

From the World of Historical Fiction

Reader Opinions Revealed








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From the World of Historical Fiction – Reader Opinions Revealed

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

Each chart that follows is presented with a few highlight notes. Since publishing the first round of results, I have conducted further analysis based on write-in comments on topics such as favourite authors, favourite digital sources of information, and aspects that detract from the enjoyment of historical fiction. These are included in this second report. Further information, along with reader comments, is available at www.awriterofhistory.com.

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.





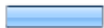




4. What are your overall book reading habits (please make one choice per row)?						
	Less than 5 books a year	5 - 10 books a year	10 - 20 books a year	20 - 30 books a year	more than 30 books a year	Response Count
In the past	5.7% (45)	11.5% (91)	18.7% (148)	17.0% (134)	47.1% (372)	790
Recently	6.3% (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

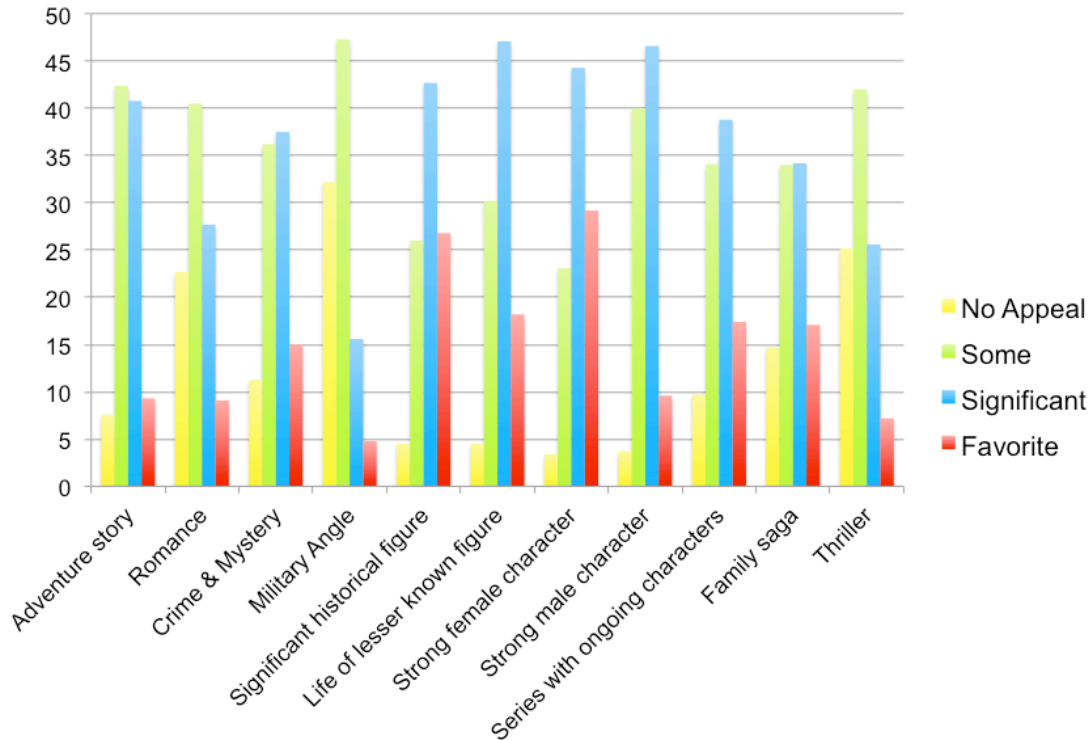
Highlights:

- 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.

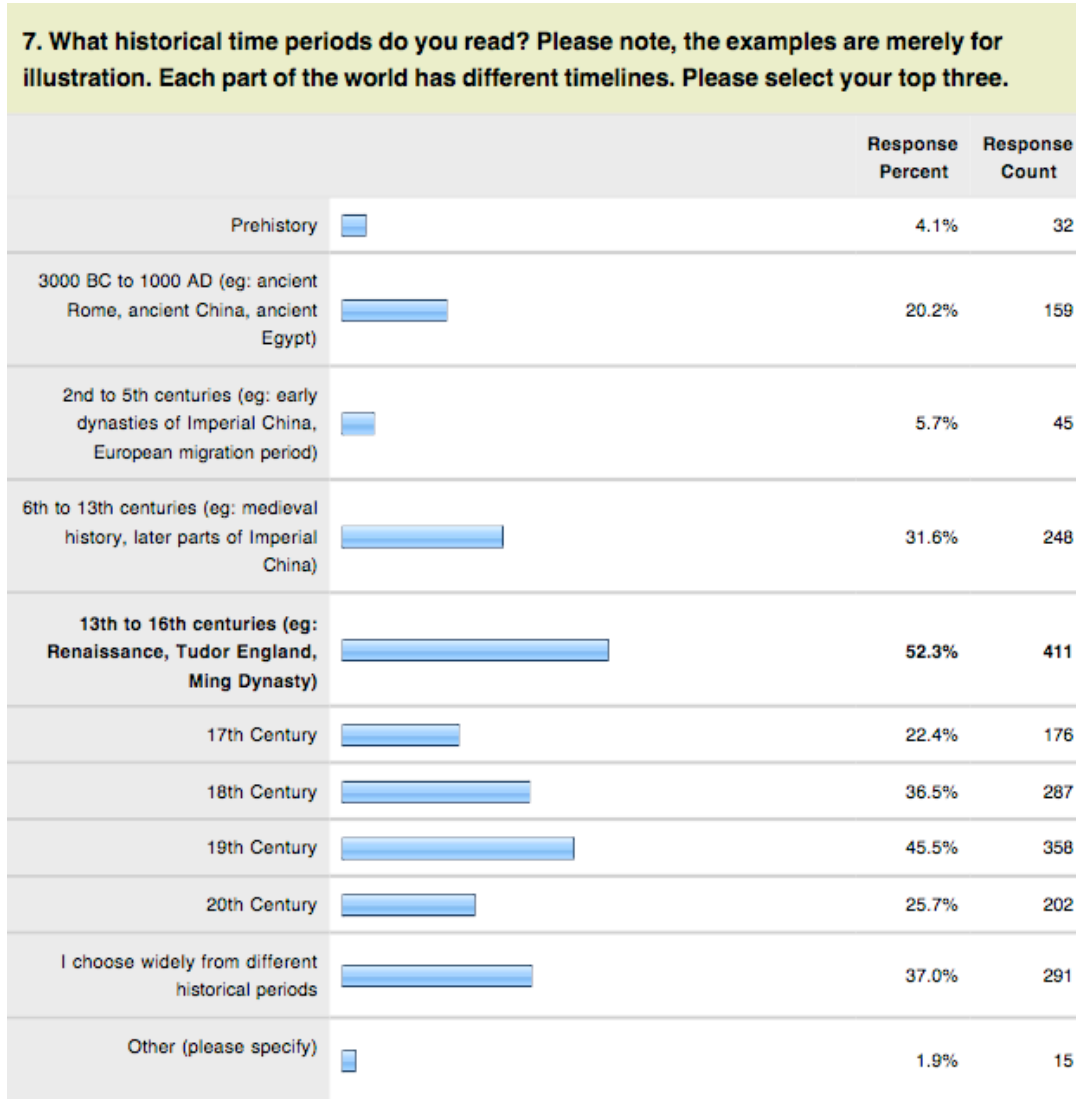
Highlights:

- 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.


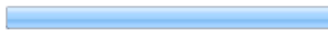









Highlights:

- 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.



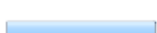

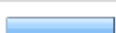
Digging beyond the averages:

- 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

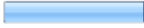



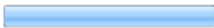
From the written comments:

- 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.


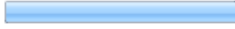

14. How do you purchase/acquire books? Please check one.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Almost exclusively online		29.6%	235
Almost exclusively at the bookstore		11.0%	87
I borrow from the library		14.2%	113
I usually borrow from friends		0.8%	6
Many of these options		44.4%	352
answered question			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%.

Who are your favourite authors?

601 individuals responded to this question, some noting a few favourite authors while others offered long lists of favourites. Counting the names – a laborious process – resulted in the following, where the middle column is the number of times an author was mentioned and the right hand column their location.

Sharon Kay Penman	111	US
Philippa Gregory	75	UK
Elizabeth Chadwick	74	UK
Diana Gabaldon	66	US
Bernard Cornwell	58	UK/US
Ken Follett	37	UK
Anya Seton	35	US
CW Gortner	34	US
Alison Weir	33	UK
Margaret George	31	US
Georgette Heyer	31	UK
Jean Plaidy	29	UK
Michelle Moran	29	US
CJ Sansom	27	UK
Jane Austen	24	UK
Dorothy Dunnett	24	UK
Ellis Peters	21	UK
Susan Higginbotham	20	US
Tracy Chevalier	18	US/UK
Hilary Mantel	18	UK
Jacqueline Winspear	18	UK/US

Patrick O'Brian	17	UK
Deanna Raybourne	17	US
Sarah Dunant	16	UK
Colleen McCullough	16	Aus
James Michener	16	US
Helen Hollick	15	UK
Anne Perry	15	UK
Lindsey Davis	14	UK
Charles Dickens	14	UK
Mary Renault	12	UK
Rosemary Sutcliff	12	UK
Geraldine Brooks	11	Aus/US
James Clavell	11	UK/US
Edward Rutherfurd	11	UK/US
Sarah Waters	11	UK
Jean Auel	10	US
John Jakes	10	US
Lisa See	10	US
Wilbur Smith	10	UK

Highlights:

- For the most part, these authors base their stories in long ago periods, writing about well-known historical figures either in a central or significant role. Many have written series or have concentrated on a

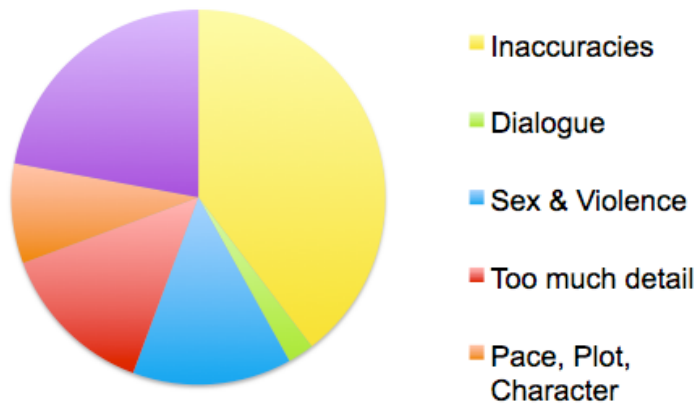
particular time period so readers know what to expect and are familiar with their main characters.

- Results show a huge diversity of favourite authors. 404 **different** authors were chosen by only one person; a further 99 authors were chosen by only two people.
- Men read **female** authors and women read male authors; the men reading female authors tend to choose those who include mystery, crime or war in their novels.
- Several **top** authors are deceased; Plaidy, Seton and Heyer are mainly favoured by those who are 40 and older.
- Each **geographic** region reads its own authors to some extent, but selects the same 'global' authors in high proportions.

What detracts from your enjoyment of historical fiction?

588 participants responded with enthusiasm to this question. Once posted, blog readers echoed many of the same sentiments.

What detracts from enjoyment of historical fiction?



- **44% Inaccuracies** - includes seeing modern sensibilities in a historic setting, anachronisms, dialogue that does not fit the period, poor research, moving major dates to suit a story line and so on.
- **2% Dialogue** - participants complained that using too much dialogue from a long ago period takes away from the ease of reading.
- **9% Sex & Violence** - this refers to stories with too much sex and violence rather than too little! In addition, some readers specifically mentioned gory battle scenes.
- **15% Too much detail** - refers to stories weighed down with reams of historical detail, almost as though the author wanted to include every bit of research found on a particular aspect of history.

- **15% Pace, Plot & Character** - in the main, these comments referred to problems that can cause any story to fail. Poor writing, unrealistic characters, slow pace, stories that are too sensational. A few comments spoke of 'wallpaper historicals' and 'romance disguised as historical fiction'. Another reader referred to the problem of 'history being a substitute for story'.
- And **24% offered a range of other reasons** from 'I just don't like historical fiction' to 'I haven't got enough time to read'.

Please list your favourites reading oriented websites, blogs & social media sites (Results first appeared in the Historical Novel Society Features page.)

As noted earlier, the online world dominates as a source of recommendations for readers of historical fiction. 562 people listed favourite reading oriented websites, blogs and social media sites. The winners in connecting readers with books share three attributes:

- thoughtful, trustworthy information about books,
- opportunities for dialogue and an exchange of ideas, and
- a community of like-minded readers.

Category	# of mentions
Goodreads	231
Historical Fiction blogs/sites	218
Small book review blogs *	145
Amazon	89
Facebook	71
Library Thing & Shelfari	49
Author blogs and sites *	43
Big book review sites	38
Other	26
Genre Sites *	24
Twitter	21
Publishing & Industry sites	18
Library sites	16
Newspapers - online	14
Other social media	13
Book Chains	13
General history sites	13
Indie Bookstores	7
Do not use	73

Highlights

- Goodreads, historical fiction blogs and small book review blogs are the top three by a wide margin.
- Adding Library Thing and Shelfari to the Goodreads number brings the category of interactive reader communities to 49.8%.
- Readers mentioned more than 150 book blogs run by individuals or small groups.
- Top historical fiction blogs are Reading the Past, Historical Novel Society,

Historical Tapestry, Historical Novel Review and Passages to the Past.

- Only 13% of respondents said they did not use online sites.
- Most participants mentioned three or more sources for recommendations.
- Beyond Goodreads, Library Thing and Shelfari, Facebook (71), Twitter (21), other social media (13) accounted for 18.6%.
- With only 89 mentions, Amazon does not fare well.
- Big book review sites like Fantastic Fiction, Book Browse, Abe Books, Fresh Fiction, ACFW, London Review of Books merited 35 mentions.

* small book review blogs are blogs written by one or two individuals, author blogs and sites include sites dedicated to deceased authors, genre sites include those dedicated to mystery, crime, fantasy etc.

General observations:

- THE PAST FASCINATES. 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.
- FAVOURITE AUTHORS: The top five favourites authors are Sharon Kay Penman, Philippa Gregory, Elizabeth Chadwick, Diana Gabaldon and Bernard Cornwell.

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 the Historical Novel Society for inviting me to participate in this year's conference and to Sarah Johnson who posted a link to the survey on her wonderful blog, [Reading the Past](#).

I am pleased to have others reference information from the survey and only ask that you include my name and blog.