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You've Got To Fake It

By Donald Hamilton

In Western, or any other kind of historical writing, you are trying to create a picture-puzzle after most of the pieces have been lost. You pretend to know everything about a period about which no one can know everything, because he didn't live it.

(First of two installments)

The first qualification for anyone who wants to write good Westerns—just as for any other kind of stories—is that he's got to like to read them.



To write a good story of any kind you've got to respect it and you've got to believe in it—which means, essentially, that the stuff you write has got to be the stuff you like to read. This is particularly true of Westerns, which are largely based on myth and legend. If you don't believe in the Western

myth, if you think the frontier legends are a lot of corn, you're not going to be able to write a convincing story about them.

To take a personal example: I always get a big kick out of the familiar scene of two men with guns marching down a dusty street to kill each other. Hollywood calls it the 'walkdown'; and various intellectual writers have proved that it never happened and that if it did happen it was immoral, illegal, and just plain ridiculous.

Nevertheless, it sends me. I like to read it, I like to see it in the movies, and I like to write it. And I've sold it as a book, as a magazine story, and as a movie—and I think the reason is that when I write it I believe in it. Now, my wife is not a writer, but even if she was she could never make that particular scene convincing for the simple reason that it always makes her laugh.

The Western comes under the category of historical fiction, and a historical novel is a completely different job from a modern novel. To put it bluntly, a modern story—whether a mystery or a so-called serious novel—can be written truthfully out of the writer's own experience. Historical fiction is on the contrary always faked.

Now, before the historical novelists get wind of this heresy and come marching in to tar and feather me, let me explain what I'm driving at. When I say that a modern story can be written

out of a writer's own experience, I don't mean that I've actually slaughtered as many people as have died in my various mysteries. I hesitate to confess it, but I actually haven't killed anybody at all. Nevertheless, these stories were written about times and places that I have known. I won't say they were written about people I have known; but at least all the characters lived and moved in a social, political, and economic climate with which I'm personally familiar. When I wrote about them, I knew what they would eat and drink and wear, because I was eating, drinking, and wearing the same things. I even knew more or less what they would be thinking; because I was dealing with twentieth-century people like myself.

But when I move my story back a hundred years in time, I immediately lose that personal contact with my characters. I don't know what they had for breakfast; I don't know what they think about sex. Take a simple scene. Our hero is getting up in the morning. He's going to see his girl. He slips his arms into the sleeves of his best shirt—whoops, we're wrong. Nineteenth century shirts didn't open up like a coat; you had to pull them on over your head. Well, we get our hero disentangled from his shirt. He next selects a well-creased pair of pants from his wardrobe—hold it! Only a cheapskate wore creased pants back in those days. A crease meant that the pants were ready-made and had been stacked flat on the dealer's shelf. A gentleman, of course, wore tailor-made clothes; and if you couldn't afford to patronize a tailor, you at least took your ready-mades home and ironed out that tell-tale crease so that your pants would have the proper baggy well-groomed look.

You see what I mean? I've already made two bad slips and I haven't even got the poor guy dressed yet. How am I going to get him over to his girl friend and into her arms? I mean, it's a hopeless situation—if I write with the same detailed technique I would use for a modern story.

The answer is, I have to fake a lot of knowledge I don't have by careful use of the little knowledge I do have. And where I don't have the knowldege, I just

fudge around it. If I don't know what clothes they wore I simply say they got dressed. If I don't know what they were apt to eat, I simply say they had supper.

I call this kind of writing faking because when I do it I'm pretending to know everything about a period about which nobody today can know everything, because they didn't live in it. To my mind, it's a different class of writing entirely from what is involved in a modern story. In Western or any other kind of historical writing you're trying to recreate a picture-puzzle after most of the pieces have got lost.

The stuff we need, as writers, is spread very thin through a lot of libraries. The customs and habits, the thoughts and conventions and speech mannerisms of the era are almost lost.

Of course, we can't dispense with the history altogether. It's necessary to locate a work of fiction with some reference to the historical framework of the period.

(To Be Continued Next Month)

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Westerns Eternal, Says Frank Gruber

An Associated Press story out of Hollywood quotes Frank Gruber as follows:

"The classic 'Odyssey' of Homer embodies the same basic elements that go into the construction of a modern drama of the Old West—love and hate, deception and intrigue, man pitting his skills and resources against nature and his enemies—all elements of high adventure."

Gruber adds the only essential difference between the modern Western story and older pre-Western adventure yarns is the setting—"It makes little difference whether it's Gary Cooper walking down the Western street with his hand over his holster or a medieval knight charging on his stallion with mace in hand. The same elements are there.

"The Westerns will always be with us—as long as love of adventure remains."

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"One thing about Texans I'll vouch for, and that's: their hearts are as big as their brags and their hats."—(Barker)