



Medieval Underpants and Other Blunders: A Writer's (and Editor's) Guide to Keeping Historical Fiction Free of Common Anachronisms, Errors, and Myths

Susanne Alleyn

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this is not a book on how to write historical fiction. It *is* a book on how *not* to write historical fiction.

If you love history and you're hard at work on your first historical novel, but you're wondering if your medieval Irishmen would live on potatoes, if your 17th-century pirate would use a revolver, or if your hero would be able to offer Marie-Antoinette a box of chocolate bonbons...

(The answer to all these is "Absolutely not!")

...then *Medieval Underpants and Other Blunders* is the book for you.

Medieval Underpants will guide you through the factual mistakes that writers of historical fiction—both beginners and professionals—most often make, and show you how to avoid them. From fictional characters crossing streets that wouldn't exist for another sixty years, to the pitfalls of the Columbian Exchange (when plants and foods native to the Americas first began to appear in Europe, Asia, and Africa, and vice versa), to 1990s slang in the mouths of 1940s characters, Susanne Alleyn exposes the often hilarious, always painful goofs that turn up most frequently in fiction set in the past.

Alleyn stresses the hazards to writers of assuming too much about details of life in past centuries, providing numerous examples of mistakes that could easily have been avoided. She also explores commonly-confused topics such as the important difference between the British titles "Lord John Smith" and "John, Lord Smith" and why they're not interchangeable, and provides simple guidelines for getting them right. In a wide assortment of chapters including Food and Plants; Travel; Dialogue, Expressions, and Slang; Guns; Money; and, of course, Underpants, she offers tips on how to avoid errors and anachronisms while continually reminding writers of the necessity of meticulous historical research.

Medieval Underpants and Other Blunders: A Writer's (and Editor's) Guide to Keeping Historical Fiction Free of Common Anachronisms, Errors, and Myths Details

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From Reader Review Medieval Underpants and Other Blunders: A Writer's (and Editor's) Guide to Keeping Historical Fiction Free of Common Anachronisms, Errors, and Myths for online ebook

David says

Susanne Alleyn is a historical fiction author who's evidently seen one too many manuscripts by aspiring authors of historical fiction featuring Marie-Antoinette eating bonbons. And she *really* has a thing about French Revolution guillotine scenes.

Medieval Underpants and Other Blunders: A Writer's (& Editor's) Guide to Keeping Historical Fiction Free of Common Anachronisms, Errors, & Myths, as the name suggests, is written primarily for writers, and can basically be summed up as a heartfelt plea to **do your research!**

I'm not a HF author, but I enjoyed this book a great deal both for its historical tidbits about minutiae that most of us don't think about but have seen in countless bad books and movies (and even good ones), and because Alleyn's rants are both entertaining and informative. One can practically see her gnashing her teeth and throwing books against walls as she describes all the historical infelicities she has encountered.

The first chapter goes into great detail on the history of underpants and the logistics thereof, and from there we move through many more chapters covering geography, slang, food and animals, names, guns, funerals, and a host of other topics. Why your 18th-century traveler cannot cross Europe in a week. Why your 17th-century Englishman was not hanging out in the 17th-century equivalent of Starbucks. Why your Irish Celtic tribesman did not eat potatoes and your 19th-century American heroine was probably not named Dominique or Brianna.

Many of the things the author points out are (or should be) obvious, but she describes some real howlers from people who should know better.

The *first page* of this writer's sample chapters included (this is supposed to be England in 1066, remember):

- A character lighting up a cigar [tobacco originated in the Americas, which, if it's slipped your mind, weren't discovered until 1492; and smoking cigars—rather than pipes—didn't really become popular until the 19th century.]
- Two characters chatting, while sitting on a leather sofa, in a roadside inn's cozy lounge [11th-century English roadside inns were not remotely cozy and had neither lounges nor leather-covered furniture; and no one in Western Europe had had anything like a sofa since the days of the Roman Empire.]
- One character casually mentioning that, since the coronation of King William [autumn 1066], he had just been on a trip to the Far East and had had a wonderful time seeing China [two centuries before Marco Polo spent years on his history-making journey from Venice to China and back, and when a traveler was lucky if he covered forty miles a day—did this fellow get to China, and back to England, within two months by going to Travelocity.com and buying a discounted airfare?]
- One character greeting another with "You look great." [Ouch. Just ouch.]

Then she tears into Charles Dickens for his mistakes in *A Tale of Two Cities* (remember, Dickens was writing historical fiction himself, about events that took place in the previous century, and like modern writers, Dickens relied on a lot of popular myths and then-current propaganda about the French Revolution.)

Alleyn provides a wealth of detail about myths and facts concerning everything from hygiene to employment to travel. She takes aim at the myth that Europeans from the fall of Rome until the modern era were generally filthy and unwashed, and spends an entire chapter on that horrid anachronism we've all seen, the medieval or Renaissance or Victorian woman spouting 21st century feminism, racial equality, and religious egalitarianism.

Of course, she totally won my affections with her trashing of Mr. Churchill's *Secretary* (which was a horrible, badly-written, and atrociously anachronistic book - and Alleyn spotted even more errors that I didn't!).

This is not a comprehensive book about writing historical fiction. It covers only Europe, and mostly only the 16th century onwards, with a few notes about earlier times. Alleyn's own work seems to be mostly about the French Revolution, so she spends a lot of pages talking about that. (And she apparently thinks the French aristocracy totally had it coming, since there are many, many sarcastic asides about those "poor, blameless aristos.")

There is also an entire chapter about the nuances of English titles and why "Lord John Throckmorton" and "John, Lord Throckmorton" are not the same. This chapter made my eyes glaze over and was far more detail than any normal person would care about (as the author points out, even upper-class Brits get it wrong nowadays), but if you're writing historical fiction in that era, it would be very useful.

I bought this mostly because the ebook was on sale for \$0.99, but it was well worth the read.

Amy Rae says

Have you ever met a person who thinks they're *really special* just because they know something? The kind of person who gets snide and sniggery when other people dare be less informed than they are?

That's this book in a nutshell.

Susanne Alleyn clearly knows a great deal about history, and the information she provides in this book is invaluable. You just have to put up with her deeply unfunny attempts at wit and insistence on putting down other people on the way there.

Look, I get it. It's annoying when people mess up stuff you think is easy. I get annoyed when characters in historical novels have unlikely names--I totally get it. But Alleyn's writing is so incredibly condescending, so devoid of encouragement or faith in her readers, that I just want to go out there, find everyone writing Viking romances featuring women named Madison, and tell them to follow their fucking dreams. At least there's a chance their books won't be completely and utterly joyless.

The sad irony of all this is that her book is hardly free from error. A footnote in Chapter 8 reads as follows:

The autobiographical Little House books, first published in the 1930s, are an invaluable

resource for American frontier life in the Midwest and Great Plains in the 1870s and 1880s.
Forget everything about the TV series.

The rule on the very next page--*the very next page*--is Do Not Borrow Your Period Details & Information From Other People's Historical Novels & Movies.

Oh, honey. Oh, *honey*.

Look, I love the Little House books, but they are *historical fiction*. They're a sticky situation, because you'll certainly know how to make butter by the end of them, but they are absolutely fictionalized. They were written decades after the fact, about a time period the author lived through as a very small child, and there are aspects of them that are *absolutely not appropriate* to take as fact.

Wilder's treatment of Native Americans, as an example, should not be taken as historical reality by any means. For instance, the Native American "prophet" character at the beginning of *The Long Winter* was the product of her imagination. She made him up out of whole cloth--and with unfortunate implications, since his placement within the book suggests that Native Americans are unchristianized and animal-like. Remember how Pa tells Laura that God tells the animals when a long winter is coming because they don't have free will like humans? What's the Native American character's warning to the people of De Smet?

There's no acknowledgment of these complicating factors in her footnote. If you had no familiarity with Wilder's work, you might assume that her books were straight autobiography and unquestionably useful. Of *course* you shouldn't take a single source as unimpeachable fact, but Alleyn is presenting her book as a one-stop shop for basic historical information. In a hurry, you might.

And that's the point at which I put the book down, because I have better things to do with my life than listen to a paper tiger of an author being a blowhard about what she knows while getting basic facts about children's literature wrong. ˘(?)˘

The information in this book is useful, I'll say it again. The author's attitude is not. Would not recommend.

Lolly's Library says

4.5 stars

If anyone out there in "I wanna be a writer!"-land desires to turn their hand to the Historical Fiction genre (hereafter known as HF), Alleyn's book should be required reading before a single sentence is put to paper. Because, unlike other writing guides, this book doesn't tell you how to write HF, it tells you how NOT to write HF. Mainly by pointing out what should be obvious: do your research and never assume anything. (Almost as important? *Never, ever get your research from other HF novels or movies. EVER.*) While Alleyn uses howlers, those mistakes so glaring they're hilarious, found in published works as examples of what not to do (always without naming names*), she's not shy about pointing out the errors in her own writing, which is refreshing. And refreshingly honest. However, the use of her own writing as examples of how to accurately write HF is a bit jarring as well as self-serving; it's the only real sour note in the entire book.

I can't say I learned anything new by reading this. Neither will anyone else who's made a study of, not just a

wide range of history, but also books of opposing viewpoints. However, this is a handy compendium, full of reminders of the pitfalls to avoid as well as resources to help research the different historical eras. The chapter on the aristocracy and their titles alone is worth the price of the book.

*I know she couldn't (libel laws and all that), but I wish Alleyn had used names or at least book titles when mentioning these howlers. It would make it so much easier to avoid these potentially crappy reads.

Deborah Markus says

What a terrific book. You don't have to be a writer or a history buff to enjoy it. If you are a writer or a history buff (or both), for heaven's sake, read this. Even if your writing isn't historical in nature. Heck, you might be inspired to tackle historical writing after reading this.

That sense of enthused inspiration was one of the most pleasant surprises *Medieval Underpants* had to offer me. (That and how much fun it was to mention on a daily basis that I was reading a book called *Medieval Underpants*. Especially to my teenage son. Seriously, it never got old.) I thought I'd come away from this book terrified to continue with my current writing project, but instead I can't wait to jump back into it. Because while Alleyn does point out other writers' bloopers and blunders, she's never malicious or spiteful. She knows how hard it is to get historical writing right, and she's made a few mistakes herself. So she doesn't yell or finger-point.

Well, okay. She does yell, a little. But not in a scary-schoolteacher kind of way. When another writer gets something blatantly, horribly, avoidably wrong, especially in Alleyn's specialty – Revolutionary France – she falls on the floor and writhes around in agony. And she makes it a lot of fun to watch. Chapter 15, “Bloopers: Guillotines – and the Obligatory Heart-Wrenching French Revolution Execution Scene,” alternates between Alleyn holding it together long enough to offer a lot of fascinating information, and screaming “DEAR GOD, MAKE IT STOP!” as she details some of the worst offenses on both page and screen.

(Speaking of fascinating details: Did you know that the French were using the guillotine in public executions as late as 1939, and “was the sole official method of execution used in France and French territories until the death penalty was abolished,” and that its last use was in 1977? I sure as heck didn't.)

Alleyn covers a lot of territory in a relatively short book. She offers many good general rules for writers – never assume! Look everything up, even stuff you thought you knew! Believe it or not, Wikipedia is your friend (at least some of the time)! And for mercy's sake, don't borrow “historical” details from movies and novels. (Unless they're novels written during the time in which your novel is placed, of course – and even then, you need to be careful.)

She also slips in some great information specific to certain times and places. I'm not saying I was planning to mention chipmunks in my YA novel set in Regency England, but now I know that I'd better not have my heroine gazing idly out the window and catching sight of a few frolicking in the trees.

And she makes subjects that usually put me to sleep interesting in spite of themselves. (Or, to be fair, my self.) I am that rare American female who has never felt a speck of interest in how British titles work, though I have been known to absentmindedly correct friends who refer to “Princess” Kate. (She's actually a duchess.) Even after Alleyn's best efforts, I'm still not totally conversant when it comes to the ins and outs of

lords and ladies. But I know more about them now. Mostly, I know enough to know that I'm not even going to try to get them right, so it's a good thing my heroine is a commoner.

I was also interested, in spite of my generally peaceful tendencies, to learn where the phrase "a flash in the pan" comes from, and the differences between muskets and rifles. (Summary: Rifles are more accurate, but muskets are quicker to load.)

Getting back to subjects that do interest me: I was surprised and pleased to learn that, contrary to stereotype, human beings have not spent most of our history being really, really stinky.

And, most surprising of all, I was impressed to see that Susanne Alleyn offers a really strong argument for a lack of female underpants. (Historically speaking, that is. Go ahead and hang on to yours, if you have them.) I still think that Regency females must have worn something under those relatively close-fitting WHITE gowns. Yes, they might have just wrapped up as best they could during certain times of the month; but many if not most women have been surprised by Aunt Flo at some point in their lives. Surely you'd want to be wearing something to keep from ruining that lovely gown (and embarrassing yourself publicly), especially if, like plenty of women, you had unpredictable periods. But Alleyn's arguments against pre-Regency panties are compelling.

Which is a great note to end on, so I'll leave it there.

Marquise says

A wonderful little book full of useful information, all laid out in a humorous tone that I personally found charming. Alleyn is very well-informed and knowledgeable on a variety of topics, and more importantly, is willing to admit to her own bloopers in her own novel, an attitude that I am not sure others that bemoan her tone are taking into account.

Some of her facts are quite basic and any history fan with a modicum of knowledge would know, others are more complicated. But whether you're a history fan in search of a good book on accuracy for those novels you adore or a writer aspiring to be taken seriously, reading this book is immensely helpful.

Lyuda says

Some of my GR friends mentioned this book in their reviews of "historical" romances where the history didn't entered into the setup beyond dresses (or rather undresses).

And with a title like this, how could I resist? So, I'll get right to the burning question of medieval underpants. What kind of panties did the pre- mid-19th-century woman wear?

The answer: She didn't. (no ruffled bloomers, no lacy drawers). Why not? Imagine there is no modern public toilet in sight. Imagine layers and layers of skirts, underskirts and hoops or panniers that women had to unearth to untie and pull down bloomers or panties...

Without the underdrawers, you just hunker down and spread your skirts, without exposing any part of your bare flesh to prying eyes, and whiz. So much easier and so much more modest ...That's how women relieved

themselves for millennia, even in civilizations like ancient Rome that had toilets at "sitting" height; ancient Roman public latrines seem to have been unisex because both genders simply sat and spread their clothing decently over themselves while they were tending to their business.

I love historical trivia and the book is full of these everyday tidbits of the past written in a highly entertaining and informative manner.

From money to food to geography to English titles to slangs, the little book covers a lot of ground. I especially liked the chapter **Anachronisms of Attitude: Misplaced Political Correctness, Informality, & Feisty Females** and I wish more historical romance authors read it.

Some authors, especially of formula steamy romances (or of formula histo-mysteries featuring plucky female amateur crime-solvers from all eras), just don't grasp the Taliban-worthy social limitations imposed on high-caste European or American women at almost any time before World War I. ... Read up on modern Saudi Arabian society and its intense religiosity, sexual prudery, and severe limitations placed on all women, when you try to imagine how restrictive and narrow young, upper-class, unmarried Western women's lives could have been in past centuries—even in notoriously uninhibited eras like the 17th or 18th centuries in western Europe, when married adults tended to revel in promiscuity.

The author's basic lessons can be summed up: check your facts and then check them again. Use PRIMARY sources. Never depend on other historical novels or movies. Never ASSSUME something was true "then" because it's true now. In fact, never assume anything.

Kim says

Quite a fun read. It is full of what not to do in Great Britain, France and the Roman Empire but not so helpful other parts of Europe (Germany in particular). That said, it WAS helpful in getting me to think about the research that I haven't done and need to do before I continue on my MG historical novel.... I have already found two mistakes that I need to correct.

I would recommend reading this if you need some insight on what to look for when writing about the past be it 50 or 500 years ago.

Sesana says

Read out of simple curiosity, not because I plan on writing anything. Informative and well-written, and I love Alleyn for tackling almost all of my historical pet peeves. In particular, I greatly appreciated the sections on the French Revolution, because it really is difficult to sort out historical truths from the various biased accounts.

Ben Aaronovitch says

A useful little book that will steer you towards good practise and away from some of the howlers of Historical Fiction. The author, sensibly, doesn't attempt an exhaustive guide but instead deals in broad strokes with problem areas - you're still going to have to go out and do some research - sorry.

Tracey says

I love this stuff.

I didn't so much want to read this as a writer as as (as as?) a reader. I used to write, though not historical fiction (HF) – but I am a long-time (sometimes I feel it should be "long-suffering") reader of all-sorts, including lots of historical fiction and mystery. And as I know I have said in several HF/HM (historical mystery) reviews, one thing that is sure to make me fling a book against the nearest wall (unless I'm reading on my Kindle) is for anyone in any story set before about 1875, or an equivalent time period, to say "okay". It's not okay.

Susanne Alleyn is a lady after my own heart. She knows the pain of an anachronistic "okay", or an out of place revolver, or an impossible cup of tea – and instead of just complaining about it like me she aims to do something about it.

And so, in an intelligent and fun-to-read format, she proceeds through the various areas where authors, and not just new authors, tend to screw up. Don't – as Adam Schell so wonderfully explained in *Tomato Rhapsody* – include tomatoes in Italian (or any European) cuisine before the 1500's; don't have a chipmunk run over someone's foot in 16th century England or have an Apache brave leap onto his horse in 15th century North America; don't – DON'T – have anyone say "okay" before 1890, no matter what.

I've been looking over some of my book reviews lately, and I'd love to anonymously send at least a few of those authors copies of this book. Because just about everything she tries to instruct against has come up at some point. (Except tobacco... I don't think I've seen misuse of tobacco in a book. I think I would have flagged it.) Like the Restoration Era CPR in one book, along with the use of "hammered" to mean drunk; the references to personal space in another; an accusation that one person is "playing" another in 15th century Scotland, along with a reference to "play[ing] that card". All the bits that seem to be written with a tin ear toward historical accuracy ... I've never understood why someone with that sort of tone deafness chooses to set his tale in another place and time. I've never understood why someone who chooses to set his tale in another place and time can't do the research. Here, in one easy dose, is an antidote to a whole heck of a lot of that nonsense – and it's also a gateway drug, to abuse that metaphor further: with this as a starting point, it can't but be a great deal easier to know whether that one character should be eating spaghetti ... or if that other one should be wearing underpants...

Justin Robinson says

To be clear, there's a lot of good stuff in here. This is an excellent resource both for writers of historical fiction and people who just plain love trivia. The writing though... the writing isn't great. The tone is condescending, to the point that the subtitle might more accurately be called "The Mansplainer's Guide to..." Unlike traditional mansplaining, it's mostly correct (as far as I can tell, anyway), but when the author gets something wrong (a howler, in her persistent and obnoxious terminology), it really stands out. Like when she says you won't encounter many doorknobs in the 18th Century. Quite a trick since they weren't invented until the middle of the 19th. Still, the good outweighs the bad, and the author is up front about the single most

important point: do your own research. Don't trust anyone. Not even her.

Roxana Chiril? says

I won't lie: I bought this book because I liked the title and I thought I'd very much enjoy a book called "Medieval Underpants and Other Blunders". It sounded like a fun guide to random historical things you'd assume were different, complete with quotes and examples.

And... well, it is. I suppose.

Have you ever had the feeling that you're reading a book and wrestling with the author at the same time? Because that's how I felt. While the **information** here was fun, the **tone** wasn't. I guess it would have worked for Tumblr posts jotted down while tired, but it felt oddly out of place in a published book.

What annoyed me:

- the author facepalmed a lot. By which, I mean she literally wrote *facepalm* on a separate line fairly often. It felt... mean?
- servants kept getting compared to vacuum cleaners and other appliances; and while I'd agree that their *roles* were somewhat similar (helping keep a house), this felt uncomfortably like dehumanizing said servants. I'm sure they get ignored in a lot of period fiction, but fiction is different from real life - they ignored a lot of things in fiction.
- some things felt reductionist (like describing women as basically dismissed as child bearers... eh... eh).

Otherwise, there's random interesting stuff there, like what medieval underwear was like, or how sugar got imported, how cemeteries worked, how and on what people wrote, the fact that fruit isn't all available at the same time (...I guess the last one can be explained by the fact that the author is American, because I don't think people around here don't know that strawberries and grapes don't come into season at the same time) and all sorts of other things.

Not that bad, but not a book I'd heartily recommend, either.

The Just-About-Cocky Ms M says

I think that HF authors and wannabes should download or buy this book before they write another word. If some of them had, I probably would be so cranky when I finish reading a book or three. This is a short, highly entertaining, and very valuable primer for avoiding pitfalls large and small. Don't think you already know it all, because none of us do, but prop your feet up, have a little wine, and enjoy,

Lindsay says

I wanted to like this book a lot more than I did, and it's a shame because it is truly a wealth of information for both historical writers and enthusiasts alike. There is a lot of very well-researched, well-explained facts that are generally gotten quite wrong in a lot of popular genres, and it was honestly a treat for a non-history-major to get some great easy-to-grasp info about the nitty-gritty of everyday life.

Why not 5 stars? Honestly, it was the writing tone, and I feel bad saying that. The tone was extremely condescending and specifically worded as if I were already making these mistakes, and should feel bad for that. It's unusual for me to take exception at the tone of an instructional book, but there you are. It would have been something I'd devoured in a day if I hadn't been feeling all kinds of grumpy at being lectured on how I was stupid and doing things wrong -- isn't reading this book the first step to getting them right? Or well, doing your research.

Still, absolutely worth it for anyone who is interested in writing historical fiction, picking up historical trivia, or really wants to know how anyone managed to pee under layers of stays, petticoats and overcoats.

Jane says

Where I got the book: purchased on Kindle.

With knowledgeable editors rarer than purple elephants and increasing numbers of wannabe historical fiction writers self-publishing, the chance of really good historical blunders is high. I've reviewed quite a few novels with hysterical howlers; many of them were ARCs so I couldn't point out the mistakes in my reviews, but some were published, presumably edited, novels from major publishing houses. Two that jump to mind were the prim and proper young lady climbing out of a carriage window in front of the hero in what would have been CROTCHLESS UNDERWEAR, and the accident at a London stoplight around 14 years before the first traffic signals made their appearance in England. That last author is, in fact, singled out by Alleyn for one of her other books, as a how-not-to-do-it example, which tickled me no end.

Most of the book, though, isn't attacks on authors. Most of the book is an idiosyncratic but very entertaining look at some of the most common traps in historical fiction, written to amuse but also (hopefully) to provoke wannabe historical fiction writers into doing the most basic research at the very least. There are always, ALWAYS, however much you research, going to be readers who think you're wrong, from the Ph.D. whose thesis was on EXACTLY the period you've covered to the general reader who doesn't think people said "bump" to refer to a pregnant woman's belly in the 19th century (that's from a review of a book I wrote, and maybe she's right...) But the point is to avoid making too many errors that provoke an OH COME ON and a little book-throwing from the general reader; my Kindle narrowly escaped damage when one self-pubber had someone perform a Heimlich maneuver in 1912 (look it up).

Alleyn's basic message is: do some background research before you start writing and look things up as you go along, if only on Wikipedia. Don't get your ideas about history from other people's fiction or from movies or TV, which are often wrong. If you're dealing with the aristocracy, for gawd's sake gain a basic understanding about how titles work. And if a character's undergarments are showing, make sure they're correct for the period and that people actually *wore* undergarments back then (hint: often, they didn't.)

In among all the amusing advice are some very helpful chapters; the one on titles is pretty thorough and should be required reading for all American authors and many Brits. There is an excellent list of resource books at the end, which alone is worth the price of the download.

The only things I take issue with are the screamingly horrible cover (is it ironic?)* and Alleyn using her own fiction as a how-to-do-it example, especially as she uses the term "teenage" in a period well before the idea of a teenager was invented. Those are minor quibbles given the amount of entertainment I got from a book that can be read by both writers and readers of historical fiction. Heartily recommended.

*The author says yes.
