

## From the Battlefield to the Bookstore

by Kathleen Ernst

For many reenactors, military and civilian, one of the pleasures of a weekend spent in the field is that elusive moment when everything works. I've heard the sensation called "the bubble," or simply "the magic." There's no way to predict exactly when it will happen. The feeling may last only seconds. But once you've experienced a moment that suddenly looks, smells, sounds, and feels so real that you completely forget your modern existence, you'll be hungry for more.

I know I am. After a decade of reenacting, I'm not able to participate much any more. Instead I read, disappearing into the magic of good historical novels. And I write historical fiction as well, a hobby-turned-career that lets me spend time in imaginary scenes of my own creation. My most recent novel, *Hearts of Stone*, grew out of a Civil War refugee camp scenario at an event in Tennessee. And one of those "bubble" moments provided the kernel of raw inspiration.

Is there a novel in your future? If, like a number of reenactors I know, you're interested in trying your hand at fiction, why wait until someday?

Reenactors are well poised to write historical fiction—much more so than many of the beginning writers I meet when I teach general workshops on the genre. As a serious reenactor, you're already steeped in the history and social fabric of your chosen period. You know a lot about material culture and historical process. You're experienced at traditional research, and you conduct experiential research every time you participate in a new event or try your hand at a new activity. And you probably have an innate sense of story. The things that you find most interesting about your hobby would likely make a strong foundation for a novel.

If you are ready to get to work, here are a few suggestions.

1. Develop a fresh story idea. If you want to write a children's book about the Civil War, see how many stories about drummer boys exist before writing one of your own.
2. Once you've settled on your idea, focus first on writing your story, not publishing your novel. Enjoy the process. Take a class. Learn your craft. Let the marketing stuff come later.
3. Create a compelling, memorable main character. The best fiction is character-driven, so spend a lot of time thinking about the people you'll be writing about. Develop a complete history for them. All the information won't make it into the story, but it will help you present a complex, believable, consistent character.
4. Once you have a strong sense of your character, shape your plot. Think in terms of having your character struggle to achieve something. Short stories and books for young children may have one clear plotline. More complex novels have multiple plotlines. I like to think in terms of "outer" and "inner" struggles. In *Hearts of Stone*, my main character Hannah's outer plot involves struggling to keep her family together after she and her younger siblings become orphaned and homeless during the Civil War. Her inner plot focuses on her emotional struggle to accept both her father's decision to fight for the Union Army and her best friend's support of the Confederacy.
5. Some writers outline their novels in advance; some don't. Choose whatever approach works for you. I don't outline, but I do build a graphic organizer as I go. I create a table with four headings across the top: Chapter, Date, Scenes, Historical Events. That helps me keep track of what my characters are doing, and how their actions fit into the actual timeline of events that form the backdrop for my story.

6. Research, of course, is essential and ongoing. The historical details we love can also bog down a novel's pace. If you fall in love with some fact or process, don't just describe it in your fiction. Use that information to help reveal something new about your character, or to advance your plot.

7. Also, decide in advance where you are going to draw the line on historical accuracy. Are you willing to fictionalize weather details, or to make up business names for the merchants in a particular town? Reenactors are often fanatical about getting the details right. At some point, you'll have to say: Enough. I'm done.

8. Keep a journal when you are at events. With a well-chosen pencil and notebook, you can even make it part of your impression. Make a point of recording specific, sensory details. Those details will bring your fiction to life, and will signal to readers that you are a trustworthy narrator.

9. Read as many different primary accounts as possible. Becoming steeped in period literature of all kinds will help you impart the flavor of period-appropriate speech in your fiction. (Note I said "flavor." You don't want to overwhelm readers with period-perfect but hard-to-understand speech.)

10. Join a professional writers' organization. Membership can be an excellent way to learn more about both writing and publishing. The groups' informative newsletters are often worth the price of membership. Most groups also hold regular conferences, which let pre-published authors meet other writers, agents and editors. The Historical Novel Society is an umbrella group for all historical fiction writers. Genre-specific groups like the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, Mystery Writers of America, and Romance Writers of America may help you find professional success.

Once your story is as good as you can make it, you have options for publishing. If your top priority is creating a book that your family and friends can enjoy, sooner than later, you may want to self-publish. If your only dream is a book contract from a major publisher, hunker down for the long haul. Learn everything you can about the industry. Read what's being published and make note of what different presses are looking for.

Having a book published is an amazing experience. Still, if someone told me that I'd never be published again, I wouldn't stop writing. The process of researching, imagining, and writing my stories brings its own rewards. I hope you can find that magic as well.

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Kathleen Ernst is a writer, social historian, and educator. She has written a dozen novels, including five set during the American Civil War. Her latest book is *Hearts of Stone* (Dutton, 2006). She has also written one nonfiction book about the impact of the Civil War on Maryland civilians. Kathleen invites readers to visit [www.kathleernerst.com](http://www.kathleernerst.com) for more writing tips, information about her books, teacher guides, schedule of appearances, and much more.

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