

# Fijian Studies

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When no one is left to tell the story,  
would there be no history?

On History:  
Fact,  
Fiction,  
&  
Factions

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Faction:  
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of Published Works

## Fact, Fiction or Faction<sup>1</sup>

Pamela Rushby

I write what I call faction: fact-based historical fiction. Why write history? Because I believe the best, the strangest, the most riveting, heart-breaking, laugh-out-loud stories aren't fiction. They're real. They come from history.

I'm constantly amazed, overwhelmed, when I come across one of these couldn't-possibly-be-true-but-they-actually-are stories. Stories and events that make me go 'Wow!' when I discover them. And make me immediately desperate to put my own characters in the middle of the action and explore what could happen if ...

Just like the blending of the words 'fact' and 'fiction', faction is a mixture of history and story. It can be set in the stone age, or in 1970. Because the story has a basis in fact, it's not entirely fictional. But it's not exactly factual, either. (Teachers love faction, because it's a way to introduce children and young adults to people and events in the past.)

But if you're interested in writing history, where do you find these stories? Well, I find I don't need to go looking for them. I trip over them. They're everywhere. Some of my Wow! moments that have led to published books have been:

- Standing in the middle of a replica of a Neolithic stone circle in Glen Innes, NSW (*Circles of Stone*, HarperCollins, 2003)
- Seeing a photograph of a rat catcher and his dogs – and a pile of dead rats – taken during the 1900 plague epidemic in Australia (*The Ratcatcher's Daughter* published by HarperCollins in 2014)

<sup>1</sup> This article was first published in the December 2013 issue of *Writing Queensland*. This version was published by Queensland Writers Centre in *WQ*, 15 October 2015. <http://www.writingqueensland.com.au/fact-fiction-or-faction/>. It is republished here with the kind permission of the author. *Fijian Studies* does not claim copyright over this article.

- Reading a non-fiction book about the 1,000 Australian women who were in Vietnam during the Vietnam War (*When the Hipchicks Went to War*, Hachette, 2009)
- Seeing a photograph of a hospital ward set up on a merry-go-round in Cairo in 1915 (*Flora's War*, Ford Street Publishing, 2013)
- Hearing an archaeologist explain why you should always, always say the name of an Egyptian mummy out loud (*Say My Name*, Macmillan, 2010)
- Watching people put red roses, today, on the tomb of a heroine of the Black Death in 1600s England (*The Great Plague*, Rigby, 2001).

How could you not want to write about things like these? Once your story's been located comes the very best part. The research. Hanging out in libraries, museums and archives. Surfing the net. Contacting historical societies. Visiting the places where it happened. Maybe interviewing people who were there. Finding out more and more amazing facts that could be, simply must be, included in your book. The difficulty is knowing when to stop, when to call 'Enough!' and start writing.

Then comes combining the facts with the fiction. Weaving imagination through your research. I've written several different kinds of faction, which I've called (with startling originality) Types A, B and C.

In Type A, the setting is historical, but there are no documented historical events or characters involved. All characters and events are fictional, though the background is realistic. This story can be set in extraordinary times, or very ordinary times. (Think, for example, of a story about an everyday girl in Victorian London.) My novel *When the Hipchicks Went to War* is a Type A. The background of the 1960s and the Vietnam War is as authentic as I could make it. But I don't describe any actual incidents, such as the Battle of Long Tan. And there are no authentic historical characters.

In Type B, some events may have actually occurred and some characters may have been real people. They might appear only briefly in the story, and the protagonist may interact with them. (The London girl meets Queen Victoria – or Jack the Ripper.) My novel *Flora's War* is a Type B. The Battle of the Wozzer was an actual event in Cairo in 1915 when Australian soldiers rioted in the streets, and my protagonist, Flora, is involved in it.

In Type C, we're deeper into fiction. Though the story is set in the past, a character from today travels back to the past and interacts with people and events there. (Think girl of today stepping through a time portal and helping the London girl save Queen Victoria from Jack the Ripper.) My novel *Circles of Stone* is a Type C. A girl from today travels

back to the British Celtic Iron Age, through two identical stone circles: one at Glen Innes in New South Wales and the other, the Ring of Brodgar, in the Orkneys in Scotland.

Faction is becoming a popular genre. So how can you make your book stand out from all the rest? One way is to choose a time period that hasn't already been done to death. Because the hundredth anniversary of World War I is coming up, that's a currently popular period. So what about ancient Greece? Carthage? The swinging Sixties? The depression? Your characters could be involved in the destruction of Pompeii; ritual sacrifices in Iron Age bogs; migrating to Australia in the 1950s. Of course, you'll want to choose a period you're passionate about, but be aware that many other books may have been written about it.

Having said that, *Flora's War* is set in 1915. But if you're determined to write about a popular time period (as I was), choosing a different angle could make your book stand out.

You could consider telling your story from the point of view of someone on the losing side, or someone from a minority group. I wanted to tell the story of the civilians in Cairo during the Gallipoli campaign, and how they helped medical staff cope with the enormous numbers of wounded flooding into the unprepared city. I also chose to write about the crisis from a female perspective.

There are four dangers in writing faction. The first is not being able to stop researching! As well, there's a great temptation to use every fascinating fact you've unearthed. Every last one of them. That can result in information overload. Be ruthless. If a fact doesn't move the story on, discard it. The second danger of faction is dialogue. How did people really speak in the period you're writing about? It's not enough to throw in an occasional 'tis, 'twas, or By your leave, sir. Should you try to adhere totally to the language style of the period? Or update it to some extent? Too much authenticity means you can lose readers as they struggle to understand the dialect and idioms. Two books that get it right, I think, are *Forrest Gump* and *Huckleberry Finn*. Lots don't.

On to the third danger of faction: historical accuracy. When did zips come in? Were there rabbits in England in 1200? How were homes lighted in 1800? What gods did people in Iron Age Britain need to placate? How did people in the past see their world? Probably quite differently to us – and the way they saw it can be very non-PC. I read many World War I diaries and letters for my novel *The Horses Didn't Come Home* and Australian soldiers' opinions of Egyptians were very strongly expressed and not at all complimentary. I had to make decisions about how much of that to include.

And lastly, the fourth danger: gender roles. What were women actually allowed to do in your chosen period? What would – realistically – have happened to them if they challenged this? If, for example, I wanted to write about a young woman detective in ancient Athens I'd have problems, because respectable young women would not have been allowed outside their homes unchaperoned.

But enough about dangers. Let's talk about fun. Travel for research for your historical novel can be enormous fun. Travel's not compulsory, but if you can visit the place where your novel is set, it can be tremendously helpful. You gather the atmosphere, absorb the feel of a place. Stand on the Israeli desert, right where the Charge of Beersheba took place. Feel the unsteady rocks under your feet. Look at the dangerous, halfhidden gullies and washouts. Feel the sun scorching your head.

Walk around Saigon, checking out the beautiful old French buildings that still stand there, feeling the sweat slide down your face and trickle down your back. Stand in the middle of a Neolithic stone circle in the far north of Scotland at 10 at night. And watch the sun not set.

And maybe you'll go 'Wow!' too. And be inspired to write some faction.

## Author

**Pamela Rushby** is a Queensland based writer who loves historical fiction. Her recent novel, *Flora's War* (Ford Street Publishing 2013), is about Cairo in 1915 when the wounded from Gallipoli overwhelmed the city. Her latest novel, *The Ratcatcher's Daughter* (HarperCollins, 2014) tells the story of the plague – the Black Death – in Brisbane in 1900. She has written over 200 children's books. [www.pamelarushby.com](http://www.pamelarushby.com)