plan to read more in the future in higher proportions than other age groups.

## Where do you purchase/acquire books?



### Highlights:

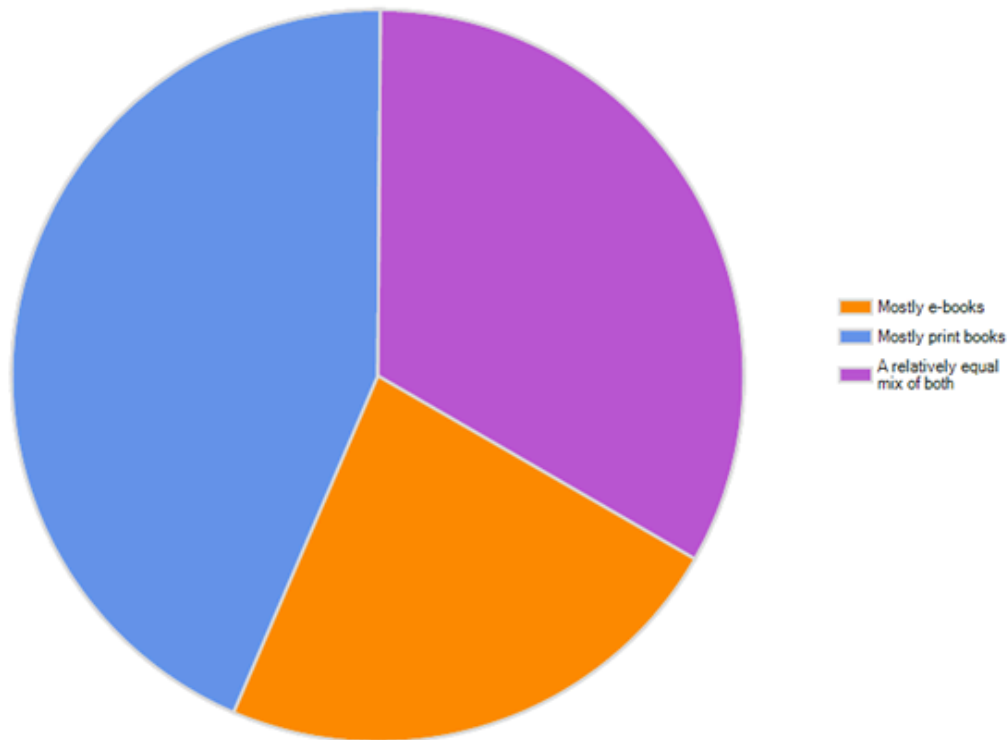
- ONLINE/INTERNET PURCHASING DOMINATES – adding 'Frequently' and 'Exclusively', online purchases are 73%; a similar results across all age ranges
- BORROWING FROM FRIENDS IS RARE – except in the 'under 30' category
- LIBRARIES REMAIN STRONG OPTION – 25% use the library sometimes, 34% use it frequently

### Digging beyond the averages:

- GENDER DIFFERENCES – women use libraries in higher proportions to men
- ONLINE PURCHASING CORRELATES WITH E-BOOK PREFERENCES – not surprisingly, those who read mostly e-books or who read e-books and print books in relatively equal proportions are more likely to purchase online (74% and 80% respectively) than those who read mainly print books (51%)
- CANADA IS NOT AS ONLINE AS OTHER GEOGRAPHIES – of the major geographies, Canada stands out for purchasing online in lower proportions (57% either frequently or exclusively) than other parts of the world (US – 74, UK & Ireland – 74, Europe – 73, Australia – 77)



## What book format are you reading?



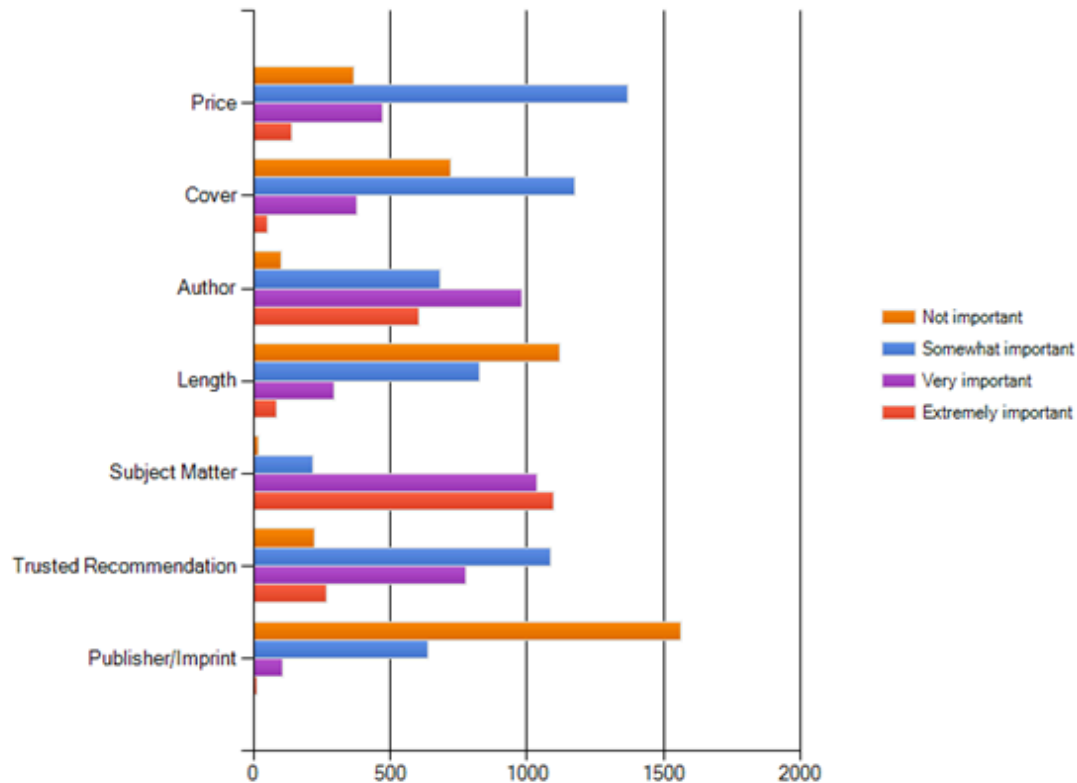
### Highlights:

- 23% read mostly e-books, 44% mostly print books, 33% relatively equal mix of both

### Digging beyond the numbers:

- MEN & UNDER 30s MORE TIED TO PRINT – men read print books in higher numbers than women (51% versus 42%); 'under 30s' are reading print books at slightly higher %ages (50%) than the average (44%)
- US E-BOOK PENETRATION HIGHEST – 26% of US participants read mainly e-books compared with 21% Canada, 17% UK & Ireland, 18% Europe, 19% Australia

### In choosing a book, how important are the following factors?



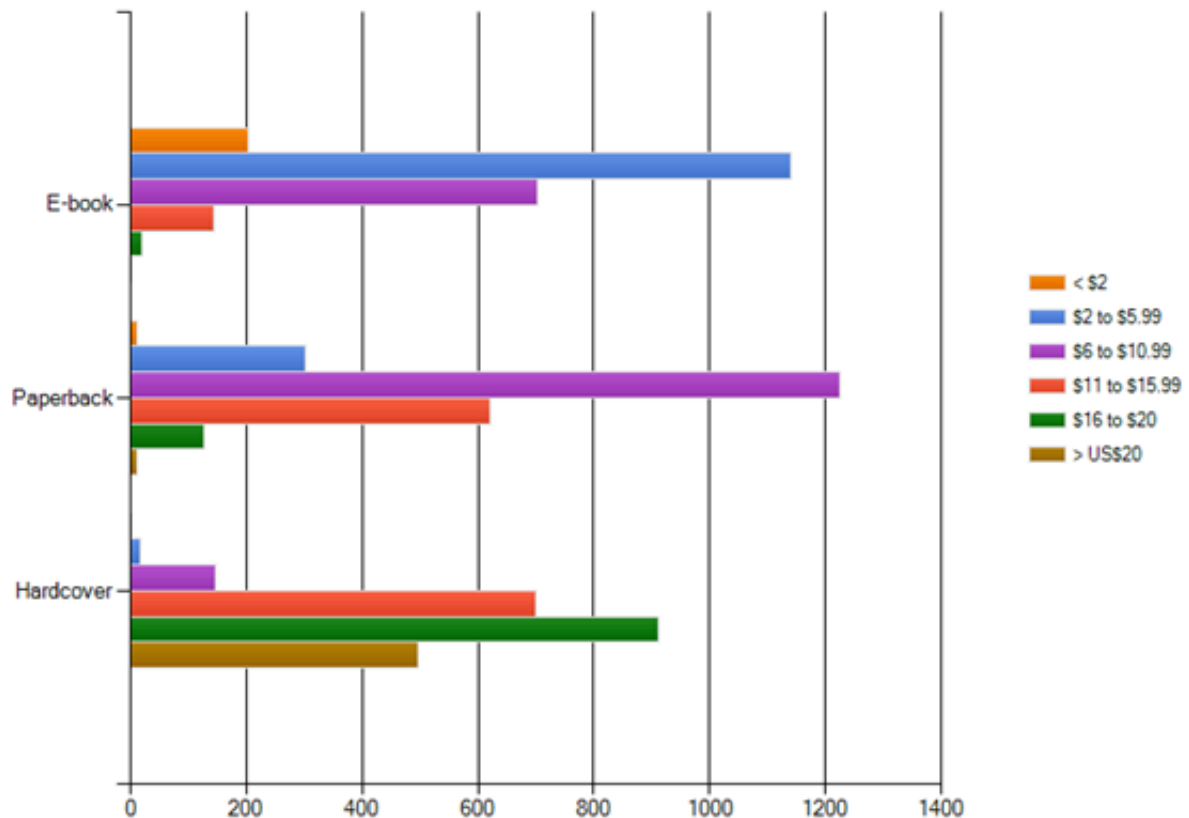
#### Highlights:

- SUBJECT MATTER IS KEY – not surprisingly, more than 2000 participants (90%) chose subject matter as either very or extremely important
- AUTHOR IS SECOND – author comes next with almost 67%
- TRUSTED RECOMMENDATION is third with 44%.
- 67% said PUBLISHER/IMPRINT is not important
- 26% said PRICE is very or extremely important

#### Digging beyond the averages:

- AGE MAKES A DIFFERENCE – price is more significant for 'under 30s' than other age groups
- HISTORICAL FICTION ENTHUSIASTS LOVE THEIR AUTHORS – however, those who rarely read historical fiction are much less likely to see the author as a significant factor in choosing a book

### What do you think is a reasonable price to pay for a book of fiction?



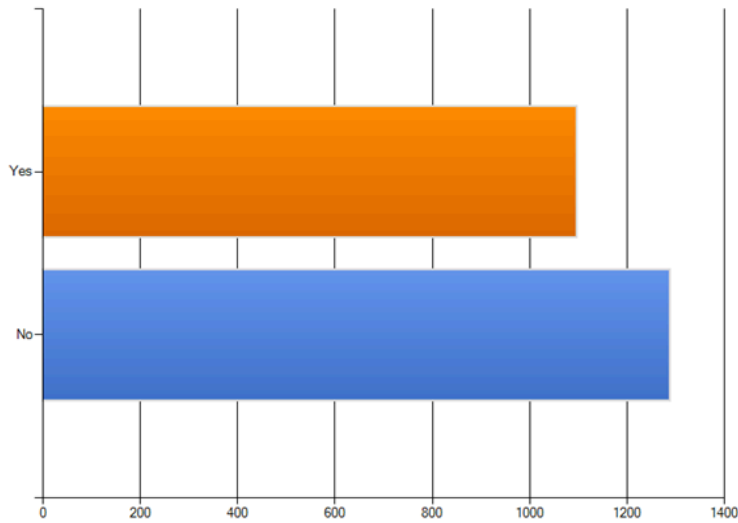
#### Highlights:

- READERS FEEL E-BOOKS SHOULD BE CHEAP – 60% feel e-books should be priced at less than \$6 US. Editorial comment: As an author, I find this statistic daunting.
- PRICE PRESSURES ON PAPERBACKS AND HARDCOVERS – 67% feel paperbacks should be priced at less than \$11 US; 62% feel hardcovers should be \$16 US or higher

#### Digging beyond the averages:

- PRICE EXPECTATIONS ARE CONSISTENT – they vary little with gender, age, or # books purchased per year
- PRINT FANS TOLERATE HIGHER PRICES – those who read mostly print books are prepared to pay slightly more for paperback and hardcover than the average

### Are you aware when viewing a book if it is by an indie author?

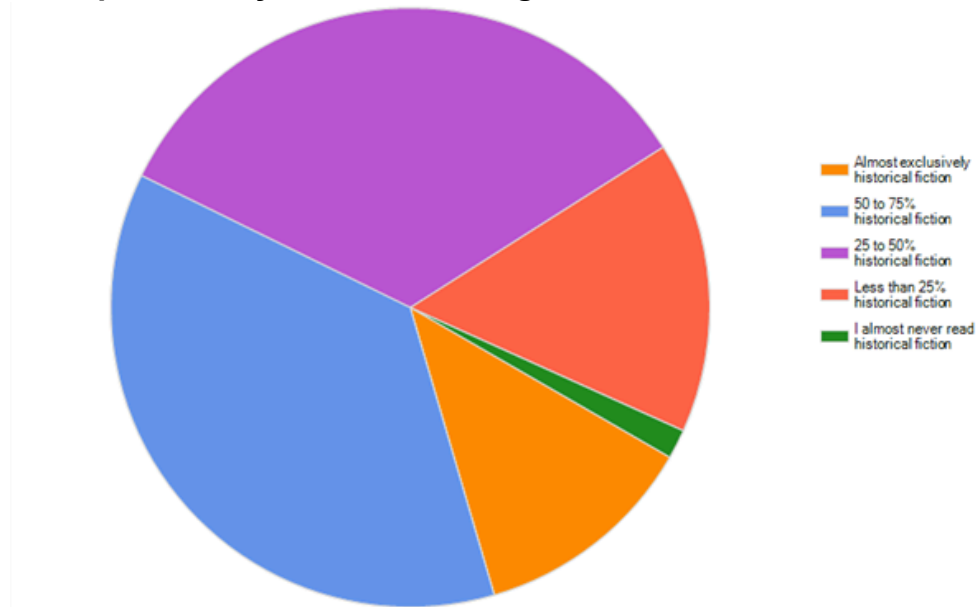


#### Highlights:

- INDIE BOOKS STAND OUT – 46% indicate they are aware when a book is by an indie author
- READERS ARE WILLING TO BUY INDIE BOOKS – of those who are aware, 87% said that this does not stop them from purchasing the book

### 3. HISTORICAL FICTION PREFERENCES

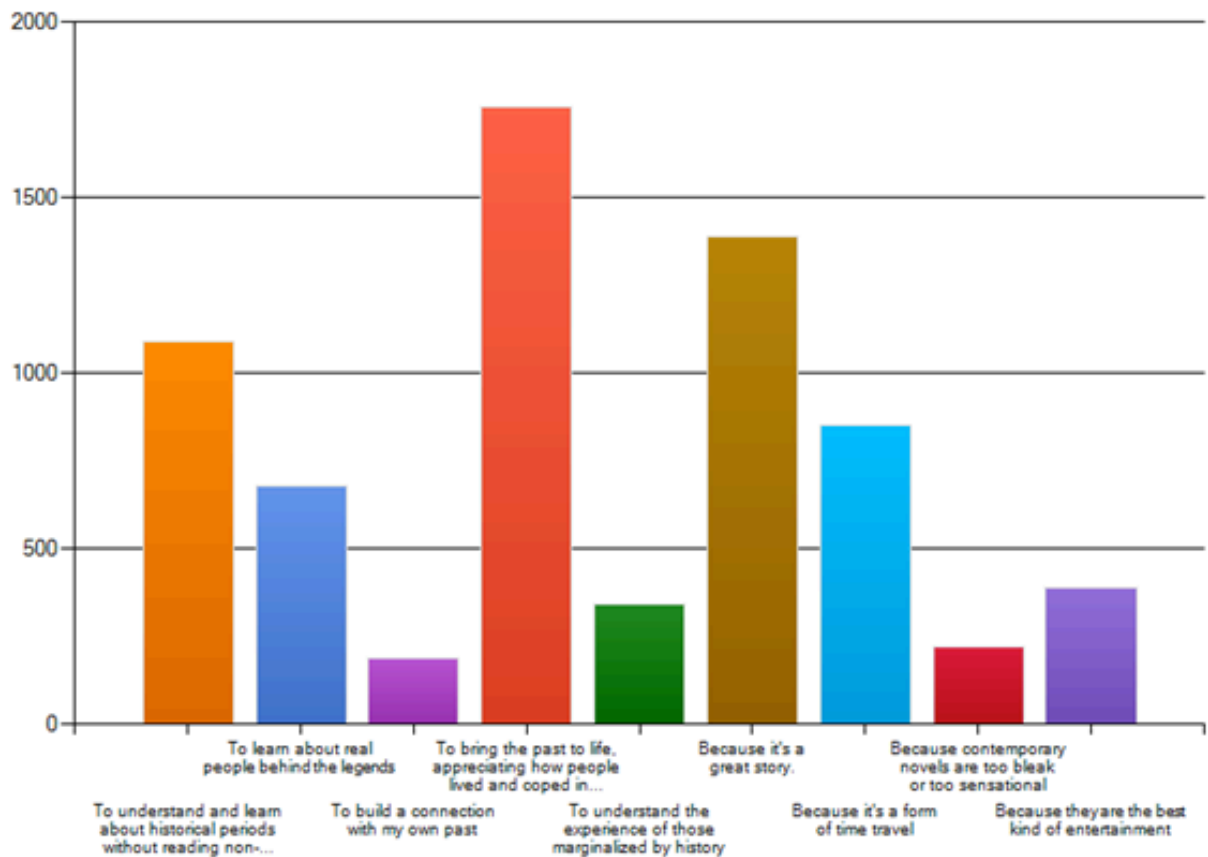
What portion of your book reading is historical fiction?



**Highlights:**

- WOMEN READ HISTORICAL FICTION AT HIGHER RATES THAN MEN – on average, 49% read HF more than 50% of the time; however, this is 50% for women and 42% for men; similarly, those who read historical fiction less than 25% of the time are 15% women and 28% men
- HISTORICAL FICTION IS MAINSTREAM – only 1.6% said they almost never read historical fiction.

### Why do you read historical fiction (choose up to 3)



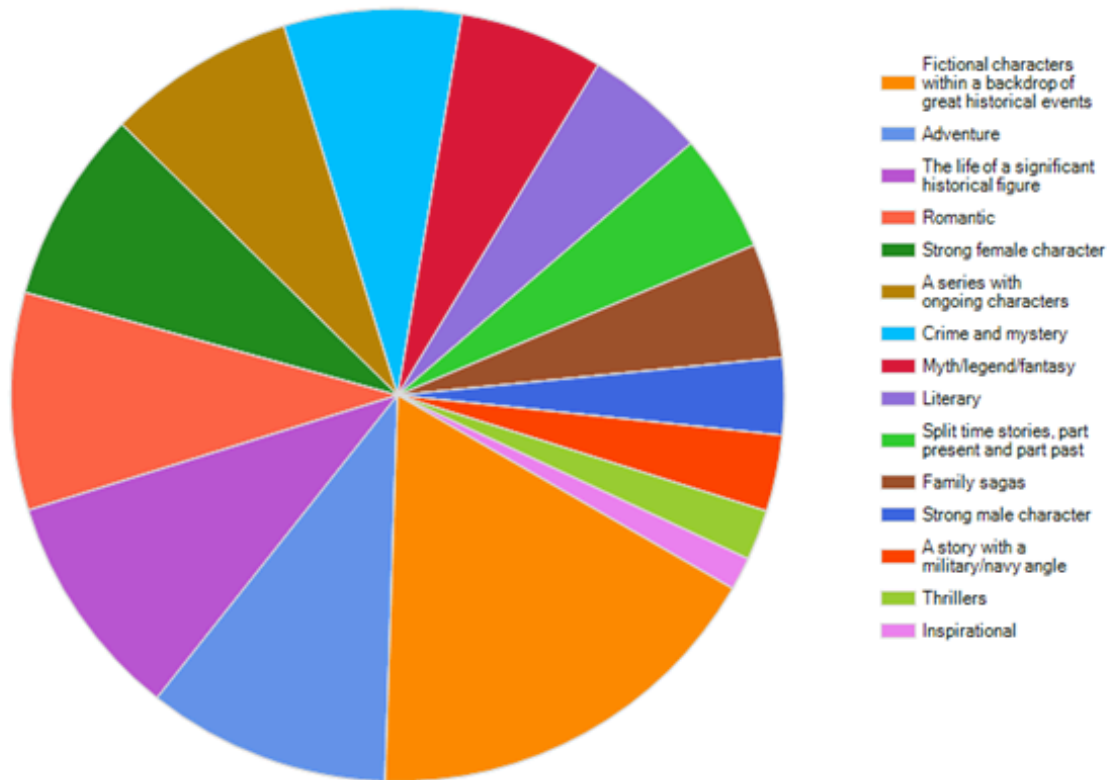
#### Highlights:

- THE TOP 3 REASONS are: (1) 'To bring the past to life', (2) 'Because it's a great story', and (3) 'To understand and learn without reading non-fiction'. These are the same top 3 as in the 2012 survey.
- Editorial note: the text is cut off beneath the first bar. It should read 'To understand and learn about historical periods without reading non-fiction'.

#### Digging beyond the averages:

- A GREAT STORY IS ALWAYS A REASON TO READ – the top reason for those who read less than 25% historical fiction is 'Because it's a great story'.

**Within historical fiction, what type of story appeals to you (select up to 4).**



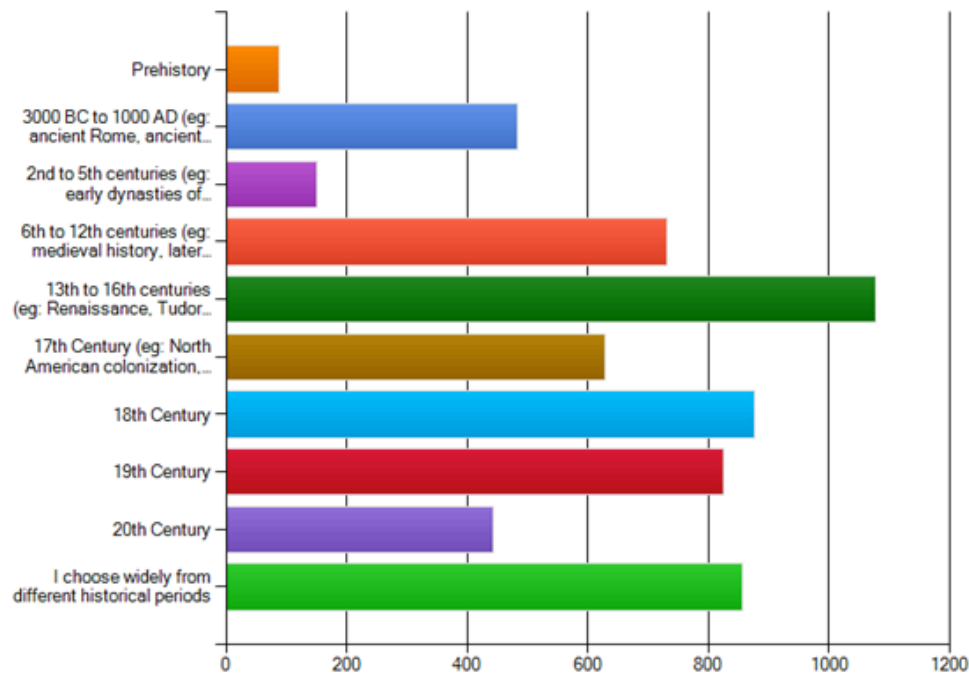
**Highlights:**

- READERS LOVE FICTION CHARACTERS WITHIN A BACKDROP OF GREAT HISTORICAL EVENTS – this choice is significantly ahead of all other choices (71% chose this as one of their responses). This choice was unavailable in the 2013 survey.

**Digging beyond the averages:**

- GENDER DIFFERENCES – Romantic is the second most popular story type for women, while adventure is second for men. Generally, women do not enjoy stories with a military/navy angle.

## What historical time periods do you read?



### Highlights:

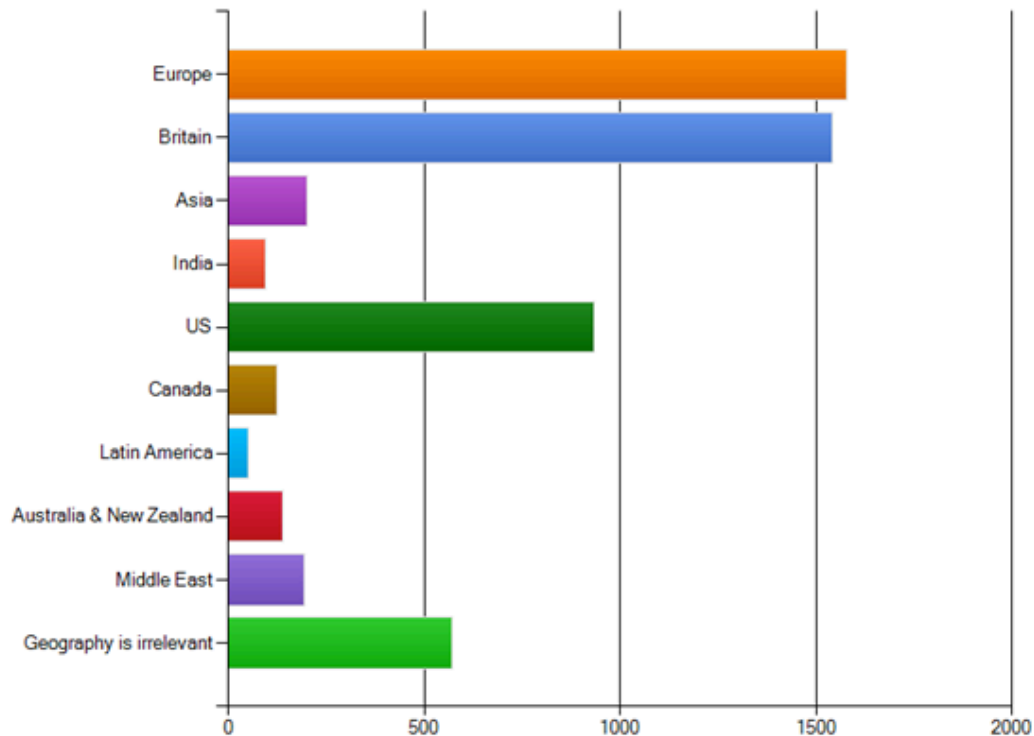
- **13TH TO 16TH CENTURIES MOST POPULAR** – as with the 2012 survey, the 13th to 16th centuries are the most popular time period. Beyond that, in close proximity are 18th and 19th centuries as well as choosing widely from different periods.

### Digging beyond the averages:

- **MEN HAVE DIFFERENT PREFERENCES TO WOMEN** – top 3 for men are 3000BC to 1000AD (42%), 6th to 12th centuries (40%), and 13th to 16th (36%). Virtually tied for 4th are choosing widely and 19th century. Women choose the top 3 listed above in the highlights.
- **HEAVY READERS OF HISTORICAL FICTION (HF) HAVE STRONGER TIME PREFERENCES** – for example, 62% of those who read HF almost exclusively prefer the 13th to 16th centuries compared with an average of 48%
- **MODERATE READERS OF HISTORICAL FICTION CHOOSE FROM MANY TIME PERIODS**



### What historical geographies do you prefer?



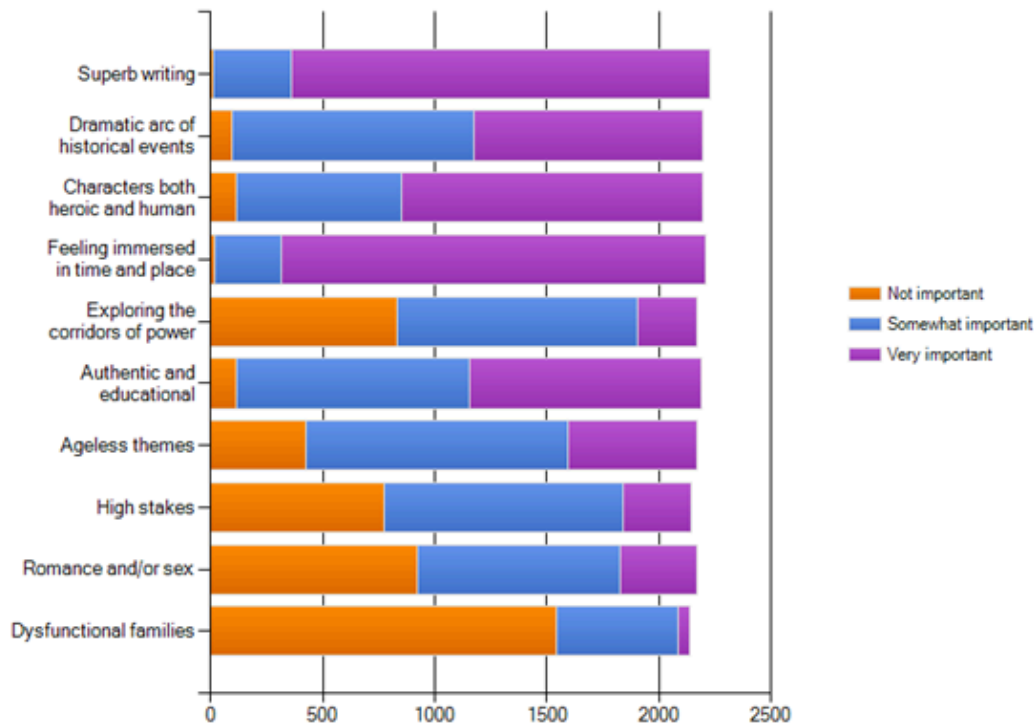
#### Highlights:

- EUROPE AND BRITAIN DOMINATE – 71% chose Europe, 69% chose Britain
- 42% choose stories set in the US
- 25% indicate that geography is irrelevant in choosing what to read

#### Digging beyond the averages:

- GENDER DIFFERENCES - women (44%) are more likely to choose US location stories than men (32%)
- UNDER 30s – are a little more likely to choose European stories, a little less likely to choose US based stories
- PEOPLE CHOOSE STORIES FROM HOME – for example, Canadians choose stories based in Canada in higher proportions than anyone else; Americans choose stories based in America in higher proportions than others.
- BRITAIN IS THE #1 CHOICE FOR EXCLUSIVE HF READERS – 85% of those who read HF almost exclusively preferred British stories compared with 69% on average

**Reflecting on your favourite historical fiction books, how important are the following factors?**



Editorial note: These factors come from some thinking I did about historical fiction based on an analysis of runaway bestsellers by James W. Hall in his book *Hit Lit: Cracking the Code of the Twentieth Century's Biggest Bestsellers*.

**Highlights:**

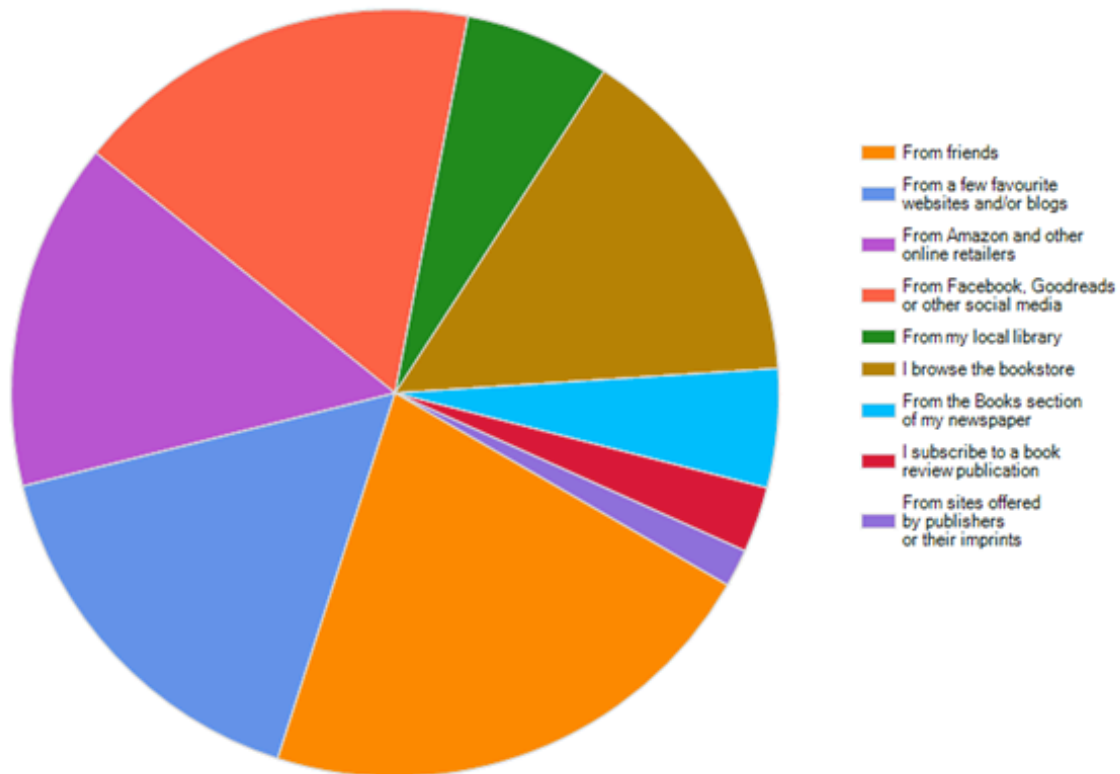
- READERS WANT SUPERB WRITING & TO FEEL IMMERSED IN TIME AND PLACE
- DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES ARE NOT A FACTOR FOR DETERMINING FAVOURITE HISTORICAL FICTION

**Digging beyond the averages:**

- WOMEN IDENTIFIED MORE 'VERY IMPORTANT' FACTORS THAN MEN – specifically, women listed 'Superb writing', 'Characters both heroic and human', 'Feeling immersed in time & place', 'Authentic & educational', 'Ageless themes', and 'Romance and/or sex' as very important in much higher proportions than men
- THE MORE YOU READ, THE HIGHER YOUR STANDARDS – the importance of 'Superb writing' increases with the number of books read per year
- THOSE WHO READ MORE THAN 50% HF – highly value the 'Dramatic arc of historical events', 'Characters both heroic and human', 'Feeling immersed in time and place', and 'Authentic and educational' stories in addition to 'Superb writing'

## 4. CHOOSING & TALKING ABOUT BOOKS

Where do you find recommendations for good books (top 3)?



### Highlights:

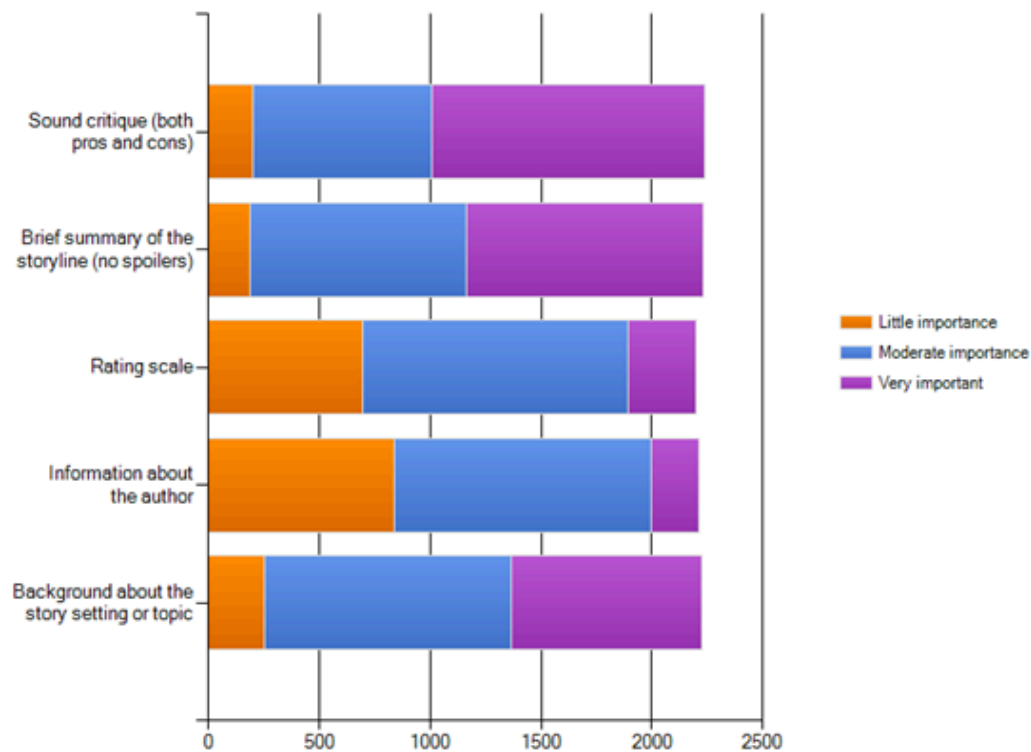
- THE ONLINE WORLD DOMINATES RECOMMENDATIONS – although the second, third and fourth choices in the chart above are not strictly additive, we can see readers favour online sources over anything else
- FRIENDS & BOOKSTORES ARE IMPORTANT – 64% get recommendations from friends, 44% from bookstores

### Digging beyond the averages:

- GENDER DIFFERENCES – friends: women 65%, men 56%; social media: women 53%, men 39%; library: women 19%, men 13%; bookstore: women 42%, men 49%; newspaper: men 22%, women 13%; I don't know about you, but I find this fascinating.
- UNDER 30s – top source of recommendations for this age group is social media; second source is bookstores
- CANADA LAGS OTHER GEOGRAPHIES – in using online sources of recommendations
- UK & IRELAND BROWSE BOOKSTORES – in higher numbers than other geographies; they also favour newspaper sources in higher numbers

- LOW VOLUME READERS RELY ON FRIENDS – 82% of these readers get recommendations from friends compared with an average of 64%
- EXCLUSIVE HF READERS – value online sources in higher proportions than others and are less inclined to browse the bookstore
- E-BOOK AFFICIONADOS – selected Amazon & other online retailers as a major source of recommendations (64% compared with 43% on average); as a corollary these readers are less inclined to browse the bookstore or use libraries
- NEWSPAPERS – less than 15% selected newspapers as one of their top 3 sources of recommendations

## What is important for you in a book review?



### Highlights:

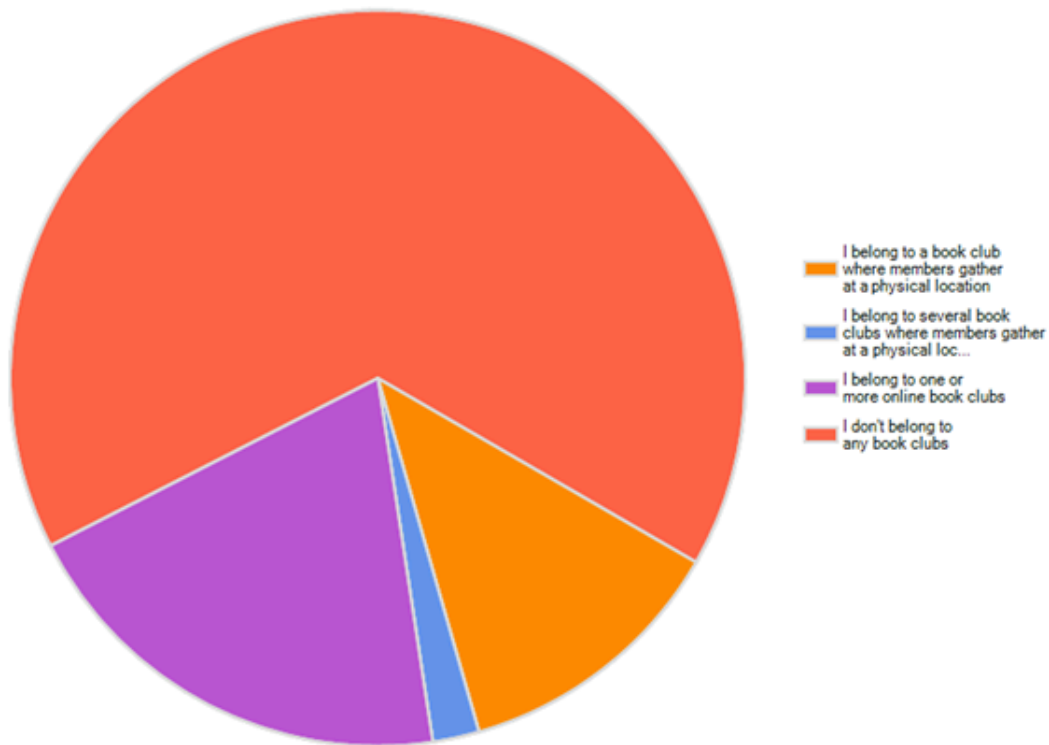
- READERS WANT SOUND CRITIQUE IN THEIR BOOK REVIEWS, they also want a brief summary of the storyline
- READERS ARE LESS INTERESTED IN – rating scales and information about the author

### Digging beyond the averages:

- SOCIAL READERS \*\* place more emphasis on sound critique than those who are not social readers

\*\* Social readers are defined as those who use blogs, social media and other sites for reading recommendations and discussion.

## Do you belong to any book clubs?



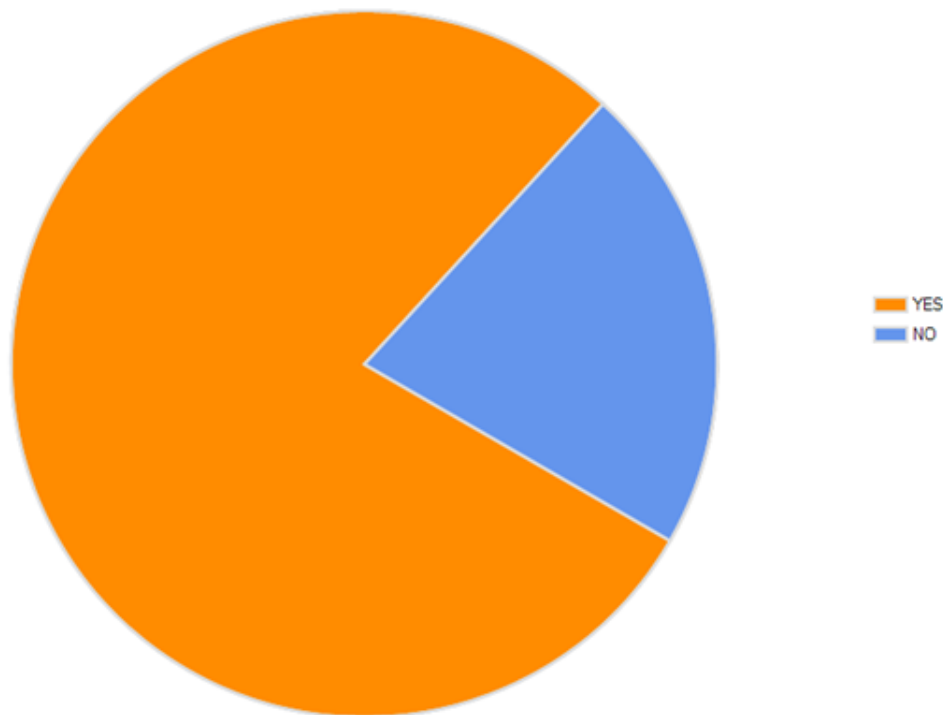
### Highlights:

- 31% OF PARTICIPANTS BELONG TO BOOK CLUBS
- BOOK CLUBS GO ONLINE – more readers belong to online book clubs (21%) than clubs that meet in a physical location (13%)

### Digging beyond the averages:

- GENDER DIFFERENCES – women are slightly more likely to belong to book clubs than men
- SOCIAL READERS (see definition on previous page) – belong to book clubs in higher proportions than others

**Do you use blogs, social media or other online sites for reading recommendations or discussion?**



**Highlights:**

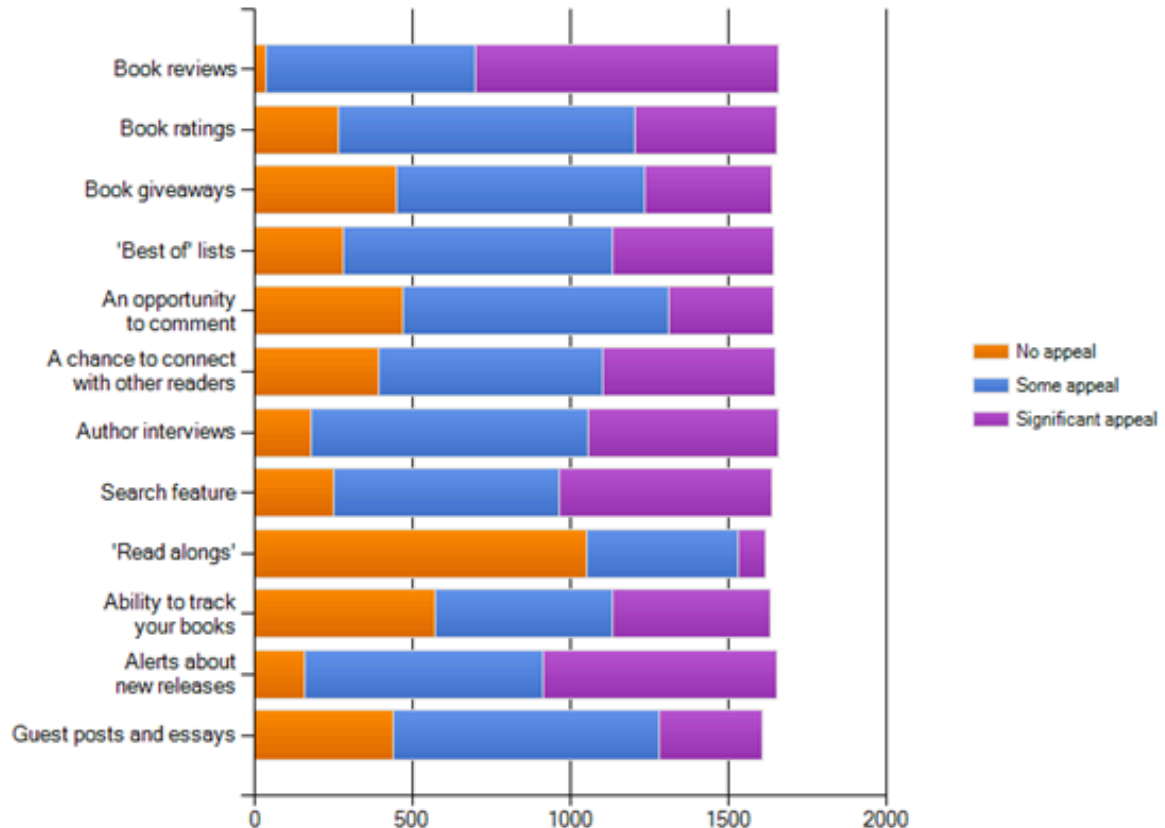
- 78% USE BLOGS, SOCIAL MEDIA AND OTHER ONLINE SITES Editorial note: One might argue this is a skewed result because most participants discovered the survey through online means. Nevertheless, 1773 people said yes to the question.

**Digging beyond the averages:**

- GENDER DIFFERENCES – women are social readers (81%) in higher proportions than men (69%)
- AGE DIFFERENCES – the younger you are, the more likely you are to be a social reader
- SOCIAL READING VARIES BY GEOGRAPHY – US 84%, Canada 65%, UK & Ireland 68%, Europe 82%, Australia 83%
- SOCIAL READING VARIES WITH BOOKS PER YEAR – the more you read, the more likely you are to use blogs, social media and other online sites to enhance your reading
- HISTORICAL FICTION ENTHUSIASTS – are more likely to be social readers than those who consume HF in lower quantities
- THOSE READING MOSTLY PRINT BOOKS – are less likely to be social readers

## 5. WEBSITES, BLOGS & SOCIAL MEDIA

What blog, website and social media features do you enjoy?



### Highlights:

- MOST POPULAR FEATURES – 'Book reviews', 'Search features', 'Alerts about new releases'
- LEAST POPULAR FEATURES – 'Read alongs' and 'Ability to track your books'

### Digging beyond the averages:

- GENDER DIFFERENCES – book giveaways have much less appeal for men than women; men care less about being able to comment, connecting with other readers, search capabilities, and book tracking capabilities
- UNDER 30s – value book ratings, book giveaways, best-of lists, and author interviews more than other age groups
- THE YOUNGER YOU ARE – the more value you place on being able to track your books and book alerts
- THE MORE YOU READ – the more likely you are to value the ability to track your books



## 6. THE BIG PICTURE

- HISTORICAL FICTION IS MAINSTREAM: Less than 2% of participants said they rarely or never read historical fiction.
- GENDER MAKES A DIFFERENCE: Women and men differ significantly in their views of historical fiction and their reading habits and preferences.
- AGE MAKES A DIFFERENCE: Those under 30 responded differently to several questions. In addition, in some cases a response increased or decreased with age.
- SOCIAL MEDIA IS HAVING A HUGE IMPACT: Social media and online sites play a very significant role for those choosing, purchasing, and talking about historical fiction.
- BOOK BLOGS ARE VERY POPULAR: 1,473 participants listed one, two or three favourite blogs.
- GEOGRAPHY: Responses to some questions such as the use of online tools for recommendations and purchasing and preferred setting for historical fiction varied by geography.
- PRICING: Sadly, readers are pushing for low prices. For example, 60% want e-books at \$5.99 or less and 66% want paperbacks at \$10.99 or less.
- ONLINE BOOK CLUBS ARE GAINING POPULARITY: 21% belong to online clubs while 15% belong to clubs meeting in a physical location
- VOLUME OF BOOKS READ MAKES A DIFFERENCE: for example, high volume readers have different expectations for book reviews, a higher interest in tracking their books, and higher usage of online tools and social media to augment their reading experience.

### **Caveats:**

I am neither a statistician nor a survey specialist, however, I realize conclusions cannot be drawn from small numbers. As a result, I have avoided drawing inferences from small partitions of data and for the most part, comments in 'digging beyond the averages' reflect gaps of 8-10 percentage points or more.

Survey publicity was almost totally through online means and used a number of historical fiction blogs and websites. These factors likely create biases towards (1) historical fiction readers, (2) readers who are accustomed to social media, and (3) participants who read more than the average individual. Nevertheless, I believe the results are highly interesting and of significant value to authors, bloggers, members of the publishing industry and, of course, readers.

*I am pleased to have others reference information from the survey and only ask that you include my name, M.K. Tod, and blog [www.awriterofhistory.com](http://www.awriterofhistory.com).*