

Careers for Historians: Historical Writers

By Beth Crist

Many history professionals, including curators, research historians, and anthropologists, do a lot of writing in their jobs. Some historians make a living writing articles and books. If you love writing and history and are dedicated and determined, you may want to consider a career as a historical writer.

Historical writers work in three primary genres.

- Historical nonfiction—a work that examines an event or a time period or traces the history of a group of people, company, product, trend, or place
- Historical fiction—a story set in the past that combines real events, places, and details of a period with imaginary characters and story lines
- Biography—a history of a person’s life.

Writers who specialize in these areas begin by doing research. Nonfiction writers study their subjects in great depth. Writers of historical fiction investigate the clothing, technology, customs, events, people, and daily life of the time and place their books are set in. Biographers often choose well-known people, such as authors, politicians, and artists, as their subjects. They examine numerous aspects of their subject’s life, from what his parents were like, to how he did in school, to when he ended his career. Historical writers search for this information in books, articles, old newspapers, letters, diaries, photographs, and other sources. No matter what they’re writing, historical writers must be sure of their facts.

After gathering their research, historical writers compile and organize the information. Only then do they begin to write. While writing, they may need to do further research.

Historical writers usually have degrees in history, English, journalism, or creative writing. Attention to accuracy and detail, creativity, determination, and, of course, excellent writing ability are required. Most historical writers ask publishers and periodicals to print their books or articles. Others work full-time for newspapers; magazines; and state, local, and federal government agencies. Because finding work can be challenging, historical writers need to be persistent and confident. Once hired or published, they can bring history into the lives of many readers.

To learn more:

- Check out the following links to learn more about historical writers:

Historical Fiction Author Roundtable

<http://www.authorsontheweb.com/features/o210-historical-fiction/historical-fiction.asp>

Burke Davis: Fiction and Nonfiction Writer

<http://www.ncwriters.org/services/lhof/inductees/bdavis.htm>

Interview with: Donald Spoto—Biographer/Historian

http://www.writersstore.com/article.php?articles_id=62

- Arrange an interview with a historical author. Come prepared with a list of questions: What do you do on a typical day? What is your favorite part of the job? Why did you want to be a writer? What is your educational background? What projects are you working on?
- Read examples of historical writing. Go to <http://www.springfieldlibrary.org/reading/yahistory.html> and <http://www.fcps.k12.va.us/FranklinMS/research/hisfic.htm> for lists of books.

Try it out:

- Try these on-line activities to see what it's like to write a biography.

<http://www.bham.wednet.edu/bio/biomaker.htm>

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/biograph/>

<http://www.infoplease.com/homework/wsbiography.html>

- Choose a time and place (for example, Wilmington during the Civil War). Research to find out how the citizens of that place and time earned a living, what they ate, what major events happened, who their government leaders were, what students learned in school, how they spent their free time, what technology they had, etc. From that information, write a nonfiction essay on a topic (for example, items the citizens of Wilmington produced that soldiers used in the Civil War). Then, write a short story in the setting you researched but with characters you invent (for instance, the tale of a free African American man who wants to marry a slave).

Interview with Marjorie Hudson

Marjorie Hudson writes poetry, nonfiction, and fiction for children and adults, with a focus on history and natural history. She's been a writer since before she could write. "When I was three years old," Hudson writes, "I made up a five-word song about elephants. My mother wrote it down and saved it and showed it to me a few years ago. The first school writing I was ever very proud of was a poem I wrote in sixth grade about George Washington crossing the Delaware. It had some awful rhymes in it, such as 'a night, I figger/ for gun and trigger/ten more miles to the river!' But I remember loving the sense of fight in the language and how it made the event come alive for me. So I have always written about history—and elephants . . . well, plants and animals!" Her most recent book, a mix of history, poetry, fiction, and interviews, is Searching for Virginia Dare: A Fool's Errand.

Beth Crist: What is your educational background?

Marjorie Hudson: I studied philosophy, art, journalism, and psychology as an undergraduate. Then I became interested in history and literature and learned much on my own and in graduate school. I hold a bachelor of science from American University, a certificate in publishing from George Washington University, and a master of fine arts in creative writing from Warren Wilson College. And I've attended many workshops in writing.

BC: When did you become interested in writing as a career?

MH: I was always interested in writing as a career, ever since I read the books of Albert Peyson Terhune in third grade. He wrote books about living on a farm and raising collies, who always had great adventures. In his stories he talked about himself as a writer, living what seemed like a great life to me—lots of dogs and long walks and adventures. My life is a little bit like that now, though I have mixed-breed dogs who seem to be a lot more trouble than his noble collies.

I was very shy about this interest until college, when I took a careers course, and it said I would be good at publishing and writing. I started taking journalism courses and worked for a number of magazines and publishers as a graphic designer, kind of edging toward writing, until one day I went up to my editor at National Parks magazine and told her I wanted to write a story. She gave me the assignment, and I had my first national byline. It was hard, though. I had no idea how to do it. I worked on it until I got it right. It's a little bit easier now, but writing is still hard work because every time you start a new project you have no idea where you are going. It's all fresh territory. That also makes it exciting.

BC: Have you had any other history-related jobs?

MH: When I worked at National Parks magazine, I wrote and edited articles about historic parks. That became a specialty of mine, combining outdoor

adventure with history. For example, I got to ride a raft down the New River in West Virginia in the dead of winter, then explore some old abandoned mining towns. I also remember going to the Historic American Buildings Survey offices in the old Pension Building in downtown Washington. I loved the architectural drawings of old buildings; they just fascinated me.

What's interesting is that when I was growing up in Washington, I was surrounded by history, national history from the past and in the present—the memorials, the Kennedy assassinations, the downfall of the Shah of Iran. But I really felt a connection with history and it became very personal for me when I moved to North Carolina. History became something that happens to people and families. My research about George Moses Horton and John Lawson made that first come alive for me.

BC: What do you do at work on a typical day?

MH: I get up, make coffee, and turn on the heater in my office. I do some reading for research to get warmed up. I take care of urgent correspondence, then turn to a current writing project and work for about four hours, then break for lunch. If I don't have to be anyplace, I work another two hours. Sometimes in the evening, I reread my work and do revisions. I'm pretty obsessed with a project when I am working on it. I get forgetful about other things, like I'll put pencils in my bun rather than set them down, and I'll lose track of them. Some days at the end of the day I have four or five pencils there. But that's how the writing gets done, by going into a kind of trance where you forget the world around you.

Some days I go to the North Carolina Collection at UNC and read or take out books. That's a big day out for me. Other days I will track down information or people and talk to them about what they know.

BC: What do you like best about your job?

MH: I love the writing and the research both. I love reading and finding out something surprising and new. And I love going into the writer's trance and not coming out for hours. Then going back and sometimes saying, "This is good. I can do this!"

BC: What advice do you have for students who are interested in becoming historical writers?

MH: Notice what you are interested in and pursue it. Read a lot before you write. Find out who the experts are, call them up, ask them questions. Don't be afraid to ask "obvious" or "dumb" questions—often those get you the best answers. That's been one of the hardest things for me, admitting to an expert that I don't know something. But they are the experts, and I'm just learning. If I learn enough, I'll become an expert, too.

Look for the heart of the story, beyond facts and dates to see how the people felt at the time. Think about how you feel about it. Most historical stories have mysteries in them, questions that remain unanswered. Look for the mystery!

Practice writing every way you can. Never be satisfied with a first draft. Go to four or five or eight drafts. I just completed a historical novel I've been working on for ten years. I must have written four or five whole books while finding out the heart of the story.

BC: What has been your favorite project?

MH: My favorite writing project is always the one I'm working on now. I did especially enjoy writing *Searching for Virginia Dare: A Fool's Errand* because I got to use all the different kinds of writing I do in a new way, a kind of collage of writing. It was risky, plus I got to travel around and talk to people and go to different libraries. That was an adventure. There were days, though, when it was really hard. Maybe my favorite writing project is the one I've just finished!

Searching for Virginia Dare: A Fool's Errand will be released in paperback on April 15, 2003. Teachers and students may order from the publisher, Coastal Carolina Press (toll-free 877-817-9900).

Selected bibliography of works by Marjorie Hudson:

Greenline Parks: Land Conservation Techniques for the Eighties and Beyond, ed. Marjorie R. Corbett, Marjorie Hudson, et al. (National Parks and Conservation Association, 1983).

The Architectural Heritage of Chatham County, ed. Rachel Osborn, Marjorie R. Hudson, et al. (Chatham County Historical Association, 1991).

Searching for Virginia Dare: A Fool's Errand (Coastal Carolina Press, 2002.)

"George Moses Horton: A Triumph of Literacy," *NC Learn newsletter*, October 2001.

"John Lawson and the Warring Nations: A Meditation on Images of Terror," *North Carolina Literary Review*, fall 2002.

"Among the Tuscarora: The Strange and Mysterious Death of John Lawson, Gentleman, Explorer, Writer," *North Carolina Literary Review* 1, no. 1 (summer 1992).

"Invasion of the Zebra Mussels," *North Carolina Wild Notebook* (children's fiction and natural history booklet published by the North Carolina Wildlife Commission), November 1994.

"The Secret Life of Ponds," *North Carolina Wild Notebook*, January 1994.