

Don't Look Down

Patrolling the blurry boundaries between fiction and non-fiction is like finding yourself in no-man's land during wartime - dangerous and likely to attract hostile fire from both sides. I experienced this with my first two books, which dealt with Aussie icons. My first was *Shoot Straight You Bastards!*, which was about "Breaker" Morant, treacherously shot by the British during the Boer war. My new book, *You'll Never Take Me Alive*, tells the story of the bushranger Ben Hall – two different characters and two very different challenges. I set out to write both as pure non-fiction, but had to compromise and take risks in both cases.

When a writer decides to tackle a non-fiction subject, an early assessment needs to be made about how many gaps there are in the story and how you are going to fill them. Did the character leave a diary, memoir, notes, give a newspaper interview or tell a reliable source their story? How much archive is there? This is the value of a solid story structure and historical timeline – two techniques I swear by. It means more preparation, but pays dividends in the long run.

"Breaker" Morant was a renowned poet, horse "breaker" and larrikin about whom much was written and said long before he landed in South Africa. His command of the ill-starred Bushveldt Carbineers was also well-documented as was the aftermath of his infamous trial and execution. Four years of research on three continents involving the combined efforts of a dozen research colleagues unearthed some rare nuggets of information about both his personal and military life, but there were still gaps. Morant was an enigma – born Murrant he changed his name to Morant in Australia and there were numerous mysteries about his origins, childhood, his emigration to Australia and the circumstances surrounding the controversial "take no prisoner" orders he claimed he received from the British in South Africa. Despite his literary prowess he never thought to write down his story and kept no journal or diary.

I was faced with three choices – keep it strictly non-fiction and pepper the manuscript with "perhaps", "maybe" and "arguably", employ some creative non-fiction to bridge the gaps, or write the story as historical fiction.

The latter option was appealing, but I had unearthed some startling historical facts and was determined to keep it factual. Spending long periods of time researching someone's intimate secrets breeds a strange obsession. You come to identify with your characters' struggles as if they were your own.

I personally hate historians who sit on the fence with their maybes. A good researcher will have accumulated enough of a feel for the subject to fill in the missing pieces, so I opted for option two.

I put all my passages of creative fiction in italics. Once I'd started using that technique I found that it was also a useful way to inject drama into key scenes. The technique suited this particular story, which is both a great yarn and a compelling piece of Australian history. In the Foreword I explained my technique to the readers. The reaction was predictable, horror from the purists and general approval from reviewers and the public who agreed that the technique made for a

more compelling and more complete book. *Shoot Straight...* became a best-seller.

You'll Never Take Me Alive provided even more of a challenge. I fell in love with the story right away. Here was a bushranger who wasn't Irish or born with an inbred hatred of the police. Ben Hall's life was a compellingly powerful human tale of betrayal, guilt and vengeance set against the dramatic backdrop of the gold rush and the "roaring days" of bushranging that followed.

In a nutshell, Ben Hall was a cattleman and land owner whose wife left him. He went on the grog and fell in with bad company, which brought him to the attention of the police. After they had harried and hounded him, burnt his farm and killed his cattle he turned bushranger with the memorable ditty, "I might as well have the game as the blame." For three years he led the forces of law and (dis)order a merry chase until they hunted him down and killed him.

Great story, trouble was that Ben Hall was illiterate and didn't tell his story to anyone else who could write. Apart from folklore, the only solid archive that existed was in police records or newspapers, neither noted for their objectivity on the subject of bushranging. The story outline was clear enough, but the internal detail was missing. It was too much to attempt non-fiction or even creative non-fiction, so I decided to use historical fiction. Its widely believed that once you cross that "line" you give up any claim to historical credibility, or do you?

Historical fiction that has been researched as thoroughly as non fiction and sticks to the facts of the story, involves actual events, issues and characters of the day can be so convincing that readers have difficulty telling fact from fiction. The film "*Breaker" Morant* has left such an indelible impression on the national psyche that even some historians have presented scenes from the film as fact. While the author must make their approach clear, writing fiction it does not exclude you from including genuine historical fact.

During my research for Ben Hall I came across some new and controversial historical information. I could have left it out, but my story for fear of mixing genres, but was based on a real character and actual historical events I decided to add an Author's Afterword detailing the research I had uncovered, which vindicated the point of view I have taken and adds more value to the book. Will this be seen as muddying the waters, or adding substance to the story? Only time and the reviews will tell, but at the end of the day all you can do is research your story thoroughly, be brave, put your best foot forwards, tell your reader where you're coming from and above all don't look down! (1,017)

SPECIAL XMAS OFFER

A special Xmas offer for all members of the NSW Writer's Centre. Buy Nick Bleszynski's new book "*You'll Never Take Me Alive*" at a special price of **???**

To order just log onto www.blackrosemedia.com.au This offer ends on 31/1/2006.

I have always had trouble with so-called "objective history". Even a ????? reading of world history would have to concede that the history of mankind does not point to that as one of our virtues. Few books I have ever read and even fewer historians I have debated could claim to be truly objective. Perhaps they start out that way right at the beginning, but their politics and world view facts invariably point the writer to one point of view or the other and he builds his case around the facts, as they see them.

*Nick Bleszynski is the author of "Shoot Straight You Bastards!" and the recently released "You'll Never Take Me Alive" both published by Random House. Nick also does mentoring and writing courses for NSW Writer's Centre. His popular course **Write a Best-Seller** will be running in 2006.*