

empires, fall in love, exact vengeance, escape from a horde of vampires, right injustices, overcome adversity or slaughter and eat their own parents. They are the common currency of both popular fiction and truly great literature.

“Secondly, the key thing for historical fiction is authenticity. Compulsive readers of historical fiction like to wallow in the detail. Historical novelists must know their period and setting inside out: sights, smells, technology, literature, music, fashion. They need to know five times more than they would ever attempt to include in their story.”

Yes, we’re all guilty of over-researching, I think, but actually all the historical novelists I know love wallowing in the period detail themselves.

“However, it’s been a while since I read historical work that was really satisfying,” says Ed. “There’s so much derivative stuff right now: Napoleonic aping of Patrick O’Brian and Bernard Cornwell, innumerable sword-and-sandal re-tellings of Caesar, Alexander, *The Iliad* – Templars, post Da Vinci Code are starting to bug me a little. Though the market for historical fiction has risen exponentially, the quality and originality is not as good as it was.”

Ed had warned me he had some controversial views in an email prior to our interview. But it got me thinking: is he right? Is historical fiction today less likely to be original? Are publishers, who are under greater commercial pressures than ever before, more likely to publish me-toos these days?

If they are, then Myrmidon is aiming to break the mould. “We want, within three years, to become the UK’s most influential independent publisher of trade fiction outside London,” Ed says. “And it’s a good time for independent publishers right now. Independents are more able to take risks on something a little different and able to invest the bigger proportion of their cost in the fabric of their books.”

I like the sound of that. I’m published by an independent publisher myself – Robert Hale, founded in 1936. And they certainly take story-driven fiction that defies easy categorization into lists elsewhere, commission unique cover art and produce attractive, long-lasting hardcovers. Okay, so the author sells less books, but in the meantime I’ll keep kidding myself that I’m at the fine-wine end of the market. Vive la difference!

*Kate Allan is the author of Perfidy and Perfection (2006) and co-author of The Lady Soldier (2005) by Jennifer Lindsay.*

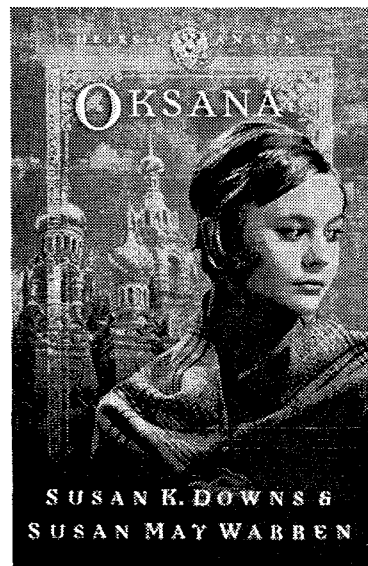
## Red Pencil

*CINDY VALLAR analyzes the work behind polished final manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles Oksana by Susan K. Downs and Susan May Warren.*

Having recently celebrated my fiftieth birthday, I found much in my life has changed. One thing remained constant, however, a love for reading. An early fascination with unsolved mysteries introduced me to Grand Duchess Anastasia and the Romanovs. Prior to 1998, rumors and pretenders surfaced claiming at least one of the tsar’s

children survived the 1918 assassination in Yekaterinburg, Russia. In 1992, however, the royal family’s bones were discovered in a mine shaft. Six years later, a presidential commission confirmed the identities of the deceased, but two Romanov children’s remains were missing.<sup>1</sup>

My interest in the Romanovs and the Russian Revolution led me to *Oksana* by Susan K. Downs (SKD) and Susan May Warren (SMW). Their story centers around Oksana Terekhova, a chambermaid to the Grand Duchesses, and Anton Klassen, a Mennonite from the Russian steppelands. In a chance meeting, Tsar Nicholas asks Anton to take Oksana to safety. It seems a simple request, but Oksana has a secret – one that could get them both killed. I found this novel so compelling I read it in four hours, and the authors collaborated so seamlessly I never once detected that two people had written the story.



Chapter one begins in the early days of the Russian Revolution, when as Anton puts it, “The whole of Russia had gone mad.” Bound for Petrograd after a visit home, he disembarks from a stalled train to get a breath of fresh air. A dancing beam of light draws him into the forest where he finds a man, kneeling in prayer. When he rises, Anton realizes the stranger is the tsar.

*A grand and horrifying recognition seized Anton and drove him to a deep bow. “Your Imperial Highness! Begging your pardon . . . I’m sorry to disturb . . . I would never . . . Had I known I . . .” He fell silent, every cognizant thought having left him, save a desperate plea for the forest floor to open up and swallow him whole.*

*“Save the protocol, young man. Tonight, we are just two of Father Russia’s fellow partisans.”*

*Anton dared to raise his head.*

*Tsar Nicholai Romanov offered him a nod before shifting his gaze to scan the clearing’s perimeter.*

*The lantern light frescoed the monarch’s face in variegated shades of gray. A bas-relief of worry cut deep valleys into the monarch’s forehead and raised mounds under his eyes. “Pardon my lack of courtesy. You obviously know who I am, but I have yet to make your acquaintance. Might I learn your name?”*

*“Anton, Your Majesty. Anton Johannovich Klassen.” He offered the Russian version of his name in his best Russian accent, sent another fleeting glance at the*

## In Every Issue

tsar, then dropped his gaze. He wasn't at all sure where he should train his eyes. He had never studied the proper protocol for conversing with royalty, had never been in a position to need such knowledge.

"You appear to be a young and healthy man, but I see you are dressed as a civilian. Have you fulfilled your military duty or are you presently on leave?"

"Neither, Your Majesty. I am Mennonite and therefore exempt from service in the armed forces." Anton hoped the pallid glow from the lantern failed to betray his embarrassment.

"Ah, yes, Mennonite. So you served your country as a Red Cross Sanitaire, perhaps, or in the forestry?"

"I am sorry, Your Majesty, but no." There it was – Anton's greatest shame – exposed to Tsar Nikolai himself. Despite the cold, he could feel heat creeping up his neck, into his face, burning the tips of his ears.

"I was willing to serve, Your Majesty. But as the eldest son, I am exempt from active duty in order to assist in our family's harness factory. I oversee our warehouses and sales office in Petrograd." Anton's right leg started in trembling and he tried to give his thigh a squeeze to control the spasm. He could barely feel the pinch through his glove. Yet, while Anton could not will his leg still, one curious look from the tsar immobilized him.

"Of course you are willing to defend your country. I sense your devotion; see the fire of patriotism burning in your eyes. The battle between spiritual conviction, family loyalties, and partisan allegiances is one I can appreciate." The monarch's gaze burrowed through to Anton's soul. "Tell me this. . . ." His Imperial Majesty let the foreword to his command hang in the air like a February icicle on a Siberian roof, and Anton marveled at just how still a forest in the dead of winter could be.

". . . As a Mennonite, you are a man of faith, are you not?"

"Yes, sir, I seek to be devout in my Christian faith. I consider myself a pilgrim in search of spiritual truth." That much was true, as far as he spoke. He might struggle in espousing all the tenets of his family's Mennonite religion, but Anton saw no need to say as much to the ruler of the whole of Imperial Russia.

"Well, my boy, sometimes God calls upon us to serve in ways we neither choose nor foresee. Perhaps He has set you apart for a special purpose."

Anton sensed he was enduring the rigors of the most stringent exam. Despite the cold, he flushed hot under the tsar's scrutiny.

"I can't help but believe that the Lord, in His mercy, saw fit to answer my prayer for aid by converging our

paths in these woods. Some would say it is fate or happenstance, but I personally believe it is Providence that brought you to me."

The tsar took a step back, then another, until he stood just beyond the lamplight's trajectory. His gaze searched the wall of trees as he motioned for Anton to follow him. "Let me speak to the urgency at hand. I don't expect they will leave me in peace much longer. I suspect they've let me be until now in hopes I might end my own life and save them from having to decide what's to become of me." Again, he scanned the forest beyond. "I disembarked my train a couple versts up the tracks from here under the ruse of mushroom hunting. I desperately needed some air." The tsar pulled in a deep breath, and Anton fought the craving to fill his own lungs.

"All of Russia will soon know, so there's no sense my keeping it a secret now. A few hours prior, I laid down my authority as monarch over our magnificent Fatherland. I am no longer tsar." At his pronouncement, strength seemed to drain from the ruler like a fresh-shorn Samson. For the briefest moment, his shoulders slumped, but he righted himself with a shake of his head.

Oksana is the fourth book in the "Heirs of Anton" series, yet it recounts the beginning of Anton's tale. I asked SKD and SMW who wrote what and why they opted to write the first book last. "Originally we debated starting the book 'at the beginning.' But as we fleshed out the plot, we began to toy with the concept of going back into time to unravel a mystery. SMW's Russian friends played into this – she knew her friends well, but their parents and grandparents' stories intrigued her and she began to wonder what choices those relatives made that caused her friends to be the people they are today... We desired to create a story that allowed a reader to see not only the end product but the process... We showed the happy ending first... then revealed how they got there." SMW usually writes the rough draft then sends it to SKD to edit, but Oksana "needed a special touch. As a royal, Oksana's voice needed to be distinctively elegant. SKD's writing embodies a certain elegance that perfectly suited this story, so she wrote the first ten chapters... SMW then picked up the last ten chapters, editing the first chapters to incorporate her voice. SKD then edited and proofed the final chapters to incorporate her voice. We are still amazed at how well it came together."

For the passage above, the authors sent me this early draft, four revisions, and the final version of this scene. The revisions incorporated minor deletions and additions, some text rearrangements, but SMW and SKD's comments proved most enlightening in how they edit.

A grand and horrifying recognition seized Anton and drove him to a deep bow. "Your Imperial Highness! Begging your pardon . . . I'm sorry to disturb . . . I would never . . . Had I known I . . ." He fell silent, every cognizant thought having left him, save a desperate plea for the forest floor to open up and swallow him whole. How could he have eavesdropped on the (name for Tsar Nikolai as the head of the Orthodox Church)\*. He felt more ill than he had on the train.



Susan May Warren

SMW added the last two sentences to this paragraph, and felt the tsar's religious title should also be used. SKD disagreed. "I'm wondering if Anton, as a Mennonite, would be thinking in these terms or know that specific title for the tsar. Also... Peter the Great did away with the Patriarch of the Orthodox [C]hurch and it was reinstated by the

parliament at about this time." Their editor at Barbour Publishing concurred. "I'm not sure why it's important to bring in the idea of the tsar being head of the church. Would this matter to a Mennonite? I'd think his political power would be more important. If you want to bring out the tsar's role in the church, include contextual sense of why this mattered to Anton." Thus, the published version appeared this way:

*A grand and horrifying recognition seized Anton and drove him to a deep bow. "Your Imperial Highness! Begging your pardon... I'm sorry to disturb... I would never... Had I known, I..." He fell silent, every cognizant thought having left him, save a desperate plea for the forest floor to open up and swallow him whole. How could he have eavesdropped on the sovereign ruler of all Russia? He felt more ill than he had on the train.*

Authors are cautioned against using "odd" words in their narratives because they require the reader to interpret the sentence.

*The lantern light frescoed the monarch's face in variegated shades of gray. A bas-relief of worry cut deep valleys into the monarch's forehead and raised mounds under his eyes.*

SMW felt "frescoed" was one such example, so instead of using these two sentences, she suggested replacing them with: "Worry cut deep valleys into the monarch's forehead and raised mounds under his eyes." Working from this suggestion, they settled on this version in the published novel:

*"Fear not. You are in no danger." Tsar Nikolai's voice seemed to assure both of them despite the incongruity of that thought. Anton nodded, as if agreeing, and noticed the worry that cut deep valleys into the monarch's forehead. "Pardon my lack of courtesy," Tsar Nikolai continued. "You obviously know who I am, but I have yet to make your acquaintance. Might I learn your name?"*

In editing the first draft, SMW wondered why SKD used Petrograd rather than St. Petersburg? People who grew up during the Cold War

think of Petrograd (or Leningrad) as the Soviet name for the city, whereas St. Petersburg was the city's name prior to that time period. SKD's research showed, however, that "[t]he name of the city flipped back and forth a couple of times during this period. At this particular point, it was Petrograd. That's how the tsar referred to it in all of his personal correspondence."<sup>2</sup>

The last paragraph of the draft also changed. This wasn't the end of the scene, but served as a transition to the tsar's mission for Anton. As written, this paragraph wasn't compelling. In revising, SMW asked whether "Bolsheviks" was the proper word choice, but SKD replied, "Bolsheviks weren't the issue yet, nor did they have the organized power at this point. It would have been either the Provisional Forces or the rebels. Lenin comes onto the scene shortly, but not yet." Below is the final version that appears in the book.

*"All of Russia will soon know, so there's no sense my keeping it a secret now. A few hours prior, I laid down my authority as monarch over our magnificent Fatherland." He sighed, and for the briefest moment, his shoulders slumped.*

*"I am no longer tsar." His voice lost strength with the pronouncement.*

*No longer tsar? Anton's mouth grew dry; questions lined his throat. Was Kaiser Wilhelm overrunning Petrograd? Or had the rebels taken captive the royal family?*

*Perhaps the Great War, the internal chaos, and the allegations of mismanagement finally turned the tsar mad.*

While the portrayal of history in fiction was important to both authors, they never permitted it to become a detriment to the story. As Andrew M. Greeley wrote in *Irish Love*, "The purpose of historical fiction is to enable a reader through the perspective of characters in the story to feel that she or he is present at the events."

Often considered a solitary endeavor, writing sometimes works better when two people combine their strengths to create a better book than either author could have achieved alone. "SKD's strengths include great research skills and her novels shine with detail and texture. SMW shines as a suspense writer and her strengths are plot and characterization. Together, we felt we had skills that could pull together a series that accurately reflected life in Russia as well as told riveting stories. SKD is also a professional editor, so we really tapped into her skills. We called our team, appropriately, 'Spit and Polish'."

It helped that both Susans have common interests and already knew each other from their memberships in American Christian Fiction Writers (ACFW). They chose this particular time period because "SMW was interested in the theme of seeing how God worked out His promises from generation to generation, especially after hearing from her Russian friends the tales of how their parents and grandparents had persevered in their faith during the dark reign of communism... SKD wanted to write a story about the plight of the Mennonites who emigrated from Russia. The idea germinated from a photograph given to her by one of the single adoptive mothers whom Susan assisted in the adoption of a Russian orphan. This adoptive mother came from Russian roots, but the only link she had

to her Russian past was an old photograph, reportedly of her grandmother and great-aunt standing at a gravesite, the worn and illegible name on the tombstone engraved in Cyrillic. SKD kept this photo on her desk, and often, the question "What if ..." edged into her thoughts."

Collaboration wasn't always easy sailing, though. They faced any number of challenges – writing style, voice, plot twists – but negotiation, friendship, and faith played significant roles in overcoming these conflicts. "It takes letting go of the words, and your voice, and allowing another person to groom the work to make it better. We had to keep an end-goal focus and know that we were working together, not competing... Compromise was an attribute we both worked hard to achieve. We made a conscious effort to keep pride out of the picture. Our friendship is more important than books, and that kept our perspective in place, also."



Seeing each other at the annual ACFW Conference "is one of the highlights of our year." They've both spent time in Russia – SMW as a missionary for eight years and SKD as a Russian Adoption Program Coordinator. SMW believes "Russia as a whole is a mystery to the rest of the world, and I loved being able to write from the inside out and share a different perspective." SKD's experiences drew her "to delve deeper into all things Russian. I also had the added blessing of facilitating the adoptions of my three nephews and one niece, and a part of my motivation for writing 'The Heirs of Anton' series was to foster a sense of pride in them for their native culture."

*Oksana* shows how collaboration works if writers recognize each other's strengths and weaknesses and maintain a professional attitude. Trust is of paramount importance, as are the ground rules the partners establish to guide all aspects of the writing process. Collaboration isn't for everyone, but if successful, it can be a rewarding venture.

## Notes

1. Genine Babakian, "Now, where to bury the Romanovs?" *USA Today*, 2 February 1998.
2. This scene takes place on 3 March 1917.

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## Caught in the Middle

Fiction

by B.K. BIRCH

*Selected for publication by historical novelist EMMA DARWIN.*

"Don't go being nosy," Finnian said. "You'll only get into trouble."

"I just want to see what they're doing," Jesse whined.

Finnian put down his knife and looked at his youngest son.

"I don't want you nowhere near them soldiers," he said.

"But Pa," Jesse protested. "They won't see me. You said I was a good hunter."

"You heard me," Finnian said. "Besides, you don't hunt people. Now go help your ma finish up that deer shoulder. It's getting late and you and Eamon still got the feeding to do."

*Doggone it.* Jesse kicked at a log that had fallen from the woodpile. Bark flew from the outer ring of the dry wood and flew right at his face. He wiped his eyes on his coat and stomped off around back to find Ma.

Why couldn't he go see them? All the other boys had; even the boys younger than he was. It wasn't fair. Wasn't he the one who first saw the smoke rising from their campfires two days ago? It was all his grandma's fault. She saw the squares in her tea leaves. She always saw bad things in them and had been talking about soldiers on the mountain since late summer, and ain't none of it come to pass. She was just an old crippled gypsy trying to get attention by scaring folks half to death about this whole thing.

He found Ma out near the smokehouse rubbing salt on the last piece of shoulder meat.

"Pa said I had to help you," Jesse said.

"Where were you an hour ago?" she asked, and then handed him a thick wire hook.

"Helping Pa with the hide."

"Get these hooked and I'll hang them," she said. "Hurry now. It's fixing to rain."

Jesse jerked the wire through the meat so hard some of it tore. He wrapped it in the burlap anyway.

"You still mad about those soldiers?" she asked.

"Nope."

"You know what Grandma saw," she warned.

"I know."

"It's safer here. Even Pa and Eamon are staying close to home. Don't you be running off, you hear?"

"Ain't nothing to do around here."

"Take this to the house and give it to Grandma."

She handed him a large, heavy bowl with watery blood swishing in the bottom.

"You can wash it if you ain't got nothing else to do," she said.

"That's women's work," Jesse said, and then wished he hadn't. He poured the blood out on the ground. His old hound ran over and licked the grass where the blood spilled. Walking back, Jesse grabbed a leg from the pile of deer entrails and tossed it to the animal.

"Women's work? Do you want to do dishes for the next few weeks?"