

Historical Fiction:

The Silent Soldier

“Historical fiction doesn’t sell.”

This is a direct quotation from several of the early rejection letters I received for my debut novel, *Between Shades of Gray*—the story of a 15-year-old Lithuanian girl deported to Siberia under Stalin’s regime. The letters were kind and apologetic, and they stated that, amidst a competitive market, it helped if historical titles contained a twist or device. The rejections explained that “traditional historical,” written in previous decades, had saturated the genre and addressed most topics. As I tried to peddle Advanced Reading Copies (ARCs) at my first conference, a librarian sighed and said, “Historical. It’s such a tough sell. But I hope you stick with it.”

Several years later, I’m still scratching my head. Historical fiction sells worldwide and has one of the broadest audiences, from preteen to elderly readers. It is equal parts entertainment and instrument. It provides a telescope to peer not only into the past but also into the timeless qualities of the human spirit. Reader becomes detective, examining hidden details and charting a path to a better future. History is full of thrilling secrets and dark doorways. We find hope, horror, comedy, tragedy, shocking plots, beautiful heroes, and evil incarnate. But despite all of its merits, historical fiction retains the reputation of being difficult to sell. Is that simply an old label we can’t seem to scratch off, or is it a branded fact? Is this stigma an American construct only?

Historical novels open borders, ideas, voices, and possibilities. But what role do national optics play in story interpretation and value assessment? Instead of perpetuating the idea that “Historical fiction doesn’t

sell,” what if we reframe to examine, “How can we best sell historical fiction, and what is its global value?” Do we really need a device to attract readers, or are universal themes, historical truths, and personal history the rivers to the sea?

The Cultural Lens

For several years, I’ve been traveling worldwide to meet with readers, teachers, librarians, and booksellers. I quickly realized that, although I can describe the time period or historic basis for my novels, it’s difficult to distill a theme for readers in different countries because members of each location read through a different lens.

In the United States, the conversations about both *Between Shades of Gray* (2011) and *Out of the Easy* (2013) are often framed through a lens of courage and survival. When I visited France, however, students there told me that *Between Shades of Gray* is a story of identity, posing the question: How much can be taken away from human beings before we lose our sense of self? Further, they felt that *Out of the Easy* is a story of feminism in historical context. The Parisian readers then discussed how themes of identity and women’s roles have been drivers in the French culture for generations. In Poland, *Out of the Easy* is titled *Choices* and is presented as a story of decisions and the dynamics that affect choice. During WWII, the fate of Poland was determined by choices—some made by others, not the Poles themselves. In Spain, some readers say my books are about freedom. In Germany, they are about historical responsibility, and in Japan, compassion.

I've learned that each country, each reader, filters and absorbs history based on family narrative as well as national narrative. When the readers in Spain speak of freedom, they connect it to the Spanish Civil War.

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When German readers speak of historical responsibility, they compare it to their own Holocaust accountability. In Thailand, young girls read *Out of the Easy* and see a disadvantaged girl who escaped a brothel, not feminism in historical context. The text is the same, the history the same, but the themes and learning outcomes are very different. What quickly becomes most relevant is the

reader's interpretation, not the author's explanation.

To some extent, the scholastic outcomes in each locale are guided by curriculum. The German students spend years studying the Holocaust. A 15-year-old German student told me quite grimly, "I am responsible for what happened. All of us in this class must assume responsibility." When I visited schools in Japan, I realized that although students study the crimes of Hitler and Stalin, some Japanese students were unaware of Japanese acts of brutality during WWII. When I consulted a colleague in Tokyo, he explained that perhaps the goal is to teach empathy in the classroom without the burden of guilt. Naturally, these different study methods result in different learning outcomes, associations, and interpretations.

Just as each country approaches historical novels differently, their resources, reading guides, and academic supplements are also very different. In Japan, a teacher created an exam for *Between Shades of Gray* with over 100 questions. Some of the questions were difficult for *me* to answer, but they very clearly illuminated the focus and goals within the Japanese classroom.

Following a successful all-school read program, teachers from Montgomery Bell Academy and Harpeth Hall School in Nashville traveled to Lithuania. They have since partnered with a Lithuanian school for a joint reading experience and cultural exchange based around the novel. If analyzed in depth, the American

lens differs in many ways from the Lithuanian lens, illustrating perceptions of secure democracy versus fragile freedom. But the teachers involved in the cultural exchange assure me that, despite the ethnic differences, the students on both ends have gravitated most to the universal themes of hope, love, and courage. The history became memorable because the readers in both countries could feel and imagine themselves within it.

Each spring, I Skype with English classes at St. Anne's Diocesan College in Hilton, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Students read *Between Shades of Gray*, study the Soviet occupation of the Baltics, and then compare and contrast through a lens of Apartheid. In our last visit, the girls created a video message. They sang a song cherished by freedom fighters during Apartheid that is now part of their national anthem. That day they dedicated the song to Lithuania. They sang with purpose and emotion. I cried. They cried. Through historical fiction, two very different cultures were suddenly joined together in empathy—the powerful acknowledgment, "I feel for you. You are not alone."

United in Story

Global Classroom

By allowing individual readers, classrooms, and countries to interpret historical events and characters through their own lens, both history and historical literature take on deeper meaning and purpose, honoring those who gave their lives in pursuit of truth and freedom. Historical fiction and its universal themes allow us to connect on an emotional level. It is those emotional strands that are the strongest and most memorable.

After a presentation at European Parliament, a discussion of WWII arose amongst several students in the audience. Each student contributed and debated, and the discourse was overwhelmingly positive. One of the Parliament members pointed out that the students speaking were from countries who stood on opposite sides during the war, yet now, through a book discussion, they were joined in critical thinking and positive progress. We also noted that, with decades as a buffer, what lingered foremost amidst the history were the stories of love and the incredible power of the human spirit. It was a moving reminder—history

divided us, but through books, we can be united in story, study, and remembrance.

Through these cultural lenses, I've learned we are a global reading community, but most important, a global human community striving to learn from the past.

It's Always Personal

When discussing history with readers, the conversation inevitably shifts to individual and personal stories. I've discovered that reading historical novels creates a hunger to uncover personal family history. Readers ask: *How would I have endured this history? What is my family story? Is my family history lost, or is it just hidden?* Discussing underrepresented history with students, teachers, and librarians has emphasized the role that personal history plays in forming our identities.

In his article, "The Stories That Bind Us," writer Bruce Feiler (2013) discusses how knowledge of family history and developing a family narrative are essential for both individuality and strong group dynamic. Psychologists reported that children and teens who know a lot about their family history fare better when facing challenges. Further studies revealed that the more children know about their families' story and legacy (the good, the bad, and even the ugly), the more control they feel over their lives and the stronger their self-esteem. Research suggests firmly that connecting with history and family stories creates a stronger intergenerational self.

I've experienced this firsthand at book events. The discussion begins with very specific events, locations, and dates related to my historical novels. As the conversation progresses, it becomes more elastic, with participants relating the specific ideas to their own history or family members.

These migratory discussions of world history into personal history have brought some of my most rewarding experiences. As someone explains how his or her own personal history aligns with an element in the novel, the revelation in the room is palpable. I can practically hear the filaments pop in the mental light bulbs.

"Your mother is originally from Bulgaria? I didn't know that."

"My grandmother refused to speak of her WWII experience and would never go near the water. We

could never connect with her because we didn't know what happened."

I let the participants talk and exchange personal history, paying close attention to the elderly readers when they question or contradict aspects of my writing. My older audience has lived through the periods I write about. They are the survivors, the true witnesses, and when they speak, I am captivated. So are the teen readers. They crave honesty. Through multigenerational discussions, readers gain a better understanding of history, each other, their community, and their collective story.

How often do we misjudge others because we aren't familiar with their backgrounds and ancestries? People who know my father understand that fireworks on the Fourth of July trigger difficult memories of the bombings in Europe. Those who don't know his history might think he is unpatriotic. After all, who doesn't love the Fourth of July and fireworks?

As Feiler points out in his article, knowledge of personal history helps individuals, classrooms, companies, and countries function better. I believe that to be true. I also believe that, when a reader identifies with a character in a book, the world is suddenly less lonely. We gravitate toward those who share or relate to our personal narratives. Shared experience is a powerful connector and triggers the realization that we are not alone in the stories that are our lives.

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Finding the Truth in Fiction

Historical novels provide a compelling introduction to underrepresented time periods and events. Through characters and story, historical statistics become human, and we know that stories of human experience resonate deeper than numbers. But is there a danger of a fictional account becoming the definitive frame through which a particular historical event is remembered? What determines how a country's history and legacy are preserved and recalled? Does fiction play a role in that? Some teachers and librarians have

expressed concern that students' comprehension of history is through fictional storylines and not facts.

Historical novelists strive for accuracy. Many historical writers spend years researching before writing a single word. We work with historians, consult academics and experts, and lose sleep over the smallest detail. And still, despite all efforts, there will be some small measure of inaccuracy. My greatest hope is always that a curious student will be the one to discover the error. In some cases, that has happened.

After much touring and many book events, I'm led to believe that the stigma associated with historical fiction is not actually attached to the literary genre itself. The stigma might originate with the academic "H' word."

History.

For many young people, the initial exposure to secrets and stories of the past is through their early history classes. At that point, "the 'H' word" is assigned a label in their minds. Depending on their experiences and performances in history class, the word "history" is either exciting and revelatory or difficult and boring. If someone recommended a book about mathematical fiction, I might hesitate and think, *Uh oh, math is a difficult mountain for me to climb*. I've discovered that readers worldwide associate historical fiction, and evaluate their attraction to it, based on their academic experience with history as a subject in general.

In truth, historical fiction is comprised of all of the genres together. History is mystery, romance, thriller, poetry, biography, and sometimes even fantasy. A good historical novel is a door. Once we've read the book, we've opened a door to step through, to seek and explore. Historical novels are most meaningful when we identify the truths woven within. The historical genre becomes a treasure hunt of fact over fiction, and teenagers, often with the help of teachers and librarians, are discriminating detectives.

Keeper of the Key

Young readers demand the truth. I'm elated when a reader says, "But this is fiction. Exactly how much of this is true? What's the real story?" They not only want the truth, they beg for the sad and gory details. "What was the absolute worst story you heard when

researching? Don't sugarcoat it. Tell us everything." They ask to see photographs of the witnesses and survivors. They often tell me that they conducted their own research online and discussed it with their parents. "My dad told me stories about our relatives. It was cool. He said I should read a book by a guy named Solzhenitsyn."

If historical fiction is a door, teachers and librarians hold the key. They are the bridge between "the 'H' word" and the journey to the past. Readers don't bound into the library or classroom begging for a novel about totalitarianism. Young readers don't just "happen" to ask for Solzhenitsyn. These books are recommended by teachers, librarians, reading specialists, and parents who know the students and their personal histories, and they understand the lenses through which those students view the world.

Historical fiction *does* sell. But the truth is, teachers and librarians are the ones who sell it. Worldwide. And they sell it better than anyone. They take time to create new lesson plans around the material, they collaborate with other departments, they spend time and personal resources on classroom sets and supplemental materials. They contact the publishers and authors about ideas, school visits, and Skype visits. They raise their swords and shields to defend historical truth and then pass the blade to each student to slay the ghosts of the past and make way for a more just future.

Historical fiction vends hope, courage, and empathy. It teaches, it endures, and it gives voice to the forgotten, the overlooked, and the underrepresented. It joins readers from all parts of the world together in common purpose to share, learn, and defend humanity. And that makes me think of the librarian's words so many years ago: "Historical. It's such a tough sell. But I hope you stick with it."

We are a global learning community reading through different lenses, comprised of interwoven personal histories, watered and tended by teachers and librarians. I'm on a mission to meet with readers in every nation. I want to listen to their interpretations and look through their lenses. History gives me this opportunity. Historical fiction is the quiet soldier of our community defending truth, selling hope, and building dreams of a better tomorrow.

Yes, I will stick with it.

Ruta Sepetys is an internationally acclaimed author of historical fiction whose books have been published in over 45 countries and 33 languages. Her novels, *Between Shades of Gray* and *Out of the Easy*, are both New York Times bestsellers, international bestsellers, and Carnegie Medal nominees. Her books have won or been shortlisted for over 40 book prizes and 20 state reading lists and have been selected for several all-city read programs. Ruta is the first young adult novelist to be invited to address European Parliament and was recently knighted in Lithuania for her contributions to education and culture. In addition to her historical novels, Ruta has contributed essays to NPR's *All Things Considered* and *The Huffington Post*. Ruta was born in Michigan and now lives in Tennessee.

She serves on the Board of Advisors at Belmont University in Nashville and also on the Advisory Board for the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. Ruta's new historical novel, *Salt to the Sea*, will be published in February 2016.

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