

CREATING STORY FROM FACT AND FICTION

Judith Black

Writer/Teacher (Lesley University)/Story Teller

33 Prospect Street Marblehead, Massachusetts 01945

(781) 631-4417

jb@storiesalive.com

ABSTRACT: This is a brief hands on outline of how to create original stories from historic data.

INTRODUCTION

Often you will have available an inordinate amount of information, pictures, photos, and artifacts relating to a specific time, person or incident. By tying these materials together through a story you are drawing participants, heart and mind into the world you want them to understand. Story, the human experience, evokes human interest and empathy. If you can provoke these feelings, then the details of a time, place and incident, previously foreign to the listener, are easily assimilated. Story binds the head and heart.

I am going to simply outline here the steps you can following in turning historic data into story. (Please remember, story is a folk, not a fine art. The procedure that works for me will have to be adapted and adjusted for your needs.)

1. RESEARCH

Accumulate all the information you want to share. This will usually involve broad research from many sectors. Information from your Interpretive site will be your first stop. go on to collect information from as many mediums as possible, magazines of the era, photos, grave sights, family trees and Historic Societies can all provide idiosyncratic details of life unavailable in academic tomes. Good museum exhibits will often provide well researched information as well as bibliographies.

By way of example I will build a tale about Irish immigrants as domestic workers in America. Research will reflect this movement and my story samples drawn from this information.

2 CREATING A MAIN CHARACTER

Listeners enter a story via its main character. You want to create a sympathetic personage who will be able to embody many of the details your research has unearthed. Create an outline of the details you want included in her biography, and then play with the creation of finer details including the ideosyncracies that will draw us into her heart and world.

For instance:

At 5'2 1/2" Brigitte's 5 brothers had all called her 'runt' back on the family farm near Belfast, but her employer knew her true worth and called Brigitte "my little Irish powerhouse." The fact that she brought all five brothers over on the money she'd earned by the sweat of her brow, proved her employers contention.

or

Maggie worked not less than 14 hours a day, her hair almost never dry from sweat or out of her eyes, but on the Sabbath, in her shirt waste and wide brimmed, plumed hat, she stepped as high as any other American girl.

You can illuminate both the time and the person through careful description. We don't care what happens to someone unless we care about them. With all the information available to you, create a biography/history for your character.

3. OPENING

Draw us into your characters world with the details that will both illuminate their personality and share the facts you want people to know.

For Instance:

The ocean liner that brought our Brigitte to Boston offered many different tickets. First class passengers slept in comfortable, private births, ate at linen lined tables, and walked upon a windless deck at the ships promenade. Brigitte traveled in steerage. With nothing but the food they brought along to comfort them, disease was rampant, and spread easily among the families huddled on the spare lower deck. Brigitte, was not about to be failed by illness, and she spent much of her time on the ship's aft, facing the harsh winds, but out of sicknesses way.

Use everything around you to paint a full rich picture of your heroine's world, and how she expressed herself in it.

4. CONFLICT

Few stories are engaging without conflict. Once you have used what is available to you to draw her world, now you must consider what problems she might have. You can choose an historic event, personal revelation, social pressure, romance, any sharp external pressure to draw us more deeply into her world.

For Instance:

Brigitte was all decked out to go to St. Peters and early Mass when she saw the smoke. "Ach, it's a shame, somethin' is burnin" and continuing to walk she saw that it was her own beloved church. And not bad enough that Christ's house had been damaged, people stood around and threw rotten fruits at the Irish who were still pouring towards it and shouting at them "Papists" "Go Home!" The church, outside of work had been her only home in this strange place

called America, and now it lie in cinders.

5. RESOLUTION

You can draw people into the real conflicts that your heroines and hundreds of thousands like her were forced to deal with. How did your particular heroine react to the problems she ran into? Her very personal response and resolution is the stuff that good stories are made of. The fact that her very human reaction, her unique way of coping with a problem, is grounded in the time, place, social mores, politics, and economics that you want people to know about, ensures a wonderful result which is historic fiction.

For Instance:

As the crowd of proud Americans turned toward Brigitte, rocks still in their hands, Patrick came flying to her side. A tall and ambitious 7th son, he'd arrived on American shores not long after Brigitte. He swept his arm around her and yelled over the chaos "Come with me, I'll keep you safe." Brigitte smiled up at him sweetly, but at the same time gave a quick twist and pull, releasing her arm from his grasp. "I'm thankful for the thought" she said pulling a few rocks from her pocket "but I can care for myself," and hitting one would be attacker smack in the forehead, she lifted her skirt slightly and ran faster than Patrick than could think.

Much of my work was inspired by the following information. I include to demonstrate how story is drawn from fact.

FACTS ABOUT IRISH IMMIGRATION AND NE LIFE IN AMERICA

from Erin's Daughters in America by Hasia R. Diner

- Male and Female cultures were quite separate/Rigid sexual segregation much enforced by the church
- As agriculture failed, and only one son inherited, there was little for the remaining children of a family
- Inheritance did not come until parents were failing
- Women had always maintained a separate economic base, dealing with poultry and country crafts
- Marriage was an opening of the door to endless poverty
- Very strong sibling relations
- More than 1/2 Irish immigrants were single women
- Flocked to cities
 - Wanted nothing more to do with 'rural life'
 - Lacked extended family for rural or urban investment
 - Came with no skills
 - Came with little or no money
 - Clung to their Catholicism
- Stayed Single

Few decent work opportunities for Irish men

Man's work often resulted in impoverished widowhood

Irish men had a reputation for physical abuse (according to American social workers)

Result of desperation-jailings and drunkenness

Marriage changed your entire economic status

16.9% of all Irish households in Philadelphia, 1870 were female headed

Work and Wages

Irish women were famous for saving their pennies and bringing over siblings and investing in property.

Domestic work was a good match

- no families

- no relationships

- no property

- arriving with nothing, domestic work provided home and hearth

- no competition (most women considered the work of a 'servant' lower than they cared to descend