

# MASTERS OF THE PAST

Twenty Classic Historical Novels and Their Legacy

BY SARAH L. JOHNSON

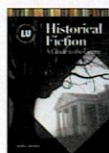
**B**OOKSTORES, LIBRARIES—EVEN THIS MAGAZINE—all seek to help readers by categorizing books into generally accepted genres: literary fiction, crime, romance, inspirational, and all the rest. Fans of historical fiction know that there are other ways of categorizing the world of books, but they are forced to sort through tales of modern suburban angst, lurid contemporary thrillers, or generic bodice rippers to find the works that match a compelling story with an informed view of the past. However, once a reader is on the trail of historical fiction, the genre's diversity has some real benefits: regardless of one's mood or temperament, there's always a mystery, a western, a romance, or a sweeping epic that can be found to fit one's tastes.

If finding historical fiction can be tricky, defining it is even trickier. The Historical Novel Society's definition, for example, includes novels written at least 50 years after the events described or novels written by people approaching the subject only via research. Others may use a different cut-off date. Still, for the most part, readers recognize historical fiction when they see it.

The genre also has unofficial rules that authors are expected to follow. To persuade readers that the story could really have happened (and perhaps some of it did), authors should portray the time period as accurately as possible and

avoid obvious anachronisms. The fiction and the history should be well balanced, with neither one overwhelming the other. It's a tough genre to write, but a fascinating one to read.

**THE FOLLOWING 20 CLASSIC TITLES** celebrate the variety in historical fiction. While I make no claim that they form the ultimate core collection, I chose these works for their lasting influence on the field and their continued popularity. Most are still in print. On this list you'll find medieval mysteries, Regency romances, literary thrillers, inspirational fiction, nautical adventures, westerns, family sagas, multiperiod epics, and many others. Each entry also offers descriptions of two other historical novels that readers may enjoy as well. Although the original may not have directly inspired these "read-alike" novels, similarities in subject, setting, or style may provide a comparable reading experience. Taken together, these novels demonstrate the power of historical fiction to entertain us with stories of our collective past.



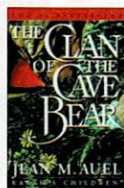
**SARAH L. JOHNSON**, a Reference Librarian and Assistant Professor at Booth Library, Eastern Illinois University, is the author of *Historical Fiction: A Guide to the Genre*. She also serves as the American editor for *Historical Novels Review*, the journal of the Historical Novel Society ([www.historicalnovelsociety.org](http://www.historicalnovelsociety.org)).

35,000  
years ago

## CLAN OF THE CAVE BEAR

BY JEAN AUDEL (1980)

SETTING: PREHISTORIC EUROPE



Ayla, a Cro-Magnon girl living in Europe some 35,000 years ago, is taken in by a tribe of Neanderthals after an earthquake kills her parents. A medicine woman nurses her back to health, but Ayla, with her curiosity and independent spirit, never fits into her adopted tribe. Combining archaeological research with a compelling narrative, Auel gained millions of fans with her convincing re-creations of prehistoric society. Four more volumes continue the *Earth's Children* series.

**ALSO TRY:** Any volume of *The First North Americans* series by writer/archaeologist team W. Michael Gear and Kathleen O'Neal Gear; the most recent is *People of the Moon* (2005). Elizabeth Marshall Thomas's *Reindeer Moon* (1987) and *The Animal Wife* (1990) depict the lives and spiritual beliefs of the reindeer hunters of prehistoric Siberia.

## THE KING MUST DIE

BY MARY RENALT (1958)

### SETTING: ANCIENT GREECE



Renalt was a master at portraying the moral struggles, heroism, and humanity of the people of ancient Greece. They lived during a time period so distant that it's hard to separate history from myth, yet

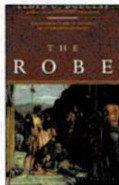
Renalt succeeds in doing so. She places Theseus, the future King of Athens, in a real historical context: as a young man, Theseus is chosen to be a Cretan bull-dancer while on a journey to find his real father. With her thorough research and lively characterizations, Renalt set the standard for historical fiction of the ancient world.

**ALSO TRY:** Steven Pressfield's *Gates of Fire* (1998), his masterwork about the Battle of Thermopylae, in which 300 brave Spartans made a heroic but hopeless stand against Persian forces. Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles* (2002), a slim but memorable volume about the Homeric hero, is a poetic meditation on love, war, and fate in ancient times.

## THE ROBE

BY LLOYD DOUGLAS (1942)

### SETTING: ANCIENT ROME



Marcellus Gallio, son of a Roman Senator, oversees Christ's crucifixion and, in the aftermath, wins his robe as a prize in a dice game. Regretful over his role in Christ's death, Marcellus grows determined

to learn more about the man and his teachings. His search for truth takes him throughout the lands of the Roman Empire. Spiritual without being preachy, the appeal of this novel of redemption isn't limited to Christian readers. It's the definitive novel about the spread of what was then a new religion.

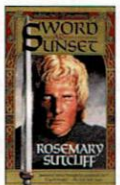
**ALSO TRY:** In James R. Mills's *Memoirs of Pontius Pilate* (2000), the exiled former governor of Judea reevaluates his opinion of the late Jesus of Nazareth. Sigmund Brouwer's *The Weeping Chamber* (1998) recounts the tale of a despondent merchant from Cyrene who meets Christ during his last week of life.

# Dark Ages

## SWORD AT SUNSET

BY ROSEMARY SUTCLIFF (1963)

### SETTING: DARK AGE BRITAIN

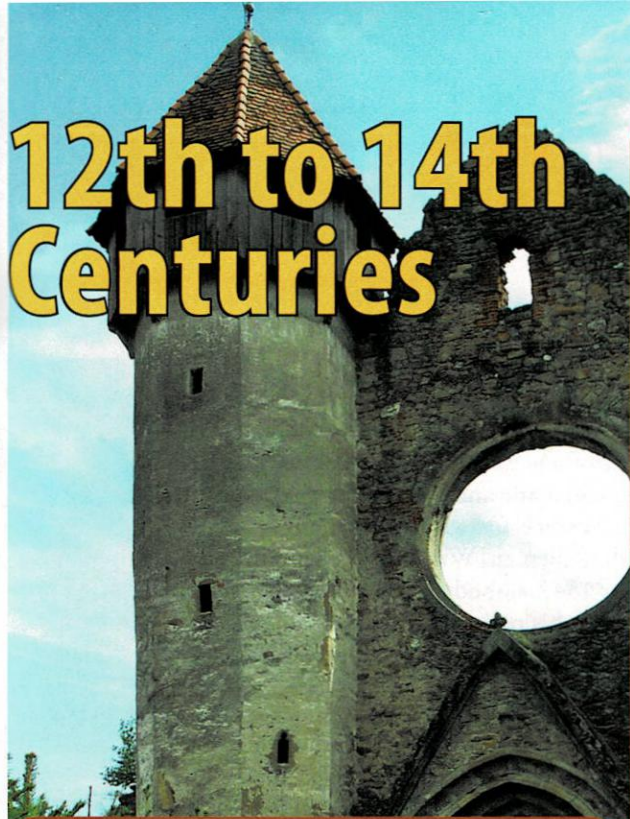


Arthurian themes return again and again in historical fiction, and *Sword at Sunset* set the standard by which others are judged. Artos, Sutcliff's protagonist, is no romanticized, Camelot-style fantasy king but a powerful Celtic warlord. During the darkest time in Britain's history, Artos rallies all of its peoples

together against an inevitable Saxon invasion. Action-packed, with realistic battle scenes, Sutcliff's novel is a remarkable achievement about the real man who may have existed behind the legend.

**ALSO TRY:** Parke Godwin's *Firelord* (1980) presents another well-realized portrait of Arthur as a great Romano-Celtic leader. Jack Whyte's *Camulod Chronicles*, starting with *The Skystone* (1996), is a gritty pre-Arthurian series that begins just after Roman legions depart from Britain.

# 12th to 14th Centuries

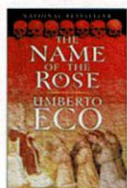


## THE NAME OF THE ROSE

UMBERTO ECO (1980)

SETTING: ITALY, 1327

- ◆ EDGAR NOMINEE, BEST MYSTERY NOVEL
- ◆ MYSTERY WRITERS ASSOCIATION 100 BEST (# 23)



In 1327, Brother William of Baskerville is sent to investigate possible heresy at an Italian monastery. While there, he confronts the sinister deaths of seven Franciscan monks. His investigations—which combine straightforward logic with detailed explorations of medieval philosophy, arcane Church history, and the secrets of the monastery's labyrinth—are anything but simple. Both intellectual feast and popular entertainment, this international best seller gave rise to a new fiction subgenre: the literary thriller.

**ALSO TRY:** Iain Pears's intelligent thriller *An Instance of the Fingerpost* (1998), in which four men tell their vastly different versions of a professor's murder in Restoration-era Oxford; only one of them reveals the truth. Ross King's *Ex-Libris* (2001) focuses on the book trade in 1660s London but contains a mystery that harkens back to the Thirty Years' War.

## A MORBID TASTE FOR BONES

BY ELLIS PETERS (1977)

SETTING: WELSH BORDER, 1137



This novel launched the sleuthing career of Brother Cadfael, former Crusader turned monk and resident herbalist at Shrewsbury Abbey in England, on the Welsh border. In the year 1137, during the civil wars between King Stephen and Empress Matilda, the final resting place of St. Winifred's bones serves as the catalyst for murder. Twenty more volumes follow, and the series kicked off a medieval mystery craze that continues to this day.

**ALSO TRY:** Priscilla Royal's *Wine of Violence* (2003), in which Eleanor of Wynthorpe, the youthful leader of Tyndal Priory, solves a monk's murder while dealing with the resentment of her much older flock. Margaret Frazer's *The Novice's Tale* (1992), first in an ongoing mystery series, introduces Dame Frevisse, a sharp-witted Benedictine nun.

## KATHERINE

BY ANYA SETON (1953)

SETTING: 14TH-CENTURY ENGLAND

- ◆ RRA-L (ROMANCE READERS ANONYMOUS), BEST ALL-TIME HISTORICAL ROMANCE



If you've heard of Katherine Swynford, the beautiful commoner who won the heart of nobleman John of Gaunt in 14th-century England, chances are that it's due to Seton's novel. Their love story plays out against a dazzling backdrop of royal pageantry, feudalism, political turmoil, and the Black Death. Meticulously researched from primary sources, *Katherine* served as the inspiration for many authors who write medieval fiction. It's an epic romance told on a suitably grand scale.

**ALSO TRY:** Sharon Kay Penman's *Here Be Dragons* (1987), about the turbulent romance between Joanna, illegitimate daughter of King John, and Llewelyn, Prince of North Wales. In Brenda Rickman Vantrease's *The Illuminator* (2005), set amid the religious reform movements of the fourteenth century, the lady of the manor falls for a humble artisan.



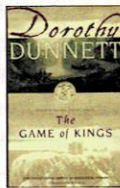
# 16th and 17th Centuries

## THE GAME OF KINGS

BY DOROTHY DUNNETT (1961)

SETTING: SCOTLAND, 1547

◆ GUARDIAN UNLIMITED TOP TEN HISTORICAL NOVELS (# 1)



This first volume of *The Chronicles of Lymond* introduced one of the most enigmatic and compelling characters in historical fiction: Francis Crawford of Lymond, younger son of a Scottish nobleman. When he finally returns home in the year 1547, nobody knows—certainly not his own family—where his political loyalties lie. Dunnett's novels, as complex and dramatic as a game of chess, play out over a wide canvas that encompasses all of Renaissance Europe.

**ALSO TRY:** The late Lady Dunnett has no true equal, though many novelists acknowledge her influence. Guy Gavriel Kay based his intricate historical fantasy *A Song for Arbonne* (1995) on the troubadours of medieval Languedoc. The sweep and historical detail in Neal Stephenson's *Quicksilver* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2003), the first novel in his massive trilogy about Enlightenment Europe, may satisfy Dunnett fans as well.

## YOUNG BESS

BY MARGARET IRWIN (1945)

SETTING: ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND



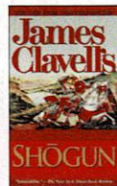
*Young Bess*, first in Irwin's Elizabethan trilogy, was one of the first modern novels about Queen Elizabeth I, a favorite subject among historical fiction fans. Irwin writes sympathetically about Elizabeth, a lively young woman still reconciling her emotions with her royal position. After Henry VIII's death, Elizabeth finds herself charmed by her stepmother's rogue of a husband, Thomas Seymour.

**ALSO TRY:** Rosalind Miles's *I, Elizabeth* (1994), a historically rich biographical novel of the great Tudor monarch, told in her own voice. Robin Maxwell's *Virgin: Prelude to the Throne* (2001) imagines Princess Elizabeth's vulnerable teenage years, when ambitious Thomas Seymour awakens her sexuality and, in so doing, teaches her a lesson she never forgets.

## SHŌGUN

BY JAMES CLAVELL (1975)

SETTING: FEUDAL JAPAN, 1600s



The name Clavell is synonymous with lengthy, exotic historical adventure. In the first novel in his Asian Saga, Elizabethan trader John Blackthorne gets shipwrecked off the Japanese coast. He sheds his "western barbarian" ways as he absorbs the language and local customs, and a powerful feudal lord teaches him the samurai tradition. Both shocking and stunning in its depiction of Japanese culture, *Shōgun* evokes a defining time in Japan's history: when its borders first opened to western trade.

**ALSO TRY:** Takashi Matsuoka's *Cloud of Sparrows* (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2003), in which an aging samurai invites American missionaries to Japan in 1861 and leads them unwittingly into danger. Lucia St. Clair Robson's *The Tokaido Road* (1991), about a young Japanese noblewoman determined to regain her family's honor, retells a famous revenge story.

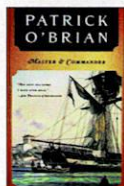


# 19th Century

## MASTER AND COMMANDER

BY PATRICK O'BRIAN (1969)

SETTING: NAPOLEONIC WARS/NAVAL



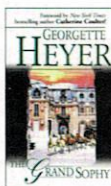
This first novel in the 21-volume Aubrey/Maturin series launched the careers and the enduring friendship of Captain Jack Aubrey and his ship's surgeon, Stephen Maturin, proud members of Nelson's navy during the Napoleonic Wars. Not just a rousing adventure story, it's also great literature, and readers will experience a real education in naval terminology and period language. It's arguably the most celebrated work of nautical fiction available.

**ALSO TRY:** Julian Stockwin's *Kydd* (2001), the first volume in a relatively new series about Thomas Paine Kydd, a wigmaker pressed into Britain's Royal Navy in the late 18th century. J. E. Fender's *The Private Revolution of Geoffrey Frost* (2002), about a privateer from New Hampshire during the Revolutionary War era, serves up nautical adventure American style.

## THE GRAND SOPHY

BY GEORGETTE HEYER (1950)

SETTING: REGENCY ROMANCE



When the irrepressible Sophia Stanton-Lacy goes to stay with her aunt in London, she takes it upon herself to solve her cousins' romantic entanglements. Sophy's outrageous antics on their behalf are hilarious, and only her stuffy but handsome cousin Charles remains immune to her charms. The queen of the Regency romance, Heyer offers an elegant, witty prose style and a precise re-creation of the language and mores of the Regency era (1811–1820), which are widely imitated and admired. *The Grand Sophy* is a favorite among her oeuvre.

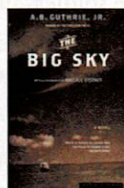
**ALSO TRY:** Nonnie St. George's *The Ideal Bride* (2003) is a clever romance in which an attractive London businessman refuses to add an earl's independent-minded daughter to his list of possible wives. In Sheri Cobb South's *The Weaver Takes a Wife* (1999), a wealthy Lancashire mill owner courts an aristocrat's daughter, reversing the usual Regency roles.

## THE BIG SKY

BY A. B. GUTHRIE, JR. (1947)

SETTING: THE AMERICAN FRONTIER

◆ NAMED BEST NOVEL OF THE AMERICAN WEST BY THE WESTERN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION



In 1830, young Boone Caudill leaves Kentucky and heads west. Over the next 13 years, from St. Louis to the Montana Rockies, he and two fellow frontiersmen live off the land—trapping beavers, trading with Indians, becoming as wild and untamed as the West itself. It's a powerful story that doesn't romanticize mountain men's lives, but Guthrie shows us the immense possibility they found in America's vast frontier.

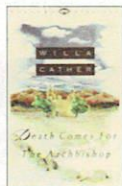
**ALSO TRY:** Richard S. Wheeler's *Skye's West* series, beginning with *Sun River* (1989), about the adventures of mountain man/guide Barnaby Skye. Win Blevins's Spur-Award-winning *So Wild a Dream* (2003) follows young Sam Morgan's journey from naïve Pennsylvanian to hardened fur trader and mountain man.

## DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP

BY WILLA CATHER (1927)

SETTING: MISSIONARIES IN NEW MEXICO

◆ EVERYMAN'S LIBRARY # 89



Cather's novel follows two French priests, Fathers Vaillant and Latour, who brought Catholicism to New Mexico in 1851. With quiet dignity, they encourage faith in a people of mixed ethnic origin who don't always welcome their efforts. Cather, with her poetic language and stunning imagery, expresses her great love for the West and its people. She ranks second on the Western Writers of America's list of best western authors, and today's female western novelists view her as a role model.

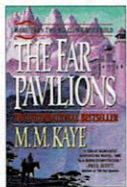
**ALSO TRY:** Jane Kirkpatrick's *All Together in One Place* (2000), the first in a trilogy about a group of women that relies on faith and each other as they travel the Oregon Trail. Ivan Doig's *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* (1987) gracefully portrays the beauty of the Montana landscape in its tale of two Scottish immigrants who settle at the foothills of the Rockies in the 1880s.

# 19th Century

## THE FAR PAVILIONS

BY M. M. KAYE (1978)

**SETTING: COLONIAL INDIA**



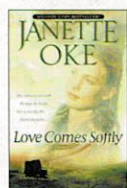
Ash Pelham-Martyn, a British subject raised among Indians, falls in love with Anjali, a princess of mixed race, when he returns to India to serve in the army. This sweeping romantic epic, set amid the political turmoil of mid-19th-century India, has been called that country's *Gone with the Wind*. Born and raised in India, Kaye came from a long line of English soldiers who served in the British Raj. Her efforts in illustrating the splendor of her beloved homeland gained worldwide recognition.

**ALSO TRY:** Rebecca Ryman's *Olivia and Jai* (1990), about a spirited American woman who dares to love a mysterious Indian man who knows secrets about her family. In Thalassa Ali's *A Singular Hostage* (2002), set in 1838, Mariana Givens travels to India for a husband but falls in love with the country.

## LOVE COMES SOFTLY

BY JANETTE OKE (1980)

**SETTING: 19TH-CENTURY CANADIAN PRAIRIE**



Marty Claridge, a teenage widow on the 19th-century Canadian prairie, agrees to marry Clark Davis, a stranger with a young daughter, for the sake of her unborn child. Over time, through their shared faith, they fall in love and form a real family. Oke adds color by recounting historical details from her grandparents' lives as pioneers. With her gentle historical romance of North America's heartland, she founded the inspirational fiction genre.

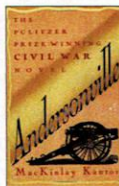
**ALSO TRY:** Dawn Miller's *The Journal of Callie Wade* (1996), first in a series, records the adventures of a young woman traveling westward with her family on a wagon train. Lauraine Snelling's *Ruby* (2003) begins her *Dakotah Treasures* series with the story of two sisters who inherit a house of ill repute.

## ANDERSONVILLE

BY MACKINLAY KANTOR (1955)

**SETTING: AMERICAN CIVIL WAR**

♦ PULITZER PRIZE FOR FICTION



In the Andersonville prison in southwestern Georgia, the Confederacy's largest facility for captured Union soldiers, a group of men endure concentration camp-like conditions and survive on their memories of better days. In this classic Civil War novel, Kantor doesn't stint on realism: many scenes are difficult to read, but he tells it like it really was. With understated, lyrical prose, he does full justice to each man's story, refusing to let any of them become statistics.

**ALSO TRY:** Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels* (1974), itself a benchmark Civil War novel, dramatizes the action at the 1863 Battle of Gettysburg from the viewpoints of major players. Robert Hicks's *The Widow of the South* (★★★ Nov/Dec 2005) pays homage to Carrie McGavock, a real-life heroine who reburied thousands of Confederate soldiers in her own backyard.

# Multi-Generational Sagas

## 20th Century

### RAGTIME

BY E. L. DOCTOROW (1975)

**SETTING: 20TH-CENTURY NEW YORK**

◆ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD / FICTION



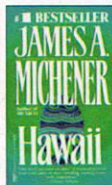
Beginning in 1906, members of a family from New Rochelle, New York, interact with a wide range of fictional and historical personages. Meanwhile, society's mood gradually shifts from the joyous optimism of the ragtime era to the disillusionment of the pre-war years. With his enormous cast of characters, Doctorow presents a sweeping view of the turn-of-the-last-century American experience. A classic work of literary historical fiction that inspired a Broadway musical, *Ragtime* is at once unabashedly retro and sharply modern in outlook.

**ALSO TRY:** *Bandbox*, Thomas Mallon's latest historical novel (★★★ May/June 2004), captures the frenzy and competitiveness of the publishing world in Jazz Age Manhattan. In Jacqueline DeJohn's *Antonio's Wife* (2004), set in the opera world in 1908 New York City, an Italian diva and an immigrant seamstress come face to face with their respective pasts.

### HAWAII

BY JAMES MICHENER (1959)

**SETTING: AN ISLAND AND ITS PEOPLE**



The first of his massive multiperiod novels, *Hawaii* presents, in colorful snapshots, the tumultuous history of America's fiftieth state from its prehistoric past through statehood. More than just a panoramic portrait of a location, it tells the story of all the ethnic groups—Polynesians, Japanese, Filipinos, Chinese—that together formed America's great melting pot of a state. Michener went on to write fictional histories of Alaska, Texas, Mexico, South Africa, the Middle East, and many other places.

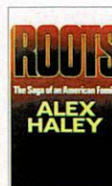
**ALSO TRY:** Edward Rutherfurd's *Sarum* (1987), *London* (1996), *The Forest* (2000), or *The Princes of Ireland* (2004) for Michener-style novels set in the British Isles. Barbara Wood's *The Blessing Stone* (2002) takes a feminist slant on the multiperiod epic, tracing a mysterious blue stone from prehistory forward.

### ROOTS

BY ALEX HALEY (1976)

**SETTING: AFRICAN AMERICAN SAGA**

◆ PULITZER PRIZE AND NATIONAL BOOK AWARD



In a Gambian village in the 1760s, a young African named Kunta Kinte is captured and brought forcibly to America on a slave ship. Over the next two centuries, Kinte and his descendants rise up from slavery and discrimination, though they never forget their origins. Rich in heritage, this entertaining saga concludes with the author's own journey in search of his ancestry. *Roots*, and the associated TV miniseries, inspired countless Americans, especially African Americans, to research their own family histories.

**ALSO TRY:** Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings* (1979) fictionalizes the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and his slave mistress, his late wife's half-sister. Lalita Tademy's *Cane River* (2001), a multigenerational saga of an African-American family in Louisiana, retells the true story of Tademy's female ancestors and the Caucasian men who desired them. ■