

# *The Case for Authors' Notes in Historical Fiction*

*Do we like them? What are they good for?  
Most important, when should we read them?  
Cindy Vallar investigates.*

**A**fter finishing Anne Fortier's captivating novel, *Juliet*, I read her Author's Note with eager anticipation. Its inclusion was somewhat surprising given the book's modern-day setting, but this story of family curses, murder, and star-crossed lovers also takes place in medieval Italy. Hence the Author's Note. She discussed the origins of *Romeo and Juliet* and why the actual event originated in Siena, rather than Verona as Shakespeare set it; the liberties she took with the real people of the past who appeared in the story; details of life and traditions in 1340 Siena; her research, and those she thanked for their assistance. These final pages were as interesting to read as her exquisite tales of a fictional Alessandro and Julie and their real-life ancestors, Romeo and Guilietta.

I volunteered to write this article because I included one at the end of my novel, *The Scottish Thistle*, and I always read them. Curious as to how many of the sixty historical novels on my bookshelves actually included one, I counted.<sup>1</sup> Thirty-four included them, although they appeared under a variety of names – Afterword, Historical Notes, To the Reader Note, Preface, or Postscript. “Author’s Note” was the

most prominent, however, and most were inserted at the end of the story. Those that appeared at the start of the novel were usually half a page or less in length, while the ones at the end varied from less than a page to more than ten pages, with three pages being the norm. *The Scottish Thistle's* was five pages long.

I also noticed some authors include notes at both the beginning and the end of their stories. Richard, one such writer, who completed the questionnaire for this article, explained: “I set the historical stage for the upcoming story. I did this after critique groups found the sudden introduction into the action of *The Swords of Faith* confusing. My style involves lots of dramatic action, with a minimum of narrative exposition. I like to burst into a scene, to energize the pace.”

Of the readers who completed the survey, the majority loves reading Authors' Notes. Doreen Jensen prefers them to James Michener's “footnotes that went on for pages . . . I found them interesting, but they got me sidetracked (good thing he could always bring me back).” Readers also have preferences as to what to include.

Suzi: *I want an author to explain . . . which*



*details she took a bit of poetic license with so I don't go away wondering if it was all truth or all fiction.*

Chanta: *I'd like to know what compelled him/her to write the book; any additional topics/books regarding the subject; any other significant events that might have been occurring during the time period the book was written.*

Rhonda Beardsley: *I prefer things relevant to the actual story. Not what-ifs . . . speculations or general comments. Just a factual tidbit if there is one. All of the other stuff would be better placed on a website.*

Marilyn Penner: *If the author bent the historical record a little, I'd appreciate an admission. I'd certainly forgive her if she said why. Richard III's usurpation of his nephew Edward V was controversial enough that many novels about it are plausible . . . [An author should not bend the facts too much; I probably would not read her story to the end if she did.] . . . A glossary of archaic words and phrases used in the book . . . Customs, ideas and beliefs that are strange to us now, but important for the story.*

Many readers do additional research to learn more. Gary Weibert considers doing so "a testament to the author writing a particularly intriguing note/afterward."

Eleyne Presley: *I'm an info-geek, and if the story was THAT good, I want to continue the adventure. Even if the author leaves no notes, if the story intrigues me, I'll do further research.*

Michelle: *I was incredibly taken with David Ebersoff's The 19<sup>th</sup> Wife . . . and for days afterward I looked up facts about the Mormons — their religion, their way of life . . . their attitudes toward polygamy.*

Kathleen McRae: *. . . the books that encouraged me to do additional research are also the books I keep, reread, and recommend. Those are the writers I support, buying every single book they publish . . . even if they never trigger another trip to the nonfiction section.*

Only one respondent believed Authors' Notes rarely added to the story. As to whether anyone had read one on an author's website, Bruce did. It was

"[p]lacked with interesting background information on the period and characters." Marilyn felt "[l]ooking it up on the site is time consuming and breaks the mood . . . Perhaps when I'm brave enough to buy an e-book, it will have internet capability." Blythe wrote, "To do so might be a 'spoiler.' I have, however, posted blog articles . . . about the history surrounding various books."

The greatest degree of variability comes when answering the question, "When do you read the Author's Note?" Some say before, some after. Five always wait until the end. A few consult them while reading. Bruce reads it once he finishes the novel because "I want to experience the novel first as a story." Kilian also reads it afterward, saying, "It's lagniappe. I save it for dessert." Stephanie reads "it in the middle of the novel when I come across something that puzzles me and I want to see if the author has an explanation for it." She prefers, however, to wait until she finishes the novel because she doesn't "like for the experience of a novel to be interrupted by academia." Gary reads it before since "it even helps me decide whether to purchase the novel."

Everyone agrees they respect the author for revealing literary licenses. They only feel betrayed when this information is omitted.

Kathleen: *I respect the author's honesty first (and am more likely to follow her/him to their next book for revealing the truth) and truly do not care if they change events or not. IF they tell me they are doing so . . . If anything, the Author's Note . . . has increased my loyalty to — or envy of — the author because I marveled at how they made their plot fit true events, even if certain tweaking was needed to pull it off.*

Stephanie: *I always respect an author for explaining their choices — all the more if an author reveals a historical inaccuracy or misimpression the plot may have left with the reader. Better that an author writes a compelling novel with a lengthy author's note than writes a boring novel that needs no explanation or qualification.*

Rhonda: *I always prefer an author who*

The Historical Novel Society invite readers to visit the websites of all the authors who participated to learn more about them and their novels:

Allison Knight, *Heartsong*  
[www.AllisonKnight.com](http://www.AllisonKnight.com)

Blythe Gifford, *His Border Bride*  
[www.blythegifford.com](http://www.blythegifford.com)

Bruce Macbain, *Roman Games*  
[www.brucemacbain.com](http://www.brucemacbain.com)

Cathie Dunn, *Luck of the Irish*  
[www.cathiedunn.com](http://www.cathiedunn.com)

Chanta Rand, *The Highest Bidder*  
[www.chantarand.com](http://www.chantarand.com)

Cindy Vallar, *The Scottish Thistle*  
[www.cindyvallar.com](http://www.cindyvallar.com)

DeAnna Cameron, *The Belly Dancer*  
[www.deannacameron.com](http://www.deannacameron.com)

Diana Cosby, *His Conquest*  
[www.dianacosby.com](http://www.dianacosby.com)

Elayne S. Venton, *Constant in Love*  
[www.esventon.com](http://www.esventon.com)

Gabriella Hewitt, *Dark Waters*  
[www.gabriellahewitt.com](http://www.gabriellahewitt.com)

Jean Adams, *Eternal Hearts*  
[www.jeandrew.co.nz](http://www.jeandrew.co.nz)

Kris Kennedy, *The Irish Warrior*  
[www.kriskennedy.net](http://www.kriskennedy.net)

Maggie Anton, *Rashi's Daughters* series  
<http://www.rashisdaughters.com>

Michelle Cameron, *The Fruit of Her Hands*  
[www.michelle-cameron.com](http://www.michelle-cameron.com)

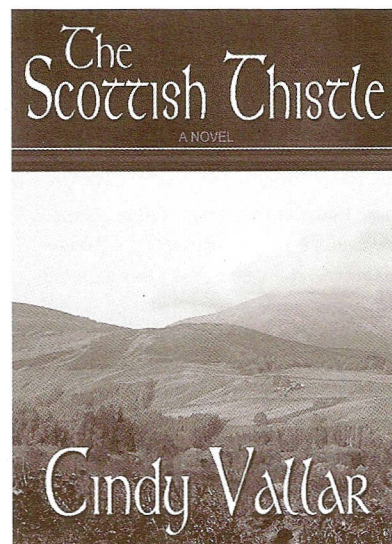
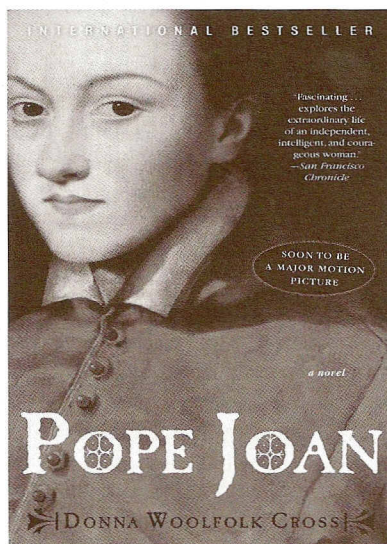
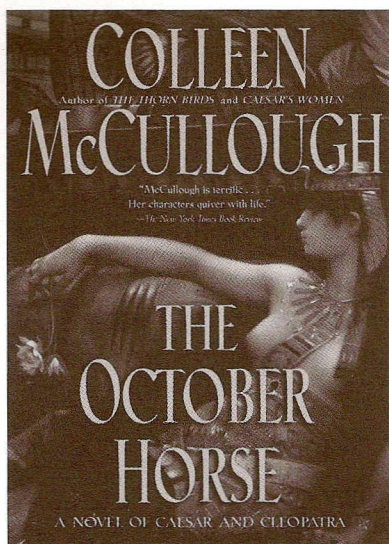
Richard Warren Field, *The Swords of Faith*  
[www.richardwarrenfield.com](http://www.richardwarrenfield.com)

Stephanie Dray, *Lily of the Nile*  
[www.stephaniedray.com](http://www.stephaniedray.com)

Syd McGinley, *Bys Vyken*  
[www.sydmcginley.com](http://www.sydmcginley.com)

Terri Brisbin, *Mistress of the Storm*  
[www.terribrisbin.com](http://www.terribrisbin.com)





points out what they fudged on. If I find out on my own I will indeed resent the author for trying to fool me . . . a flaw in a story is one thing, trying to cover it up and assuming I am too stupid to notice now or in the future is a little insulting.

Marilyn: Sometimes . . . I'm arguing with the author in my head. I was ticked off by Carolly Erickson's *The Last Wife of Henry VIII* because I admired her non-fiction about the Tudors . . . she knew better than to write garbage about the reformist Catherine Parr being anxious over the vengeance of Catholic ghosts. Catherine didn't believe such rot. Carolly didn't apologize for it, nor did she show any bibliography that backed her up.

The consensus regarding length was one to three pages, although several said it depended on what it contained and where it was located. Two felt the author should determine its length.

Among the memorable Authors' Notes, respondents mentioned: Margaret Frazer's, Jonathan Raab's *Shadow and Light*, Mary Stewart's *Merlin* books, Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl*, M. M. Kaye's *Trade Winds*, Sharon Kay Penman's *When Christ and His Saints Slept*, James Tipton's *Annette Vallon*,

Robin Maxwell's *Signora da Vinci*, Colleen McCullough's *The October Horse*, and Stephanie Crowell's *Claude and Camille*. Another fascinating one appears in Donna Woolfolk Cross's *Pope Joan*. Intrigued with her subtitle, "Was There a Pope Joan?," I had to know more. Until the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the papacy accepted her reign as fact. Only later did they attempt to wipe out all references to her existence. Being the second edition of the novel, Cross also discussed changes she made to the original version to improve the accuracy of her depiction of life in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Some readers provided these corrections to that first edition.

**I**n polling author participants, all but one included an Author's Note for various reasons.

Allison: I wanted readers to know what I was doing and why. They would understand then that the information I provided was inaccurate but I knew what the correct information should be.

Donna: [B]ehavior ascribed to three of my subjects is merely surmised. I chose to use it for

the sake of my story. I believe I'm accurate, but there are contradictory statements that make my supposition possibly incorrect, and I want to categorically state that I took artistic license in the writing of their characters.

Syd: It's usually information I found interesting, but didn't want to info-dump on the readers.

Kris: Sometimes I elaborate on elements of the story itself, and give a little of the real history on a certain historical figure or event . . . I might also give real-life instances that inspired or otherwise informed the writing, perhaps with characterization or plot. (Ex: in *The Irish Warrior*, I explained why I created a fictional barony rather than used an actual one.) Author's Note also allows me to give a wider or deeper sense of the historical period, which I know increases my own enjoyment as a reader.

DeAnna: Historical fiction can be such a tricky beast. By its very nature, it strives to stitch together what is true with what is not (or what can only be surmised), and to do it in a way that creates a compelling story. Every author handles this balancing act differently, and readers who care about history naturally want to know where the author has drawn the line.



Stephanie: *It's my one chance . . . to have a discussion with my readers – to explain the point of my novel beyond its historical context. There's no way I'd miss out on that!*

Michelle: *As a historical novelist, I have a double responsibility – to the historical record and to my own story. For a book to be dramatic, cohesive, and thematically sound, I sometimes have to sacrifice absolute accuracy. In the novel I just completed . . . I condensed the history and moved a historical character and certain events many years forward. While this was necessary to complete my overarching theme, it clearly isn't "kosher" in historical terms. So I need a medium to communicate to my reader, to let them know where the story is fictional and where it is (supposedly) fact.*

Although no one has posted their Authors' Notes on their websites, almost half thought it a good idea. Terri directs readers to her website "to point readers to . . . where I have more background about the real history." Several others do this, too, posting other background information on their websites – information not found in their stories.<sup>2</sup>

Like readers, these writers prefer Authors' Notes be kept short, although they weren't as specific about the length as readers were. DeAnna writes, "There is no single perfect length. Just as each story is different, each Historical Note will be different. I prefer those that are brief and convey only the pertinent information the reader needs to know about the historical figures and events that play into the novel, or the history that has been altered to serve the story."

Almost all read other authors' Notes. Michelle wants "to learn more about the novel itself, and . . . to learn from other writers . . . how they have handled writing their Notes. I love the 'story behind the story' aspect of these Notes, particularly if a writer includes why he or she was inspired to write the novel in the first place." Kathleen, on the other hand, reads them if the story is compelling. "If the story is slow but a certain aspect of the plot is intriguing, I may skip ahead . . . to see if [the note] generates enough interest for me to continue reading. That doesn't happen often, but when it does, the notes actually sell me

on the story and encourage me to stick with the book."

**W**hen do writers feel readers should read the Author's Note?

Kris: *After. While it's not going to hurt readers' enjoyment or give anything away if they read an Author's Note before, I think reading an Afterward or Author's Note can help in the 'withdrawal' from story, if you've been deeply immersed.*

Kathleen: *I believe it depends on the nature of the story. I've seen it both ways – used before the story helps draw the reader in easier because she/he understands this is based on or inspired by true events. A short 'before-hand' helps set the stage of the tone of the times, as well, and gets additional info to the reader much better than backstory can.*

Stephanie: *I prefer they read it later, because it contains spoilers! But really, if it comforts a reader to check the notes first, I won't object.*

