EVENT TITLE: How True Must Fiction Be?—The Role of Research in Fiction Writing

Event Description:
When does our imagination require fact checking? Curated facts vivify our made-up worlds, deepen authenticity, and ward off appropriation, while inaccuracy undermines our credibility. This diverse panel of fiction writers will detail their research methods and madnesses, addressing questions like, how can you tell when you’re writing into territory you need to learn more about? When do facts weigh down rather than elevate a story? How can we avoid (or learn from) rabbit holes?

EVENT CATEGORY: Fiction Craft and Criticism

Event Moderator
Teresa Burns Gunther: Teresa’s award-winning work is published widely in US/Int’l literary journals and anthologies. Her collection, Hold Off The Night, a Finalist for two Book Prizes, was published June 2023. Recent awards: 2023 Gemini Story Award and the NMW story award in 2022. Founder of Lakeshore Writers Workshop.

Event Participants
Susan Baller-Shepard: Susan Baller-Shepard is a poet, author, and ordained Presbyterian minister. Her essays, poetry, photography, and sermons have appeared in newspapers and various literary publications. She’s author of the poetry collection Doe, and a recently completed historical fiction novel and new poetry collection.

Viet Dinh: Viet Dinh teaches at the University of Delaware. He has received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts as well as two O. Henry Prizes and the Alice Hoffman Prize for Fiction. His debut novel, After Disasters, a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Prize, was released in 2016.


Charmaine Wilkerson: Charmaine Wilkerson is the author of Black Cake, a multigenerational novel with elements of historical fiction. A former journalist, she is a graduate of Barnard College and Stanford University, and has written at Bread Loaf
Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements
Thank you for joining us for How True Must Fiction Be—The Role of Research in Fiction Writing.

We’ve all heard precise prescriptions for handling research: *Do it all before you even begin writing.* Others say, *no. Finish the story, book, essay first, THEN research.* Most of us are somewhere in the middle. Part of our work as writers is discovering what approach to research best serves our own writing process, just as we’ve had to learn when and where we work best, in silence, music, or the buzz of a noisy café.

Whether we’re writing fiction or nonfiction, we want to gain the reader’s trust and create a believable, authentic world, even if we weren’t there. We research to make details resonant and believable. To make work visceral, to excite the senses with particularities that fit a place, era, or moment.

All of us on this panel have written and published work about places we’ve never been to, times we didn’t live through, states we’ve never visited. Sue Baller-Shepard, Viet Dinh, Jody Hobbs Hesler, and Charmaine Wilkerson will share experiences of research in their own writing.

Participant Initial Remarks

Susan Baller-Shepard

Right after college, raving about one of my English professors, I gave my father a novel written by the instructor. My father scanned the first two pages, handed it back to me and replied, “I’m not reading this.” I asked him, “Why not?” He said within the first two pages there was an inaccurate fact in the description of the village where the opening scene was set. My dad knew the village, and that inaccuracy meant, to him, the book wasn’t worth the read.

I keep this in mind when I do research for my writing. Still, when I enthusiastically embarked upon *Forgottonia*, my novel about a woman farming alone in western Illinois during the Civil War, I had no idea the number of hours I’d spend researching, and where that research would take me. I researched soil moisture, weather patterns, women’s clothing of the era, adjutant’s reports, etc. The research constantly shocked me. I was trying to tell my great great grandmother Hattie’s story as historical fiction.
in Pam Houston’s Writing by Writer’s DRAFT program.

Also, there was the issue of the language used by Hattie, as a new immigrant from Germany, and as a woman living in the 1800’s. Writer Luis Alberto Urrea, who saw early first pages of *Forgottonia*, told me I’d have to find the right language to sit in and write this historical fiction novel. I’d have to learn slang of the time, expressions used, etc.

My other work, besides as a writer, has been as a Presbyterian minister and college religious studies instructor. As a Presbyterian minister I learned Hebrew and Koine Greek, and I use both of these ancient languages as I write sermons. I believe those original words and sentence structures matter, as they do in poetry.

Lastly, as a poet, I love how our brains work with metaphoric domains, how language arises out of those domains from deep within us. Research helps ground us in those domains, helps us find those right words to make utilitarian language, beautiful.

In my remarks, I’ll be talking about how I’ve used research across genres and how going down a rabbit hole for one writing project can reap rewards for another project.

**Viet Dinh**

By trade, I’m a liar. Everyone here on this panel is a liar. But the art of lying—or, let’s face it, the art of writing fiction—relies on two key skills. First is knowing your mark. This means knowing the audience. And, as writers, we normally assume our audience to be highly intelligent, possibly people who are at the top of their game with certain topics. And if this is the mark we’re targeting—and why not? these are also going to be the people with the most money—we have to know enough of what they know to make them feel at ease. The second skill at lying is knowing how to bluff. That is, taking what you know and expanding it out to take in the suckers. But to bluff, you have to have a base level of knowledge. And that base level of knowledge is where the research comes in handy: it’s the bedrock of truth upon which we allow our lies to grow.

**Jody Hobbs Hesler**

If we botch a detail that our reader knows more about than we do, their willing suspension of disbelief disintegrates. I’ll talk about when a fictional story needs to be fact-checked and how I go about doing that. Sometimes the needs are broad, like when we’re seeking more understanding of a particular time period or world event.
Other times the needs are extremely specific, like if we need to double check that a particular car model would have had power windows in the year we’ve set our story. Other times the focus is logistical, like if we’re fact checking what actually happens when police or rescue units are called in our stories.

For my forthcoming novel *Without You Here*, I researched historical elements, from what was big in the news to where someone might have shopped for groceries in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1979. I also researched how a person with panic disorder may have experienced treatment in and around the time that that diagnosis first made it into the DSM. I’ll talk about the challenges of this kind of research, the rewards, and how easy it is to get distracted.

**Charmaine Wilkerson**

I began my professional life as a journalist, and later I worked in other forms of communication. In each case, my assignments necessarily began with the research. But when I write fiction, I find that I follow a very different process.

I like to joke that I am a write first, ask questions later kind of author. With fiction, I find I need to unhinge my thinking process and write whatever comes to mind. But from time to time, I need to stop and think about what kind of research is needed to put flesh on the bones of a story idea.

In my debut novel, *Black Cake*, I wrote a scene in which a girl cuts her leg on an old church gate that was in the water. I did quite a bit of reading to provide context. I only needed to add a few words to the original scene, but it made a difference.

I also used research to educate myself more broadly on topics that ran throughout my plot. Topics as varied as sugar cane production, remote sensing technology in ocean sciences, and domestic violence. I will share some insights on how I accessed and used information and how my relationship with research has evolved since I published my first novel.

**Moderator Questions**

1. How would you describe your relationship to research? Especially with regard to our own personal/idiosyncratic approaches, how we identify the need for it, how we avoid rabbit holes (or if we indulge them), how we decide when enough is enough, etc.
2. How do we find our sources? Including how we engage with the internet, if we subscribe to research resources, which such resources are most worthwhile, how and when and why we reach out to experts and what that looks like.

3. How do we discern the difference between what’s interesting and what’s inundating, or how do we effectively use research without info dumping on the reader?

4. What role does serendipity play in research? What are some pitfalls in research?

5. How does research influence what form our writing takes (from the poet’s perspective), or how does the form we’re investigating for affect the kind of research we might do (from the short story vs. novel writing perspective)?

6. If you created a list of resources, please talk about what you included.