

ERIC WASSERMAN:

## *Incorporating research into a fictional narrative*

In 2002 I was working on a short story that required a bit of research concerning bone-marrow transplants, something I knew nothing about. Author Frederick Reiken made me realize where I had gone wrong. I had been so convinced that I had to stack the story with details to solidify my credibility that I had lost focus of the characters and their emotional struggles. I've never forgotten Reiken's advice: If your story requires research, you only need selective facts to establish believability. I removed eighty percent of the researched details and my story started coming together.



Photo credit: Jeanette Polso

The most common trap writers who incorporate research into their narrative can fall into is that their story is so laden with factual information that a loss of content control takes place and it becomes a story of ideas instead of people expressing those ideas through experience. I know this all too well because I just completed my first novel, and it required a vast amount of research.

Fiction writers can easily write themselves into a corner. For the writer of the researched story it almost inevitably happens when the details cease to be attached to characters, particularly when writing historical fiction, which is what I have been engaged in for a number of years. My manuscript reached over 1,000 pages at one point. Of the 550 pages I cut, the majority were sections where I had fallen in love with my research. I had to accept that while I am fascinated by every aspect of the early days of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), Old Hollywood, and late 1940s anti-Semitism in Los Angeles, readers care more about stories about people *affected* by history than about untethered historical facts.

Here are two ways to look at research incorporated into fiction:

Go to Chapter 37 of Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code* (if you have the trade paperback skip the first part and start reading on page 158). While Brown is a wonderful storyteller, he has very little control over his content because he is stacking his

research in a way that provides no movement for his characters and the reader is essentially provided an academic lesson on the Knights Templar with two characters, Langdon and Sophie, simply standing around chatting. Brown's story stops cold because the researched components are not attached to his characters—Langdon and Sophie disappear from the narrative.

Contrast this with Glen David Gold's wonderful debut novel, *Carter Beats the Devil*. Read pages 146–147 (hardcover edition) and you will see two characters, Carter and Annabelle, in incremental but constant motion. They are doing something quite simple—walking up San Francisco's Telegraph Hill in the 1920s. All of the researched details placing these characters in the past reflect on who they are and what they are talking about—the narrative always hinges on Carter and Annabelle.

In draft after draft of my own novel I had mistakenly followed Brown's model. Once I eliminated those moments, I trusted myself more to see that with fewer details I could say far more than I could by including all of the historical facts that informed the writing.

**When fiction that incorporates research becomes a vehicle for facts, the magic begins to dissipate and readers are no longer invited to release themselves to an imagined world beyond their own. However, when research allows the writer to enliven characters' lives, that imagined world presents limitless possibilities. ■**