

## Using Dialect in Historical Fiction

*Cindy Vallar analyses the work behind polished final manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles **Susanne Dunlap's** *In the Shadow of the Lamp*.*

While visiting Scutari, Turkey during the Crimean War (1853-1856), a reporter for *The Times* wrote about hundreds of British soldiers succumbing to disease and the deplorable conditions the wounded endured in overcrowded and rat-infested hospitals. The public outcry was such that Britain's Secretary of War Sidney Herbert asked Florence Nightingale to assemble a group of nurses and go to Scutari to minister to the soldiers. These women worked to improve sanitary conditions, nurse the wounded, and comfort the dying in spite of insufficient supplies and doctors who resented their presence. This is the backdrop for Susanne Dunlap's *In the Shadow of the Lamp*, Molly Fraser's story of how she's wrongly accused of a crime, loses her job, and risks everything to become one of Florence Nightingale's nurses.

When we first meet Molly, she's sixteen and works as a parlormaid, although she entered domestic service as a scullery maid. She comes from the East End of London, which is reflected in her dialogue and first-person narrative in this early draft of the novel.

*I was ever so sad about Janet. Not like*

*I known her well, but she was sweet and helped me learn my duties. It was different doing them all alone, stead of having someone to point out where I missed a speck of dust or hadn't piled the coals up so's they'd catch proper.*

*When Mavis Atkins started in on being all jealous of me I took no notice at first. . . . Mavis worked in the kitchen as Cook's maid, which wasn't such a good job as mine, and was desperate to get out. She had dreams . . . She said, "A girl with ambition could go far in a 'ouse like ours." The master was in Parliament, and men came to dinner and talked about important things over the brandy and cigars. Mavis wanted to be under house parlor maid like something else, so she could clean up after the gents, maybe get someone to notice her.*

*"It ain't fair!" she said every time she saw me for a month at least after I changed my position. "A smart uniform and all. I say it ain't fair!" I couldn't believe she wished for the black dress that itched so, and the white apron and cap I had to clean and starch day after day.*

*"They'll probly give you the position soon, too. It's a big house. They should*

*have two parlor maids. They did, 'til Janet got sick," I said, trying to make her feel better. Mavis and I'd been quite friends when she was above me, when I was just scullery maid. We even brushed each other's hair at bedtime. . . .*

*But then, Mavis said, "Not unless you get dip-theriay, like Janet." Seemed to me like she wished I would. I didn't think nothing of it, just got on with my work and hoped Mavis got on with hers.*

*First she stopped brushing my hair of a night. I tried to be friendly and nice, but she ignored me. She were up to something, I thought. . . .*

*I found out when we was getting ready for bed one night.*

*"Fraser!"*

*Mr. Collins's harsh voice yelled from right outside our bedroom door. He never talked soft and nice, but I'd not heard him so cross before. "Yes, Mr. Collins," I said, opening the door.*

*"Stand over there, Fraser." He pointed to by the window. I looked at Mavis, but she wouldn't look back, so I just did as Mr. Collins said.*



"Atkins, kindly show me the evidence you discovered."

What evidence did she have? Of what? I didn't know nothing then and I thought they'd gone stark mad. Mavis pointed under my bed. Mr. Collins got down on his knees and lifted the bedskirt, and started pulling out bits and pieces what come from all over the house. He stood up with his hands full of silver and trinkets. "What do you have to say for yourself, Fraser?"

"I . . . I don't know. I never seen those things – 'cept where they was s'posed to be." My mouth of a sudden went dry, and I could feel the heat rising up into my face.

"I must inform the master and mistress that we have a thief in our midst. Be ready to leave in the morning."

No! I wanted to scream out that it weren't fair. I hadn't done nothing. I reached a hand toward Mavis, not threatening exactly, but she clutched her robe around her and turned her shoulder to me like she thought I was going to hit her.

"If it's all the same to you, Mr. Collins," Mavis said, her voice high and quaky, "I'd rather not stay here with Fraser."

"There's a cot by the coal hole. That'll do for you," Mr. Collins said.

I got my things. He went so fast down the stairs I couldn't hardly keep up with him, then he pointed to the cot, with its dirty old blanket. . . .

The next morning they made me stand up in front of all the servants while Mr. Collins accused me and lectured everyone. . . . I told them I'd have to be stupid to keep things I stole right where they might be found by anyone, but it didn't make no difference.

Only Will spoke up for me. Will was tall and straight, and he had kind eyes. He didn't treat the rest of us like we was dirt, like Mr. Collins did. P'raps that was because he weren't much older than us . . . and he come from London too. He helped me lift the heavy coal buckets sometimes, and always asked after me mum and dad when I come back from my half days. . . .

"This is just circumstance," Will said . . . "Molly's never done anything dishonest before. We should hear her side of the story."

. . . I looked at him, trying to push how grateful I felt through the air so's he could feel it. I dunno if he did, but I saw just a bit of a smile on his face. I knew t h e n he'd say something reassuring to me if he could.

Since what Will said didn't make a difference to anyone I thought I'd best get courage to defend myself. "I ain't no thief!" I said, trying hard not to give Mavis the satisfaction of seeing me cry.

"See! That just proves what a devious chit she is!" Mavis practically screamed. After that she wouldn't let me get a

word in, and no one wanted to believe anything but what was obvious. What a drama! After a bit I felt far away from it all, like it wasn't me they was accusing, and I was looking in the window watching everyone's mouths moving and hands and arms waving about. Mavis played shocked and innocent quite well, her eyes open wide and fluttering her eyelashes. Practicing to go on the stage, I thought. She got over how nervous she was the night before, probly glad her trickery worked.

When an author populates her story, her characters need individual

personalities and backstories to become three dimensional. We consider many elements in this birth process. The characters become mirrors of the real world; where we come from and our level of education determine how we speak. Molly belongs to the lower class, so her patterns of speech, her choice of words and how she pronounces them, and her grammar differ from those of Florence Nightingale, who

belonged to the upper-middle class and learned several languages and mathematics as a young girl. To show this distinction, Susanne Dunlap has Molly use "ain't" instead of "isn't." Mavis drops the "h" in house, while Molly shortens "except" to "cept" and slurs syllables, changing "supposed" to "s'posed." She also mismatches pronouns with verb tenses, saying "I weren't" rather than "I wasn't." Miss



Susanne Dunlap 1 Photo © Sigrid Estrada



Nightingale would not employ any of these in her dialogue because she's better educated and more cultured. As Susanne explains:

*... I really wanted to make sure the reader understood [Molly's] class, her station in life. In England at that time (and still now), as soon as you opened your mouth, people could place you in your social rank or region.*

She chose to use the dialect of the East End because "I lived in London for ten years, and had many friends who were from the East End. I can still hear how they speak, in my mind, the idioms and pronunciations. I'm hoping my British friends will "hear" the right accent in the dialogues." In a guest blog post for *Like Fire*, Susanne wrote:

*... at some point while I was doing my research, a voice started speaking to me. It was a young voice, female, and it had a very thick London East End accent. ... The voice ... spoke to me distinctly, with all its dropped H's, F's instead of TH's, and glottal stops.<sup>1</sup>*

Why use dialect in a story's dialogue? It "can lend color, accuracy, and liveliness. Use of proper dialect helps to vividly express a character's identity and to spark readers' interest in both narrative and characterization."<sup>2</sup> A problem arises, however, when authors abuse the use of dialect. Langley Cornwell writes: "If the dialect isn't right, it rings untrue in my ear and it's hard to feel any connection to the story or the author. I quit caring about the character too, the story no longer matters."<sup>3</sup> People who study dialects found that "[f]our out of five readers report that reading representations of heavy dialect is extremely bothersome."<sup>4</sup> This may stem from the fact that "... dialect complicates and slows down the story, if it doesn't turn the reader away completely."<sup>5</sup> I recall

reading a Scottish historical romance set in which the author decided to bring authenticity to her characters' dialogue by using Scots<sup>6</sup> mixed with English. She saturated their speech with this language, which made it difficult to read and understand. After a few pages, I gave up and chose another book to read. Susanne refrains from abusing the dialect, but her early draft contains one glaring example that the editor later has Susanne correct. Mavis speaks of the disease that kills Janet as being "diphtheriay," rather than "diphtheria."

These reasons explain why editors advise writers not to use dialect. "[Editors] tend to edit out more than the occasional word in favor of making the text more readable," writes Kathy Lynn Emerson in *How to Write Killer Historical Mysteries* (2008). Susanne's editor "thought I didn't need it throughout, that I could indicate with vocabulary and syntax where Molly stood demographically, and reserve the dialect for dialogue." She took her editor's advice, but she didn't omit all of the dialect because "I just don't think it would have been believable without some of that. When people speak, you have to be able to hear them as real, living beings." When I asked if she felt doing so helped the story, she wrote, "I think it helped. The dialect is not essential to the story, only to understanding something about the main character. And that is achieved through the way the story unfolds and the other ways [Molly] expresses herself, as well as through the dialogue."

Here is the published version of the same scene. Molly's dialect has been toned down in the narrative, but her dialogue continues to include words like: ain't, never seen, 'cept, and s'posed. In spite of this, she retains the sense of being a lower-class Londoner in the way she turns a phrase. By

the time readers reach the end of the scene, they clearly see Molly as someone who works downstairs for a family who lives upstairs.

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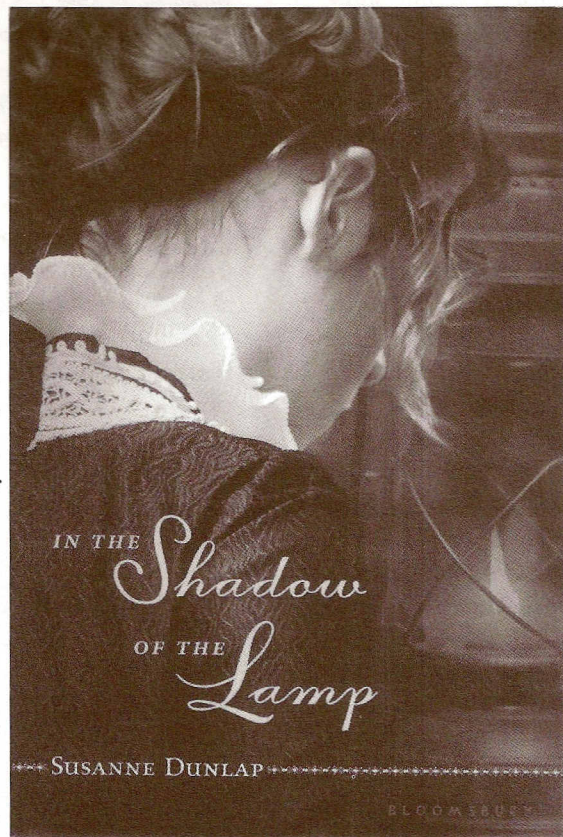
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*. . . I looked at him, trying to push how grateful I was through the air so he could feel it. I don't know if he did, but I saw just a bit of a smile on his face. I knew then he'd say something reassuring to me if he could get a word in.*

*Since Will couldn't get them to listen I thought I'd best pluck up the courage to defend myself. "I ain't no thief!" I said, lifting my chin and staring down my nose at Mr. Collins. I'd no intention of giving Mavis the satisfaction of seeing me cry.*

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*nervous she was the night before.*

Why did Susanne make these changes?

*. . . because it's a YA book, I wanted not to make the text more difficult to get through than necessary. Not that YA readers aren't sophisticated and perfectly capable of dealing with advanced vocabulary, just that part of my goal is to make sure my reader is really immersed in the book. Starting out with quirky dialect I thought might interfere with that process, call too much attention to the writing itself instead of the story.*

Her moderation to the narrative and dialogue improves this passage. Brianna, who reviews young adult books at *The Book Pixie*, writes: "The dialogue was . . . impressively done, matching each characters' [sic] station in life, be it servant or upper class." She also feels Susanne's decision to use "the first-person, past tense narrative the most appropriate choice" for the story.<sup>7</sup> Susanne uses this point of view in all her young adult novels.

*I didn't really plan it that way, but there's something about forcing myself to see everything through the eyes of my character that helps me really enter that mindset, take myself back to how it felt to be a teen. . . . Also, the nature of Molly's adventure, being completely unaware of what she was getting into and seeing so much – I wanted the reader to experience its immediacy.*

Susanne, who lives in Brooklyn, New York, has a doctorate in music history from Yale. "That's what started my love of research into historical subjects." She finds writing hard regardless of her audience.

*Books have to be just as good, just as well-researched. In fact, I feel a big responsibility to get it right, since*

*my readers are less likely to have any background against which to check for accuracy, or to temper what they read. Historical Fiction is not the easiest sell to teens, but I'm gaining a devoted audience, and am pleased with how well my books are selling since I made the transition from adult to young adult.*

Although the idea to write a novel about Florence Nightingale was her editor's, Susanne made it her own once Molly began to speak to her. When I asked if she wanted to share anything else about *In the Shadow of the Lamp*, she wrote:

*Only that I love the character of Molly, which is probably not something I'm supposed to say! I felt such a strong connection with her when I was writing her – or when I was letting her tell her story through me – despite the fact that my background is nothing like hers.*

Susanne invites you to visit her website ([susannedunlap.com](http://susannedunlap.com)) to learn more about her books. She also writes a blog entitled *Writing, Reading, Living* (<http://susannedunlap.wordpress.com/>).

#### Notes:

1. "MJ Rose's Backstory: Susanne Dunlap," *Like Fire*, accessed 6 April 2011, <http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/likefire/mj-roses-backstory-susanne-dunlap>.
2. Lori L. Lake, "The Uses and Abuses of Dialect: Y'all Be Sayin' Wha?," *Nann Dunne presents . . . Just About Write*, accessed 6 April 2011, [http://www.justaboutwrite.com/A\\_Archive\\_Uses-Abuses-Dialect.html](http://www.justaboutwrite.com/A_Archive_Uses-Abuses-Dialect.html).
3. Langley Cornwell, "Dialect: Make It Authentic," *Langley Writes*, accessed 6 April 2011, <http://langley-writes.blogspot.com/2011/04/dialect-make-it-authentic.html>.

[com/2011/04/dialect-make-it-authentic.html](http://www.suite101.com/content/using-dialect-in-fiction-a65843).

4. Lake.

5. Jennifer Jenson, "Using Dialect in Fiction: Writing Dialogue in Character Voice," *Writing Fiction by Suite101*, accessed 6 April 2011, <http://www.suite101.com/content/using-dialect-in-fiction-a65843>.

6. Scots is a Germanic language of Lowland Scotland and is derives from the Anglo-Saxons who immigrated to Scotland in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The poetry of Robert Burns is a good example of Scots. For more information on this language, I recommend visiting the Scots Language Centre at <http://www.scotslanguage.com/>.

7. Brianna, "Review: In the Shadow of the Lamp," *The Book Pixie*, accessed 6 April 2011, <http://thebookpixie.blogspot.com/2011/02/review-in-shadow-of-lamp.html>.

**A special note to authors:** If you have a published or soon-to-be-published historical novel you'd like to see spotlighted in "The Red Pencil," please contact Cindy Vallar at [cindy@cindyvallar.com](mailto:cindy@cindyvallar.com) and she'll send you the particulars. Keep in mind you must have an early draft of your manuscript available.

*Cindy Vallar is a freelance editor, an associate editor for Solander, and the author of The Scottish Thistle ([www.cindyvallar.com/scottishthistle.html](http://www.cindyvallar.com/scottishthistle.html)). A retired librarian, she also writes about pirates, presents workshops, and reviews books.*

