

DUE DILIGENCE: RESEARCH FOR ANY GENRE, ANY ERA, AND WHY IT MATTERS

Presented by:

C J Bahr

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Getting To Know The Author:

First published in Marion Zimmer Bradley's "Sword & Sorceress" anthology, CJ was bitten by the writer's bug and hasn't stopped since. Her award winning first novel, "Walking Through Fire", a Scottish ghost romance, is published by The Wild Rose Press. She is currently working on the third book in The Fire Chronicles series, as well as, a new Urban Fantasy starring a kick-ass Time Enforcer.

When her pen isn't scribing, you can find her busily cutting and tracking music for film and television. With over twenty years of music editing experience, her credits range from "Northern Exposure" and "The Muppets Christmas Carol," to "The Kill Point" and "The Middle."

Why Research Is Important (and not just for historical/period pieces):

Research gives accuracy and authenticity in settings to make them believable and bring your stories alive.

Good Example: "Forged In Fire" (my second book in my Fire Chronicles series) deals with time travel. Weather played a huge part in the atmosphere of the story. There was lots of snow, sleet and miserable cold weather. It was set in the late 1700's outside of York, England. Realizing I had no idea if such weather was possible I looked it up in an Almanac for that time. I checked out the weather for January 1795 in York and happily found out it was the coldest weather they ever had experienced to date. I caught a lucky break. I received an email from a reader of historical romances who had actually looked up the same fact and congratulated me on getting it right.

Good Example: "Playing With Fire" (book 3, WIP) is set in present day New Orleans. Though I don't have to dive deep into period research, I still wanted/needed to get details right. My hero detective is called to a murder scene around five in the morning. His partner brings him coffee.

I researched what coffee shops were open 24 hours and came across one that is actually on the way to my murder scene. It was a kind of a fun small detail to bring the story to life — especially if one of your readers is familiar with the area.

Bad Example: A favorite author of mine (who shall remain nameless), who I have read everything she has written and will continue to do so, wrote a contemporary urban fantasy series where one of the books was set in Burbank, California. I've lived there for over twenty-five years, and thought, "oh, this will be fun", and for the most part it was. I don't mind she made up a fictional television/movie studio, but what did bother me was when our heroine made it from Burbank to Santa Monica in ten minutes. Any So Cal reader would know this was ridiculous and impossible. All it would have taken was a few minutes to "Google" map the direction and know it was wrong. Kind of like the movie "Speed", the freeways the bus connected too were way wrong and it will pull the reader/viewer from the story if they know the locale.

We're not going to please everyone, some people won't agree with your research, but we should take responsibility to make it as accurate as possible.

Ultimately, as author, Audrey Abbott, points out: "You select details that will anchor the place and time and help to enrich your story and flesh out your characters. You are not going to spend endless paragraphs describing Anne's garden in Surrey, but a mention of sprigs of rosemary (signifies remembrance) that she carries within her deceased mother's prayer book as she reluctantly walks down the aisle at her first wedding conveys a great deal about Anne's emotions at the moment."

My purpose today is to help your research skills by sharing tips and tricks of the trade. I'd like to shout out to all the wonderful authors who reached out for many of today's tips (like Audrey Abbott above, I've given credit to where it is much deserved with the information I've chosen to use), thank you all so much!

First Caveat: As author, Laurie Alice Eakes, points out: "Don't let research get in the way of words on the page. Make a note to yourself to ensure correctness of fact or figure or geographical detail, and then keep writing. Later, when you're not in the middle of producing words and keeping the flow going, you can fill in those blanks."

Research Tip — GOOGLE:

Google search engine is a great place to start, possibly leading to some of the other tips I'll be mentioning later. But, you really should verify with other forms of sources. Just because you found it on the Internet doesn't mean it's true or accurate.

As author, Maria Powers, states: "This is especially true for Historical. She's always amazed how many authors justify and defend their use of tropes because 'it's always been done this way in Regencies/Westerns/Vikings' etc. It's our jobs as authors to dig deeper and check our

assumptions and biases. We should not be writing simply to uphold the status quo.” She also suggests that means rethinking gender roles, etc...for contemporary novels.

You can optimize your Google search by using different keywords and phrases to get what you want — especially using Boolean search terms.

BOOLEAN — search terms:

- The terms must be in all CAPS. Google will ignore the word if it is in lower case.
- **OR** — Searches for multiple words. The search results may have one or more of the words searched, but do not need to include all words. The search term OR broadens your search, and is usually used to search similar words. Such as (PR OR Public Relations)
- **AND** — Searches for multiple words that must all be included in the websites results. AND usually joins terms that are different (not similar like OR). Such as (Bars AND New Orleans).
- **NOT** or **Minus Sign (-)** — Search will return pages that do not include these terms. For example, NOT London should exclude London in say a search for Regency Era information if you wanted to find out what was going on outside the haute ton in England. Such as (Regency NOT London).
- **Quotation Marks (“ ”)** — Put quotation marks around an exact phrase you want to search, such as “umbrella drinks” so that the terms are not separated during the search. If you didn’t bind them in quotes you’d get possible results for umbrellas for the rain, and drinks with no umbrellas.
- **Parentheses ()** — Parentheses are often required to group search terms together. For instance: (Angels OR Archangels OR Guardian Angels) AND (Heaven OR Hell OR Earth).

Author, Daphne Walter, had a great tip (if possible) to not limit the Google search to English only. Some of her best results came in Dutch and Old French. Learn how to use Google Translate or Babelfish. The online site LEO is best for German translations but only does one word at a time though that might have changed since she last used it.

Author, Kathleen Buckley, suggested if you are having difficulty finding something useful when you Google (18th century London coaching inn, for example), try using your search term in Google Images instead. Images will come up you can click on and lead to possibly informative websites.

Just like me, author, Rhoda Novak, Google’s restaurants, City Chamber of Commerce and Universities for current and historical facts. On University websites sometimes you can find newspapers, alumni, historic and new photos and maps.

Last but by no means last, don't forget Google Earth (especially the 'PRO' version — Google Earth Pro). As author, Elizabeth Langston, reminded me: "It's a 'glorious' website to visualize how a location looks.

Research Tip — Libraries:

Libraries are probably the next most popular after Google, sometimes even before, as many authors agreed. As mentioned before, having the Internet is amazing, but not everything you read there can be true. And since almost anyone can get their hands on a library card you can access your library's online databases containing photographs, maps, all kinds of articles on any subject at your fingertips, day or night. Or walk into a local branch; this is a true research tool to use.

- Children's Books

This has come up with several authors.

Author, Patricia Bond: "Hit your library especially the children's section. For both contemporary and historical — the children's books boil the info down to quick and easy understanding without wading through tons of academic text. Once you have a feel for the time/place you can research specific times more in depth as needed. Look for story settings for kids — illustrated books are great for this, for both genres as well as how people dress in their time/locale.

Author, Bob Richard, goes with Jeopardy! Winner, James Holzhauer's approach using children's books especially when it comes to a subject he wasn't interested in and couldn't get into with adult reference titles. For certain subjects, there were probably multiple children's books available.

- Librarians

Form a relationship — ask about the topic you are researching and inquire if there are any tools/databases the library subscribes to that the general public might not be aware of.

Librarians can point you to research materials, books, databases and nonfiction DVD's. They have access to books that aren't in circulation and can let you view them in the library.

Research Tip — Go To The Source:

Almost every author, including myself loves to "go to the source", find an expert or specialist, or travel there if you can.

Find and read blogs by people who've experienced things you're writing about. In author, Jacqueline Diamond's mystery series, she writes about a schizophrenic doctor who's a friend of the hero's. She was amazed to find blogs by and about schizophrenic, high-functioning doctors. She also has a friend who is a doctor and forensics expert who's willing to answer very specific questions and several of her beta readers are nurses.

Find and cultivate acquaintances that are willing to help you. I wanted personal information on New Orleans for my current WIP. My friend had a friend who lives there and introduce us to each other. She gave invaluable first hand knowledge. She also connected me to an ex-NOPD detective who had wonderful insider information when I wanted to know more about the local police. Plus, I had another friend who went on vacation there recently, and I ask to her to specifically check out a few locations I use in my book that fit her itinerary. She recorded hysterical on location video complete with narration — not only was it entertaining, but filled with her personal take while having live visuals.

Under this heading — if you're researching locations, use travel feedback from people who have been there. Author, Ruby Hill, recommends homemade videos whenever possible because they will remark on things a travel brochure doesn't and which others might take for granted. Search for travel blogs, especially amateur ones.

Another way to gather info from acquaintances are the writers' boards. Post a question, and I swear someone will have the info or knows someone who does and hooks you up. It's how I got most of this information for my presentation today.

Talk to anyone you can find who might know something. Author, Patricia Bond, points out your "elderly neighbor who lived through WWII and what it was like to be on the homefront while her mate was fighting. Your children's teachers — there's a reason the history teacher is teaching history. Whether your hero spies for Richard III or Dwight Eisenhower, the history teacher can give you a feel for the politics of the time and could make your story more real — and maybe lead you to that plot point that makes all the difference."

Talking directly to your "expert" can get so much more detail you can sift into your story. Again, author, Patricia Bond has a great example of a different slant: "like finding out some Yankee soldiers wore green uniforms instead of blue. They were the Pennsylvania Sharpshooters unit who spent their time sitting in trees working as snipers — so don't give them shiny brass buttons!"

Author, Sally Brandle, joined multiple Facebook groups for her, "Love Thrives In Emma Springs" series. She asked for stories, quirks and distinctive traits for miniature horses and mules and was amazed by the responses. A member of the local mule-loving group even invited her to meet her mules and speak at a Back Country Horseman meeting where she sold books and garnered new readers.

Author, Jeannie Lin, likes to build up a network of authors who write in her similar genre. She finds research is a hustle and a game of six degrees of separation — who can you find to get your

hands on that research book you MUST have. It's all about networking — your fellow genre authors usually are more than happy to share research.

MOST IMPORTANT: be sure to give recognition to your expert in your acknowledgments. They were gracious with both their time and knowledge.

Research Tip — MISC:

In no particular order...

- Old Telephone Directories — Author, Fleeta Cunningham, finds lots of period details for her vintage books. They give her location and service information for all kinds of local businesses and professional offices. She loves the classified and social pages of small town newspaper for the appropriate years for descriptions of the special events central to small town life.
- Visit in person wherever you are setting your story. New Orleans, here I come! Nothing gives your story more authenticity than when the author can relate the setting clearly. As author, Patricia Bond says, “not just what it looks like, but how it smells, how the wind blows, what it FEELS like.” Visit historical sites like battlegrounds, restored towns, etc. Ms. Bond lucked out on a trip to Gettysburg and stumbled on an re-enactment weekend and got a true sense of what happened and was able to speak to some of the re-enactors themselves — a bunch of the info ended up in her book, “Building A Christmas.” She also recommends your local Historical Society or check out if there is one where you're visiting. Museums that are quiet usually have staff that is excited to talk to anyone who is interested. Ms. Bond was able to get access to the restricted area and was able to actually touch a vintage dress made in 1825 (with gloves on obviously).
- More than one author recommended for contemporary settings even exotic ones to check out your local library's travel section, AAA (automobile club) for maps, or even Pintrest boards. Again, don't forget about Google Earth, either.
- Author, Roz Lee, swears by www.ancestry.com when writing her 20th Century historical, “Suspended Game”. Ancestry had every page of every Sears & Roebuck catalog printed on their website. “If you need to see what people were wearing, buying and had in their homes from the late 1800's until the 1990's, this is a great resource. Need to know what prices were like in say, 1936? No problem. The 1936 catalog is over 900 pages. Ancestry can be a wealth of information in regards to selecting names appropriate for the time period (any time period) as well as getting a grip on wages and property values.
- Author, Daphne Walter, recommends British History Online, which has a plethora of useful historical documents.

- Author, Elizabeth Langston, came up with several great research tips.
 - Wikipedia — use as a launching place because it’s “not authoritative by itself, but many of the articles have other resources linked that are.”
 - YouTube — there is a clip for everything. “Dance, cooking, building a stacked stone wall. If you want to learn, YouTube has it.”
 - Ask a question on Q&A site like Quora. “You’ll have to cross-check the answer, since the responders are self-proclaimed experts, but they could be pointing you in a great direction. The real experts include links to their sources.”
 - One I never thought of but which is awesome! “Drunk History!” “The television series is funny, the reenactments are amazing and the history is solid.”
- If your internal editor asks, “did they say, ‘Shazzam!’ in the 1860’s, or if a certain slang term or swear word was in use, author, Kathleen Buckley, recommends the place to check this and other words out is: The Online Etymology Dictionary (www.etymonline.com)

In Closing:

Thank you so much for inviting me to speak today at the Santa Clarita Romance Writers’ meeting. Hopefully you have learned something new or remembered something you might have forgotten. It was a pleasure to meet you all. I look forward to all your awesome novels and stories to come!

C J Bahr
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