

Historical Fiction Mash-Ups Broadening Appeal by Mixing Genres

By *Melissa Rabey*

Most librarians would not think to put historical fiction at the top of a list of fiction genres popular with teens. Historical fiction is too often equated with school, facts, and other uninteresting subjects. With some historical novels, that is certainly the case. Within the past decade, however, many works of historical fiction have been published that go far beyond these preconceived notions. What explains this change? Look no further than the mash-up. A mash-up, first used to describe the combination of two or more songs, now refers to any joining of previously separate items, creating a new format or genre. The popularity of the literature mash-up has grown by leaps and bounds since the publication of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. However, before this book, more subtle genre blending has been happening in young adult literature for years.

Librarians have seen, as Anita Silvey notes, that “today’s teens are crazy about characters (and scenarios) that have little in common with their own everyday lives.”¹ Whether that means historical fiction, fantasy, or science fiction—or a

combination of them—many teens are looking for a complex story that sweeps them away from their everyday concerns. While realistic fiction remains popular, many of the most popular novels in the past decade are considered works of fantasy, such as the Harry Potter or Twilight series. As the desire for fantasy titles remains steady, publishers have sought ways to broaden that genre’s appeal. Fusing elements of fantasy, science fiction, or other genres with historical fiction helps meet the demands of today’s teen reader, as well as create a new interest within them for unusual works of fiction.

Historical Fiction and Fantasy

Thanks to the popularity of fantasy, mash-ups that combine historical fiction with fantasy are perhaps the most popular kind of mash-up. Just like that Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup commercial, historical fiction and fantasy are two great tastes that taste great together. Several popular historical novels owe their popularity, in part, to the inclusion of fantasy elements within them.

A classic example of a historical fiction mash-up is *Sorcery and Cecelia*, the delightful epistolary novel by Patricia C. Wrede and Caroline Stevermer. Originally published in 2003 and described as a fantasy as written by Jane Austen, this novel tells the story of two cousins navigating a Season in London and country life in an England that has a Royal College of Wizards. The two sequels, *The Grand Tour* and *The Mislaidd Magician* continue the story of Kate and Cecelia through marriage and children. *Sorcery and Cecelia* represents one popular approach to joining historical fiction with fantasy: adding magic to a historical setting. In the same vein, there are Marissa Doyle’s novels about the Leland sisters. *Bewitching Season* and *Betraying Season* are set in the 1830s and feature Persephone and Penelope Leland, well-bred twin sisters who happen to have magical abilities. Because magic is not a proper hobby for daughters of the nobility, the sisters must conceal their talents. It is only their desire to rescue a young Queen Victoria that makes the Lelands reveal their abilities to others.

Libba Bray’s exquisite trilogy starring Gemma Doyle is another example. Starting in *A Great and Terrible Beauty* and continuing in *Rebel Angels* and *The Sweet Far Thing*, Gemma slowly comes into her magical birthright to protect the Realm. A shadowy otherworld, the Realm is threatened by actions of the past, and Gemma must undo the damage while maintaining her position as a student in a

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genteel Victorian boarding school. *I, Coriander* by Sally Gardner shows how a fantastic element can be used as a metaphor. Coriander lives in London during the Commonwealth, when music, dancing, gaming and other pastimes were strictly forbidden by the Puritans. Finding a pair of seemingly magical silver shoes, Coriander is taken to a fairy tale kingdom, the world that her mother actually belonged to. While this hidden world is full of exotic beauty, it is withering away, not unlike Coriander's own world. Only Coriander can rescue the fairy world—and her own—by restoring its health and vitality.

Historical fantasy is not all magic and fairies, however. Equally successful have been novels that give supernatural creatures a historical context. Vampires and werewolves are not romantic young men but bloodthirsty, terrifying beings in these novels. Patrick Jennings' *The Wolving Time* shows how outsiders have often been persecuted throughout history. Laszlo's family is from the region now known as Hungary, but they live near the France-Spain border, working as shepherds. However, Laszlo's parents are werewolves, and he knows that some day he will become one as well. After the village priest turns against the peaceful werewolves, Laszlo must decide whether to join his parents as wolves or remain fully human. *Blood Ninja* by Nick Lake has a clever premise: what if ninjas are really vampires? When Taro is run through by a ninja's sword, his only hope is being turned into a vampire by a good ninja. Once he becomes a vampire, Taro begins ninja training and hopes to avenge his father's death.

While some novels give supernatural creatures a basis in reality, others take historical settings and bring them closer to fantasy with the introduction of supernatural elements that change the world. The dark, atmospheric world of Victorian London is the setting for Chris Wooding's tale of demon hunters and

witches, *The Haunting of Alaizabel Cray*. Thaniel is a wych-hunter who stalks the fearsome creatures known as wych-kin. Finding a beautiful, dazed young woman named Alaizabel, Thaniel decides to save her, even though such action draws him into conflict with the powerful cult that infected Alaizabel with a wych-kin. An equally dangerous world is seen in Marcus Sedgwick's *My Swordhand is Singing*, set in a remote Transylvanian region. Peter lives with his father in a small cottage outside the village. Everyone thinks the village gives them protection from danger, but when dead men—what we would call vampires—begin attacking their loved ones and friends, Peter will discover the secret his father has kept all these years.

These are just a few examples of the rich works that are created when fantasy is united with historical fiction. Both fantasy and historical fiction are built upon the world the author creates for the reader: exploring its environment, explaining its rules, and introducing characters that fit within such a world. The only difference is that historical fiction uses the past as a starting point, while fantasy relies upon an author's imagination to create a new world or put a new spin on our own world. When the author reinvents the past with fantastical elements, it gives the novel more opportunities for creativity. The fantasy is given a sense of reality thanks to history and the historical fiction is given a shot of vitality from fantasy. As long as fantasy remains a popular genre, there is little doubt that historical fantasy will continue to be published.

Historical Fiction and Science Fiction

Historical fantasy may have received more attention, but equally popular genre blends have existed for even longer. For example, history and science are often fused in works that feature time travel. Although it is not

always explained how the character traveled into the past, the real point is seeing how the character adapts to this unfamiliar setting. One of the best-known examples is *The Devil's Arithmetic* by Jane Yolen. Hannah does not fully understand why her grandfather is still so angry about the Nazis and their actions during the Holocaust. During the Passover Seder, Hannah is selected to open the front door for the prophet Elijah. This sends Hannah back in time, to a Polish ghetto in the 1940s. Thought to be a girl named Chaya, Hannah slowly and horribly realizes what the Holocaust did to the Jewish people. Restored home just as magically, Hannah now has a greater empathy for her grandfather.

In *The Black Canary* by Jane Louise Curry, a strange shimmer is the indication of the time portals that transport James from modern-day London to the 1600s. Finding himself stuck in the past, biracial James becomes part of a children's choir that entertains Queen Elizabeth. Although his parents are well-known musicians, James always disliked the hardships of a performer's life. As a member of the choir, though, he realizes his own musical gifts, and discovers what makes his parents travel the world to sing and play. With this realization, James will have to find out if he wants to travel back to his own time. Like James, Tommy from *Backtracked* by Pedro de Alcantara also struggles with his modern problems in the past. Tommy is a big fan of New York City's subways, riding on them to distract himself from how his jerk of an older brother has been lauded as a hero since dying on 9/11. His trips to the past let him see the subways being built and allow him to work out his modern-day problems.

Any melding of science fiction and historical fiction does not have to be light on the science. In some novels, like *Black Powder* by Staton Rabin, it is alien technology that helps create a time machine, providing a strong grounding in

science fiction for this story. Langston decides to travel back to the 13th century, using his teacher's time machine, to stop Roger Bacon from using his formula for gunpowder. Langston's best friend was just killed in a drive-by shooting, and Langston thinks that if gunpowder had never come to the West, his friend would still be alive. The author cleverly uses elements of both science fiction and historical fiction to craft the story. Philip Reeve takes a slightly different approach in his Victorian scientific tales, creating an alternate British Empire that controls the neighboring planets as well as nations of the Earth. These novels are full of scientific gadgets and historical attitudes. In *Larklight*, we meet Art and his sister Myrtle, who live in a house that takes up an asteroid that orbits the Moon. Their adventures include giant spiders, space pirates, and more, continuing in *Starcross* and *Mothstorm*.

Going beyond time travel lies another approach to combining science fiction and historical fiction: steampunk. Considered a sub-genre of science fiction, steampunk envisions a world with engineering and technology that is futuristic for that period.² This does not mean that Queen Victoria uses an iPad—but she might use a device that runs on steam to send messages to far-flung parts of the British Empire. And steampunk does not have to be set in the Victorian period; Scott Westerfeld's *Leviathan* proves that. In this novel, an alternate version of World War I begins with each side having very different weapons from the historical armaments. The Central Powers, including Germany and Austria-Hungary, has giant machines known as clankers. Meanwhile, England and the other Allies use giant animals that have been genetically engineered. Representing these two combatants are main characters Aleksander, an Austrian prince on the run from assassins and Deryn, a British girl who passes for a boy to join the British Air Service. Westerfeld

creates an utterly compelling novel based on historical events yet full of original scientific elements. It is likely that in the future, steampunk will do more to convincingly combine historical fiction with science fiction.

Historical Fiction and Adventure

For readers in search of a good, fast-moving story, librarians often recommend adventure stories—many of which are set in the past. In our time of precautions and comforts, the idea of sailing across the ocean or traveling to the frontier is foreign. In the past, travel and its dangers were often the only way for a young person to make their dreams come true. So modern readers find many thrills in historical adventure.

Several historical series take advantage of history's nautical adventures. L.A. Meyer's *Bloody Jack* adventures feature Mary Faber, an orphan who passes as a boy to join the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars. Known as Jacky, she is involved in a dizzying array of ship battles, social struggles, secret spying, and warfare in this series. Through it all, she believes that she will be able to find and marry her sweetheart, whom she met when she was living as a boy. Another similar series is *Adventures of a Young Sailor* by Paul Dowswell, which follows Sam's attempts to form a career in the Navy. He faces obstacles like capture, forced service on a merchant vessel, accusations of treason, and transportation to Australia, but these are not enough to make Sam give up on his naval career.

On the other hand, sailing ships are not the only way to find adventure. For *Cat Royal*, the heroine of an eponymous series by Julia Golding, 1790s London is full of excitement. Having grown up the ward of the Drury Lane Theater, Cat is determined to protect her home and the life she loves. That means facing up to London's street toughs, getting help from her aristocratic

friends, and saving her best friend from the bonds of slavery. In Helen Hemphill's *The Adventurous Deeds of Deadwood Jones*, Prometheus was born on the day the Emancipation Proclamation was signed. Now thirteen, he lights out with his cousin, determined to find his father who was sold away before freedom. On the trail, Prometheus's skin color does not matter—it is his skill with horses that does. And in the Wild West of the 1870s, adventures aplenty are possible for two African American boys.

Conclusion

There has been some disdain for the mash-up format. In discussing *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter*, *Publishers Weekly* noted that it is not truly a mash-up, but that it “works off the premise of the mashup, taking something somewhat sacred and highbrow (here an iconic American historical figure) and pairing it with a low-brow pop culture fascination.”³ But mash-ups in young adult literature do not seem to work in the same way. Instead, they seem more focused on simply combining unlikely elements to tell a richer, more complex story. Perhaps because young adult literature has spent so many years being disdained, its authors are more willing to try a disdained format like the mash-up. By giving the mash-up its due, and fully exploring what this technique can achieve, young adult authors have made the mash-up respectable.

Whether or not you feel mash-ups are good literature, it seems that they are here to stay. This can only be a good thing for fans of historical fiction, as mash-ups help spread this genre beyond its core base. The books highlighted in this article are just a few examples of historical fiction mash-ups: a wide range of titles further explores connections between historical fiction and other genres. Mash-ups give readers a fresh look at genres that they

might otherwise overlook, whether it is historical fiction, fantasy, or science fiction. In addition, hardcore genre fans can find new twists on common plots when a historical element is added. Time will tell, but one can hope that the historical fiction mash-up proves as long-lived as zombies, vampires, and other supernatural creatures. YALS

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