

Masters of the Past

Historical Fiction VOLUME II

By Sarah Johnson

The demand for historical fiction continues unabated, if comments from *Bookmarks* readers are any indication. Our previous spotlight on historical fiction, back in our Jan/Feb 2006 issue, focused on modern classics. Now we move forward to the present day, looking at very recent trends in the genre—what they are and where they originated—and providing a selection of titles that best exemplify them.

A variety of sources inspired the trends in historical fiction described below. Often, a single work of fiction will burst onto the scene to become an unexpected best seller—prompting publishers to look for other works with similar focus or style that can reach the same wide audience. The abundance of historical religious thrillers and novels about the Knights Templar proves that books (Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, for example) need not be historical fiction to strongly affect the genre. The rampant Tudormania sparked by Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl* prompted additional novels about 16th-century England, royal mistresses, and other influential women in the European royal courts. Some popular topics bleed into film and television, and vice versa. For example, the Hollywood productions of *Gladiator*, *Troy*, and *300*

provoked readers' curiosity about ancient Greece and Rome, adding to the interest already generated by Steven Pressfield's *Gates of Fire*. Readers shouldn't take novels' presence here to mean that their authors are slaves to literary fashion, however. Javier Sierra, for instance, reportedly began his research for *The Secret Supper* more than two years before Dan Brown's novel appeared.

The 50-odd books on this list, most of which date from the last five years, will sweep readers from Belle Époque Paris to the rocky coastline of Nova Scotia during World War I, and from foggy Victorian London to the lush atmosphere of 17th-century Persia. All of them combine, like all good historical novels, well-researched historical detail with a fascinating, well-paced story. Some can easily fit into more than one category. With a plethora of recent works to choose from, our suggestions are hardly comprehensive, but we hope they serve as a starting point in helping readers decide what to try next.

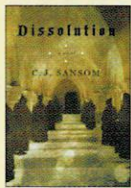
Sarah L. Johnson, a Reference Librarian and Associate Professor at Booth Library, Eastern Illinois University, is the author of *Historical Fiction: A Guide to the Genre*. She also serves as the book review editor for *Historical Novels Review*, the journal of the Historical Novel Society (www.historicalnovelsociety.org).

Tudor England

Many novels set during England's Tudor era (1485–1603) focus on the pageantry and intrigue of the royal court, while others illustrate the widespread effects of Henry VIII's break with Catholicism. Some do both. We recommend more books on Tudor England in our "What One Book" feature in the Mar/Apr 2008 issue.

Dissolution (2003)

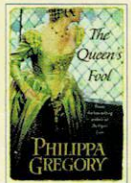
C. J. Sansom



On the orders of Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's vicar general, hunchbacked lawyer Matthew Shardlake travels from London to the monastery at coastal Scarnsea in 1537 to investigate the brutal murder of one of Cromwell's commissioners. He uncovers enough evidence of corruption to shut down the monastery for good, as his master desires, but doing so puts his life in danger. (We reviewed the third in this grimly atmospheric series, *Sovereign*, ★★★★★ July/Aug 2007.)

The Queen's Fool (2004)

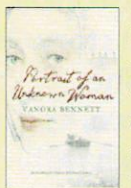
Philippa Gregory



In 1553, Hannah Green, a Jewish teenager, becomes enmeshed in a web of political intrigue when she agrees to serve as Queen Mary's court fool and spy. Gregory's second Tudor-era entry is all the stronger for its outsider's perspective on the royals. She does much to humanize the queen known throughout history as Bloody Mary.

Portrait of an Unknown Woman (2007)

Vanora Bennett



Meg Giggs, the adopted daughter of Thomas More, Henry VIII's chancellor, narrates this absorbing read about the Protestant Reformation and its wrenching effects on one Catholic family at its center. The subtle differences between two portraits of the More household, painted about five years apart, reveal unspoken secrets and mysteries.

Also consider

INNOCENT TRAITOR A Novel of Lady Jane Grey | ALISON WEIR (2007): The author of the best-selling history *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* casts her eye on the nine days' queen.

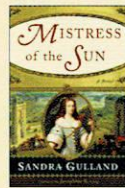
THE SECRET BRIDE | DIANE HAEGER (2008): Mary Tudor, promised to King Louis of France, determines to chart her own fate.

Royal Mistresses

Because royal marriages were rarely love matches, kings and princes often took their pleasures on the side. The Boleyn sisters were far from the only women to use their feminine charms to gain royal favor.

Mistress of the Sun (2008)

Sandra Gulland

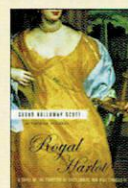


Louise de la Vallière, a quiet country girl, exhibits qualities seldom found in royal mistresses. Shunning the spotlight, she much prefers the man himself to occupy the role he was born to play. Gulland, best-selling author of a trilogy about Empress Josephine, brings to life an enigmatic woman who captured the heart of Louis XIV of 17th-century France. (Gulland offered her recommendations on the French Revolution in our Mar/Apr 2006 issue.)

Royal Harlot (2007)

A Novel of the Countess Castlemaine and King Charles II

Susan Holloway Scott



Barbara Villiers Palmer, the notorious Countess of Castlemaine, describes her rise to power as the favorite mistress of England's Charles II. Though not entirely sympathetic—her quick wit rivals her sensuality and fearless ambition—she emerges as a powerful figure who triumphs over the bawdy Restoration court and who kept His Majesty's affections longer than any other woman.

All for Love (2008)

The Scandalous Life and Times of Royal Mistress Mary Robinson
Amanda Elyot



Mary Darby Robinson is better known today as a royal paramour than as a poet, essayist, and early feminist; with this fictional autobiography, Elyot challenges readers' perceptions. Using an authentically ornate style, Mary recounts her impoverished childhood, her early celebrity as a London stage actress, the brief time she spent as mistress to the future George IV, and her celebrated literary efforts.

Also consider

A ROSE FOR THE CROWN | ANNE EASTER SMITH (2006): Kate Haute bears Richard III's bastard children in 15th-century England.

THE INNOCENT | POSIE GRAEME-EVANS (2004): In 15th-century England, King Edward IV finds love in a peasant girl with healing powers.

Trendsetter
TUDOR ENGLAND
and ROYAL MISTRESSES
The Other Boleyn Girl
(2002)
Philippa Gregory

Mary and Anne Boleyn, pawns of their ambitious parents and uncle, become rivals for Henry VIII's affections in the bawdy, claustrophobic, and perilous Tudor court.

Art and Music

Can one re-create artistic genius on the printed page? As these novelists get up close and personal with historical painters and musicians, they communicate the intensity, exuberance, and difficulties of the creative process.

Luncheon of the Boating Party (2007)

Susan Vreeland

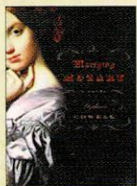


Vreeland's literary re-creation of Pierre-Auguste Renoir's

famed Impressionist masterpiece *Luncheon on the Boating Party*, which depicts a summer fête in a terrace café along the Seine, reflects the exuberant tone of *la vie moderne*. She sets the stories of both the artist and some of his models (who were his good friends) against the sociohistorical background of 1880s Paris. (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2007)

Marrying Mozart (2004)

Stephanie Cowell

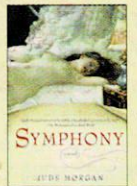


Cowell, a former opera singer, gives voice to the four charming daughters of Fridolin Weber of Mannheim, all of whom play roles in the development of young composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. In addition to being a beautiful love story, it's a delightful look at the high culture and domestic life of late 18th-century Germany and Austria.



Symphony (2007)

Jude Morgan



Harriet Smithson, a beautiful Irish actress, takes Paris's theatrical world by storm in the 1820s. She attracts the attention of Romantic composer Hector Berlioz and becomes his muse—but Harriet isn't content to serve merely as an inspiration for others' creative genius.

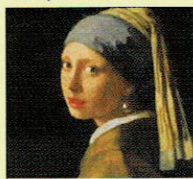
Morgan recounts not only Berlioz's and Harriet's haunting, passionate, tragic love affair but also their individual artistic journeys from childhood forward.

Trendsetter

ART & MUSIC

Girl with a Pearl Earring (1999)

Tracy Chevalier



Griet, a young maid-servant in Johannes Vermeer's household in

17th-century Delft, faces the social consequences when her master, noting her artistic eye, decides to use her as a model for his latest painting.

Also consider

LISZT'S KISS | SUSANNE DUNLAP (2007): In 1830s Paris, a young countess tries to win the heart of pianist Franz Liszt—and uncover family secrets.

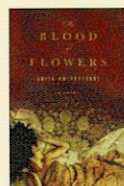
THE WAYWARD MUSE | ELIZABETH HICKEY (2007): Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his muse embark on an interesting love affair.

The Distaff Side

So-called ordinary women become immersed in events beyond their control and discover inner strengths they didn't know they possessed. They navigate the uncharted waters of their times as they abandon the strictures imposed by society and find their own place in the world.

The Blood of Flowers (2007)

Anita Amirrezvani

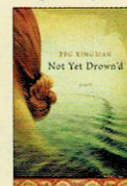


In the 1620s, the narrator, an unnamed 14-year-

old girl, relocates with her widowed mother to live with her uncle, an accomplished rug designer. Her uncle's wife, resentful of their presence, pushes her into accepting a temporary marriage with a rich merchant. In an enchanting yet unsettling tale laced with Persian folklore, Amirrezvani describes the narrator's path from shame to artistic independence.

Not Yet Drown'd (2007)

Peg Kingman



Catherine MacDonald, a young widow in 1822

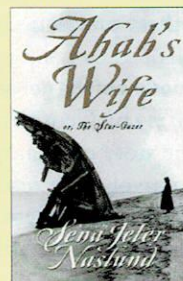
Edinburgh, begins the

Benchmarks

THE DISTAFF SIDE

Ahab's Wife (1999)

Sena Jeter Naslund

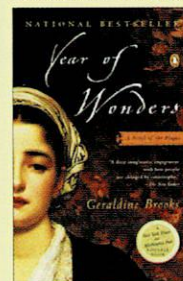


Una Spenser, wife of Captain Ahab from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, stars in this sweeping epic about a

passionate, independent woman's life and adventures in early 19th-century New England.

Year of Wonders (2001)

Geraldine Brooks



When plague strikes the Derbyshire village of Eyam during 1665–66, its residents quarantine themselves

from the outside. Anna Frith, a young widow, gathers her strength and helps others cope with their tragedies.

Philippa Gregory

on the Craft of Historical Fiction

PHILIPPA GREGORY SHARED WITH BOOKMARKS her thoughts on the craft of historical fiction—what she reads and how she writes it. Gregory, who grew up in Kenya and England, where she now resides, is the best-selling author of more than 20 books, including *The Boleyn Girl*, which was recently adapted for film. Her latest novel is *The Other Queen*.

How did you become interested in writing historical fiction?

I wrote my first novel while waiting and hoping for an academic post to teach history. It was published and very successful, so I became a historical novelist almost by accident.

What historical fiction impressed you before you started writing?

I read almost everything written by Georgette Heyer in my adolescence, and I love both her connection with history and her lightness of touch. I also read Anya Seton and Jean Plaidy. But my main inspiration for my own writing is the history itself. I think every generation creates its own way of viewing the past, and mine is very different from these previous great writers.

What are some models of the genre?

The Infamous Army by Georgette Heyer is a classic of how to write the story of a campaign and a battle (Waterloo) and also involve the reader in a personal story. The military history is apparently so accurate that it is on the reading list of the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. It is vivid and fast moving as a novel, and the fictional characters inserted in the story have their own arc of development. Her other great historical novel that reveals the same technique is *The Spanish Bride*. I loved them both when I was a young reader, and now as a writer, I respect their technique.

What inspired *The Other Queen*?

I have to pay tribute to two very good books. The first is John Guy's *My Heart Is My Own*, which looks at Mary Queen of Scots not as a romantic figure but as a

rational, courageous, determined, and politically astute woman. The other is Mary Lovell's biography *Bess of Hardwick*, which gave me the understanding that Bess and Mary lived together for years and which explored the impact that Mary had on the English lives that she touched.

What process guides you through writing your novels?

I start the process by reading the history, so in a sense, I have no idea of the direction the story will take before I understand the history. The history comes first. I read for about six months before I even think about writing fiction. The historical facts dictate the story; all the fiction does is breathe life into it. What I allow myself is a sense of foreshadowing of the facts, which I think is very enjoyable for readers who happen to know what is going to happen but which does not distract for readers who don't know. For instance, in *The Other Queen*, Anthony Babington, who will give up his young life for his part in the plot that carries his name and takes Mary to the scaffold, is a 12-year-old page boy to Bess of Hardwick, so he meets Mary and gives her his loyalty in my novel. This seems to me tremendously rich material for a historian and also for a novelist. But the trick is in knowing how things will end—but holding this fact in abeyance. We know that Mary will die, but the novel is written partly from her point of view, and she does not know this. It is always the question of, if you had been there, how would you have felt? It has to have the immediacy of unfolding events.

What do you feel are both the strengths and weaknesses of historical fiction?

I think of historical fiction as any sort of fiction and judge it as demanding as literary fiction. Historical

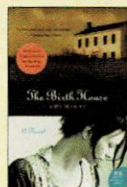
fiction sets extra challenges, such as the relationship between fact and fiction, the honoring of the past, and the requirement (in the way I like to write my fiction) of research of the highest quality I can manage. But apart from these big requirements, I think historical fiction should be as good as any other sort of fiction; it does not have any sort of special category. As a historian, I feel rather strongly that it should follow the historical record and never succumb to a romantic or nostalgic view.



adventure of a lifetime when she receives clues that her twin brother, presumed dead in monsoon floods in India, may in fact be alive. Her shipboard voyage to India teaches her much about local customs, her fellow passengers, and most of all, herself. Kingman unites her interests in tea history and bagpipe music in a breathtaking, unique debut.

The Birth House (2007)

Ami McKay



McKay creates a memorable heroine in Dora Rare, an apprentice midwife living along the Nova Scotia coastline during World War I. When a brash male doctor sets up shop in her rural village, his questioning of the safety of midwives' child-birthing methods divides the community in two. A Canadian best seller, McKay's gracefully written novel honors the generations-old traditions of her adopted region.

Also consider

THE WITCH OF COLOGNE | TOBSHA LEARNER (2005): During the Middle Ages, a rabbi's daughter studies and applies Kabbalah—until an Inquisitor arrests her for sorcery.

THE WIDOW'S WAR | SALLY GUNNING (2006): In Colonial Cape Cod, a widow must fend for her rights.

THE VANISHING POINT | MARY SHARRATT (2006): In Colonial America, a woman tries to discover the truth about her sister's death.

Victorian Pastiche

With their dramatic, multi-faceted plots, dark secrets, intricate phrasing, and evocation of class differences, these works emulate novels written during Victorian times, à la Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins. Some turn the tables on the traditional 19th-century British novel by allowing members of underprivileged classes to finally speak for themselves.

Fingersmith (2002)

Sarah Waters



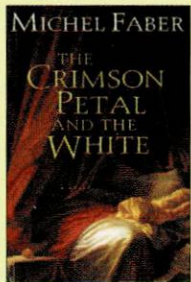
Sue Trinder, an orphan and pick-pocket living in a squalid London

Benchmark

VICTORIAN PASTICHE

The Crimson Petal and the White (2002)

Michel Faber



In 1870s London, Sugar, a crafty young prostitute eager to escape her situation, insinuates herself into the life (and

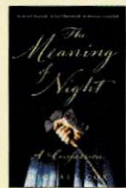
bed) of perfume magnate William Rackham. The novel touches on everything Victorian—from sin and sex to family and class. (★★★★) Jan/Feb 2003)

slum, agrees to help a handsome rogue deceive a frail heiress, Maud Lilly, into marrying him. His ingenious plan: after he has access to Maud's fortune, he'll have her institutionalized. Waters, the queen of lesbian Victoriana, presents a deliciously twisting plotline with plenty of Dickensian hallmarks. (★★★★ Summer 2002)

The Meaning of Night (2006)

A Confession

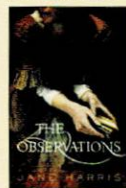
Michael Cox



In the opening scene, set on a fog-enshrouded London street in 1854, Edward Glyver kills an anonymous man to prove to himself that he is capable of murder. Then he takes us through his plan for vengeance against Phoebus Daunt, his longtime enemy, whom he blames for stealing his inheritance. Cox's labyrinthine, scrupulously researched re-creation of a Victorian "sensation novel" took nearly 30 years to write.

The Observations (2006)

Jane Harris



When Bessy Buckley takes a position as housemaid at Scotland's Castle Haivers in 1863, her "missus" asks her to record her day-to-day thoughts and activities in a journal. Then she learns the truth behind her missus's odd request, and about her predecessor's mysterious disappearance—and concocts a wacky plan for revenge. Bessy's irrepressible, slang-filled voice makes this a hilariously entertaining read.

Also consider

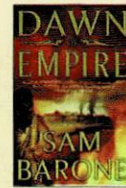
THE JOURNAL OF DORA DAMAGE | BELINDA STARLING (2007): In the mid-18th century, a London wife finds herself binding pornographic texts.

Battles of Antiquity

With their gritty depictions of soldiers' lives and battle tactics, blood-soaked combat scenes, and fast-paced action, these novels dramatize ancient clashes between civilizations.

Dawn of Empire (2006)

Sam Barone



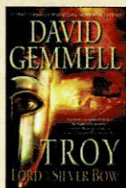
On the eastern bank of the Tigris over 5,000 years ago, nomadic hordes converge on Orak, a prosperous village of traders and farmers. Eskkar, a former barbarian, becomes its unlikely leader: he trains Orak's men in battle strategies and organizes construction of a huge defensive wall (with the guidance of his slave mistress). Barone's brazen adventure tale imagines the origins of Mesopotamia.

mia's great walled cities.

Troy

Lord of the Silver Bow (2005)

David Gemmell

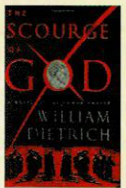


Gemmell's final novels (he died in 2006)

take considerable liberties with the usual Trojan War mythology. *Lord of the Silver Bow* begins an epic trilogy starring two seemingly minor characters from the original: Helikaon, Prince of Dardania, and Andromache, a strong-willed priestess of Thera. The result is a glorious, fast-moving, often surprising saga written in his trademark taut prose.

The Scourge of God (2005)

William Dietrich



Attila the Hun, called the Scourge of God, terrorizes all of western Europe in the mid-fifth century, the last days of the Roman Empire. Diplomat and historian Jonas Alabanda gets caught in the middle when war erupts between the barbarians and the mighty Roman Empire.

Dietrich fictionalizes a culture clash that played out in full force at the Battle of Chalons.

Also consider

MEMNON | SCOTT ODEN (2006): In the fourth century BC, Memnon of Rhodes fights the formidable Alexander the Great.

THE FALL OF ROME A Novel of a World Lost | MICHAEL CURTIS FORD (2007): In this follow-up to *The Sword of Attila*, Rome falls to the barbarians.

The French Revolution

Though an unfashionable topic until very recently, writers and readers have rediscovered that the French Revolution (1789–99) creates intense, page-turning drama. We caught the topic on the upswing in our “What One Book” feature in the Mar/Apr 2006 issue.

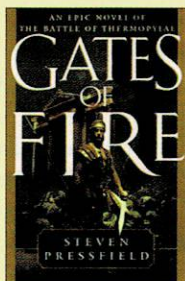
Benchmark

BATTLES OF ANTIQUITY

Gates of Fire (1998)

An Epic Novel of the Battle of Thermopylae

Steven Pressfield

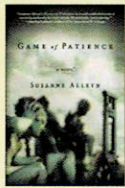


Xeones, a captive squire and only survivor among the doomed Spartan army, reveals how 300

Spartan warriors held off a Persian invasion force many times their size at the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC.

Game of Patience (2006)

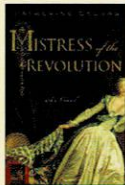
Susanne Alletyn



Alletyn's first novel, *A Far Better Rest* (2000), retold Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* from Sydney Carton's viewpoint. Alletyn now writes edgy police procedurals set in 1796 Paris, a broken city recovering from the Terror. In his first outing, police investigator Aristide Ravel goes undercover to solve the murders of a wealthy young woman and her blackmailer.

Mistress of the Revolution (2008)

Catherine Delors

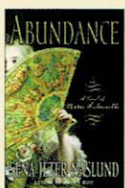


In 1815, Gabrielle de Montserrat writes her memoirs of her life during the French Revolution for posterity. She recounts her brief marriage to an abusive nobleman, life at the opulent Versailles court, and the tumultuous circumstances that led her back to her childhood love. Delors, a native Frenchwoman, examines the legal issues behind the Revolution and makes a complex set of political circumstances comprehensible.

Abundance (2006)

A Novel of Marie Antoinette

Sena Jeter Naslund



In a warm, intimate fashion, Marie Antoinette narrates her life story from her rebirth as a French citizen to her trip to the guillotine. High-spirited and compassionate, yet sheltered and naïve, she doesn't truly comprehend the

rumblings outside the splendor of Versailles until it's too late. A compulsive read despite the inevitable ending, *Abundance* gives us a fresh portrait of a much-maligned queen. (★★★ Jan/Feb 2007)

Also consider

ANNETTE VALLON A Novel of the French Revolution | JAMES TIPTON (2007): William Wordsworth's French mistress and muse survives the Reign of Terror, but finds the path to love difficult.

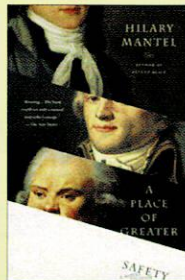
BLUEBIRD or the Invention of Happiness | SHEILA KOHLER (2007): Lucy Dillon, a lady in Marie Antoinette's court, leads her family from France to the United States.

Benchmark

FRENCH REVOLUTION

A Place of Greater Safety (1993)

Hilary Mantel



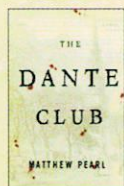
In nearly 800 pages, Mantel's monumental epic reveals the origins, progress, and aftermath of the Revolution from the viewpoints of three men who set it in motion: Danton, Robespierre, and Desmoulin.

The Dark Side of the City

In these intellectual thrillers, the setting takes center stage. As the protagonists race to investigate brutal crimes, readers view American cities' histories from a variety of angles: from the highest academic and cultural circles to the seedy underworld that proper society never frequents.

The Dante Club (2003)

Matthew Pearl

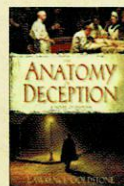


A serial killer stalks post-Civil War Boston,

torturing his victims in ways described in Dante's *Inferno*. Members of the exclusive "Dante Club"—a group of intellectuals translating the *Divine Comedy*, which includes Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and James Russell Lowell—notice the parallels immediately. (★★★ May/June 2003)

The Anatomy of Deception (2008)

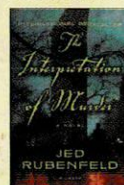
Lawrence Goldstone



Goldstone's chilling forensic thriller, set in 1889 Philadelphia, explores the origins of modern medicine. Ephraim Carroll, a newly graduated physician, observes his mentor's unexpected reaction to an autopsy subject, a young woman found dead on Philadelphia's streets. His curiosity compels him to probe more deeply, which leads him from a seamy dockside tavern to the highest echelons of society.

The Interpretation of Murder (2006)

Jed Rubinfeld



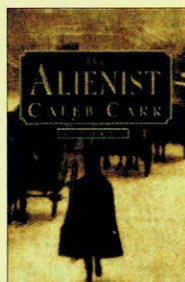
Sigmund Freud's only trip to America goes dreadfully wrong when, just after disembarking in Manhattan in 1909, a young supporter calls on him for help. A beautiful heiress, the near victim of a serial killer, remembers nothing about the attack, so Freud's psychoanalytic techniques come in handy. Rubinfeld explores the recesses of the human mind and turn-of-the-century New York with the same agility and thoroughness.

Trendsetter

THE DARK SIDE OF THE CITY

The Alienist (1994)

Caleb Carr



In 1896, New York police commissioner Theodore Roosevelt asks psychologist (or "alienist") Laszlo

Kreizler to scour Manhattan's criminal underworld for the killer of young male prostitutes.

Also consider

THE BLACKEST BIRD | JOEL ROSE (2007): In 1840s New York, Edgar Allan Poe becomes a suspect in a young woman's murder.

THE BONE GARDEN | TESS GERRITSEN (2008): In 1830s Boston, a serial killer terrorizes the city.

Mysteries Past and Present

These multiperiod novels present parallel storylines that unfold in alternating sections. Present-day researchers uncover surprising truths about past events and derive meaning from their personal connections to them.

The Secret History of the Pink Carnation (2005)

Lauren Willig



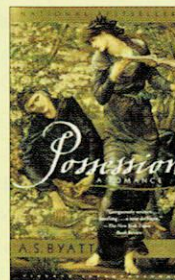
While doing research in England for her Ph.D. dissertation, Eloise Kelly comes across mention of a curiously named British spy, the Pink Carnation, who operated in Napoleonic France. In a parallel story set in 1803, Amy Balcourt leaves her rural English home for Paris to avenge her father's death at the guillotine. This witty, tongue-in-cheek romp, first in a series, mixes romance, chick lit, and light mystery.

Trendsetter

MYSTERIES PAST AND PRESENT

Possession (1990)

A Romance
A. S. Byatt

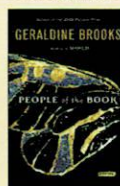


Byatt's literary masterpiece juxtaposes dual narratives, both with romantic overtones. Two British academics

research the correspondence between two Victorian-era authors who may have conducted a secret affair.

People of the Book (2008)

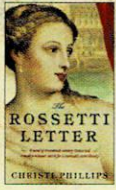
Geraldine Brooks



The Sarajevo Haggadah is a rare illuminated Hebrew manuscript dating back to medieval Spain. This fictionalized version of its history pays tribute to its multiethnic heritage and the resilient soul of the Jewish people. As an Australian book conservator uncovers evidence about the people who risked their lives to save it, Brooks recreates its travels from 1480s Seville to Renaissance Venice to World War II-era Bosnia. (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2008)

The Rossetti Letter (2007)

Christi Phillips



An American graduate student and a Cambridge historian hold opposing beliefs about 17th-century courtesan Alessandra Rossetti: Was she the savior of the Venetian Republic? Or was she part of the Spanish conspiracy to overthrow it? Their academic rivalry eventually turns romantic, while a parallel plot set in 1617–18 describes Alessandra's plight and adventures.

Also consider

THE MATHEMATICS OF LOVE | EMMA DARWIN (2007): A major chronicles his experience during the Napoleonic Wars; his story converges 150 years later with a teenage girl's.

THE AVIARY GATE | KATIE HICKMAN (2008): A present-day Oxford researcher discovers a story about a woman held captive in a 16th-century Ottoman sultan's harem.

Historical Religious Thrillers

Unlike Dan Brown's tales about modern religious conspiracies, these works are set wholly in the past. While some reflect *The Da Vinci Code*-style symbology (Mary Magdalene's hidden history, as carefully concealed within paintings and other documents), others twist the standard storyline considerably.

Resurrection (2006)

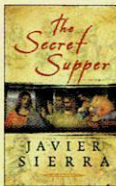
Tucker Malarkey



More literary and character centered than others in this group, *Resurrection* is based on the 1940s-era discovery of the Gnostic Gospels near Nag Hammadi, Egypt. A British war nurse discovers that the recent death of her archaeologist father may have related to his research into early Christian texts. Aside from the theological content, which is fascinating, postwar Cairo comes vividly alive.

The Secret Supper (2006)

Javier Sierra, translated by Alberto Manguel



An international best seller, *The Secret Supper* looks deeply into the mysteries embedded in Leonardo da Vinci's masterwork. In 1497, Dominican Inquisitor Agostino Leyre arrives in Milan to investigate Leonardo's alleged heretical beliefs, as expressed in his painting of the Last Supper. Sierra's ultimate conclusions about the painting are far different from Brown's, and he is a far more elegant writer.

The Begotten (2006)

Lisa T. Bergren



Here's a switch: pious Christians are the good guys for a change. In mid-14th-century Italy, the Inquisition is in full swing. A Dominican priest, Father Piero, searches far and wide for members of the Gifted, men and women with extraordinary spiritual powers whose existence was foretold in an ancient letter of St. Paul. And their gifts are necessary to fight enemies of the Church.

Also consider

LABYRINTH | KATE MOSSE (2005): Two women born almost a century apart embark on quests to find the Holy Grail.

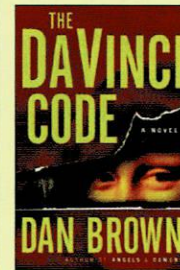
THE EXPECTED ONE | KATHLEEN MCGOWAN (2006): A special journalist researches the original Magdalene scrolls, revealing a love affair with Jesus.

Trendsetter

HISTORICAL RELIGIOUS THRILLERS and THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR

The Da Vinci Code (2003)

Dan Brown



In this controversial thriller and worldwide best seller, Harvard professor Robert Langdon's quest to solve a ritualistic murder in the Louvre uncovers long-held secrets about the Knights Templar, the Holy Grail, and the bloodline of Jesus Christ. (★★★★ May/June 2003)

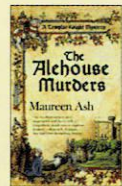
The Knights Templar

These novels humanize the men behind the Templar myths by dramatizing their real history and purpose: a military order, they were charged with protecting Crusaders en route to the Holy Land.

The Alehouse Murders (2007)

A Templar Knight Mystery

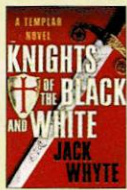
Maureen Ash



Ash's debut mystery's format—a slim paperback—may cause readers to overlook one of the most promising new examples of the Templar craze. In 1200, Sir Bascot de Marins, war weary and wounded after the Crusades, assists Dame Nicolaa de la Haye, castellan of Lincoln Castle, in solving the murders of four men found dead in an alehouse.

Knights of the Black and White (2006)

Jack Whyte

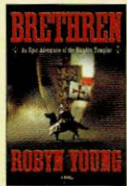


The first novel in Whyte's action-packed trilogy chronicling the birth of the Templars introduces Hugh de Payens, the pious Crusader knight credited as their founder. In 1088, Sir Hugh joins a mysterious hereditary Order, participates in the bloody First Crusade, and searches for treasure beneath Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

Brethren (2006)

An Epic Adventure of the Knights Templar

Robyn Young



A sweeping fictionalization of the epic struggle between East and West, *Brethren* opens in both Paris and Jerusalem in 1260, on the eve of the last Crusade. Young switches between the viewpoints of Will Campbell, a new Templar knight, and Baybars, a former slave turned sultan of Egypt, who is determined to purge the Holy Land of Christian influence.

Also consider

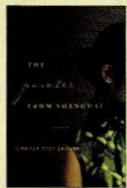
THE TEMPLAR, THE QUEEN, AND HER LOVER A Knights Templar Mystery | MICHAEL JECKS (2007): In 1325, Queen Isabella tries to negotiate peace with the French.

Historical China

The Western world's considerable fascination with China has given rise to a succession of novels that evoke and celebrate its history and culture. Those about Chinese women from all walks of life take prominence.

The Painter from Shanghai (2008)

Jennifer Cody Epstein



Members of the Chinese press have praised this luminous debut from Epstein (a non-Chinese-speaking American), which takes the form of a biographical novel of noted painter Pan Yuliang. Forced into prostitution at an early age, she asserts her independence by relocating to Paris to pursue her art—but ends up scandalizing prewar Shanghai with her nude self-portraits.

The Girl Who Played Go (2003)

Shan Sa



In Japanese-occupied Manchuria in the 1930s, a teenage girl, a master of the ancient Chinese game of Go, finds a worthy adversary/partner in a Japanese soldier sent to spy on her community. Their intricate, silent moves on the Go board become a metaphor for the war raging

around them as well as their growing emotional connection. The author's short, sparsely written chapters build to a shocking finale.

The Last Empress (2007)

Anchee Min



Having Empress Tsu Hsi speak in the first person is a bold choice, but it feels apt for Min's fictional biography of the formidable woman who ushered in modern China.

Empress Orchid covered her youth as an imperial concubine and her initial rise to power; its sequel dramatizes how she consolidated that power over the next 40 years.

Also consider

THE RUSSIAN CONCUBINE | KATE FURNIVALL (2007): In 1928 China, a young woman and a freedom fighter experience star-crossed love.

PEONY IN LOVE | LISA SEE (2007): In 17th-century China, women discover their literary voice. (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2007)

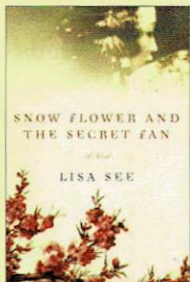
NANJING 1937 A Love Story | YE ZHAOYAN (2002): Just before the Japanese invasion of Nanjing, a professor falls in love with someone else's wife. ■

Benchmark

HISTORICAL CHINA

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan (2005)

Lisa See



In rural 19th-century China, Lily, an elderly widow, looks back on the close bond of friendship she shared

with another young woman, Snow Flower; the secret written language they used to communicate; and the misunderstanding that drove them apart. (★★★★ SELECTION Sept/Oct 2005)

What About Volume I?



VOLUME I OF MASTERS OF THE PAST was published in our Jan/Feb 2006 issue. In "Masters of the Past I: Twenty Classic Historical Novels and Their Legacy," Sarah Johnson looked at classics of

the genre organized by time periods and offered additional suggestions. Due to the topic's popularity, that issue has long since sold out, but we have published the article on our web site, www.bookmarksmagazine.com. Look on our home page under the "Classic 'Best of' Articles" heading.