

UNTOLD STORIES

what didn't make the cut?

Transforming research into fiction, deciding what to leave out and what to transfigure, are critical stages for any historical novelist. Research is a process of being comprehensive and then selective. I asked four writers to tell me what didn't make the cut in their novels, why not, and might it reappear elsewhere?

Livi Michael, author of a fifteenth-century trilogy, cites the need to reduce the number of characters as a reason for cuts. Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*, she says, demonstrate the advantage of focusing closely on a single character. John Tiptoft, Earl of Worcester, and Ankarette Twynyho are two characters that didn't make it into Michael's novels.

Tiptoft was especially cruel to captured rebels: not only were they hung, drawn and quartered, but also skewered through the anus by a sharp stave. "This angered the people of the land and forever afterwards the Earl of Worcester was greatly hated," records Warkworth's chronicle. When Tiptoft was himself sentenced to death, his execution was delayed by the extreme anger of the mob. He was kept in gaol overnight until the crowds calmed down enough to allow soldiers to get him to Tower Hill to be beheaded. "I love this story," says Michael. "It speaks eloquently of the difference between our own era and fifteenth-century England, in which barbaric punishment was lawful, but it was *still possible to go too far*."

Twynyho was hanged, unjustifiably, by the Duke of Clarence, who suspected her of poisoning his wife. Twynyho was given a sham trial at which all the jurors were men who lived on Clarence's land and were dependent upon him. After sentencing, each juror addressed an apology to Ankarette, begging her forgiveness.

And then she was hanged. Michael says: "I still have pangs of regret for these lost characters!" There is a temptation to get

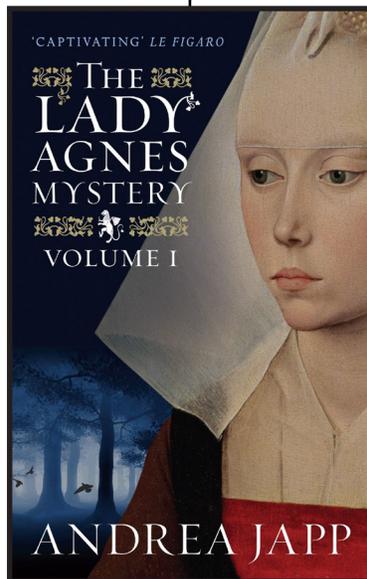
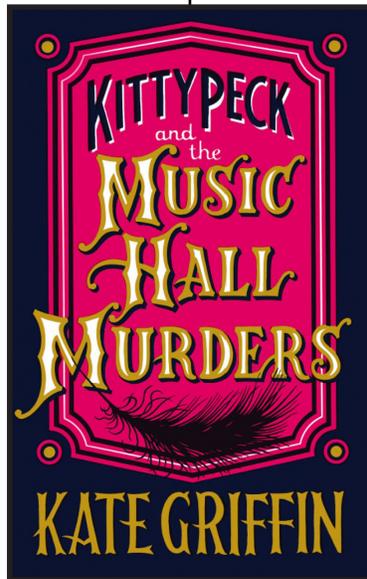
so carried away by research that the drift of the story is lost, but Michael stresses that you should fight the desire to include something simply because you find it interesting.

S.G. MacLean's novels are set in seventeenth-century Scotland and London. She also cites learning not to be self-indulgent with research, instead keeping the story focused. "If it added nothing to my substantive story, if it didn't further the plot or deepen the portrayal of my main characters in any way, it had to go."

She came across a story in the *Annals of Banff* about a young boy called Francis Brown who was hanged by the town authorities for "persistently breaking into booths," and "stealing buttons and bows." MacLean says, "I wanted to rescue him from the anonymity of history, and so I put his story in my book. My editor, very gently, but very firmly, took it out again. Other victims of my editor's pencil in the early days were lovingly researched and written up descriptions of a seventeenth-century apothecary's shop, and the contents of a Scottish bookseller's shop. They smacked too much of a writer with copious research notes beside her as she wrote, and again, the cardinal sin of crime fiction, they held up the story."

French author Andrea Japp's medieval mysteries have recently been published in English. She notes, "I have to understand everything, even if I do not use it. It is a way to ground my story, so that my readers wish to accompany me back to these ancient times. So, indeed, there are many things that do not make it to my novels, just because they are a sort of substrate."

Japp feels regret for research she cuts out, usually because she decides it is not essential, she has too much material, or she doesn't have room to do it justice. Her examples include Etienne Marcel, a supposed hero of the Hundred Years' War against England,



by Tracey Warr

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who has a subway station named after him in Paris but is, Japp says, not quite the hero everyone thinks; he was a medieval executioner. “Executioners were essential for every town, but they were considered sub-human – not allowed to live in the city, send their children to school, eat in taverns. Some became very rich, sometimes more educated than the rest of the population. I did not want to squeeze in this character, because the subject was complicated. Readers needed to understand the state of mind at that time, very different from ours today. Horrific torture and the death penalty were not seen as that cruel. What was crucial was to save the soul of the convicted person. It was a very complex reality, and I could not be cursory about it.”

Kate Griffin’s Kitty Peck novels are set in the world of the Victorian music hall. “People seem surprised by the bleakness of my characters’ lives and the London they inhabit,” she says, “but the truth was actually far worse.” She told me how she reworks her source material to make it more effective as fiction for contemporary readers. Her research on music hall entertainers took her to London’s Victorian cemeteries. Abney Park in Stoke Newington is the resting place of non-conformists, and many music hall performers are buried there. They lived outside the mainstream, not conforming to the standards or morals of their time. “The fact that they were stage performers,” says Griffin, “was enough to mark them out as ‘undesirables,’ but their perceived ‘loose’ morals, sometimes ambiguous sexuality and professional association with cheap liquor (alcohol was served in music halls, not theatres), was anathema to polite society. Their lives were often poor, rough, brutish, short. Definitely not the kind of people a ‘decent’ Victorian family wanted to see buried alongside Grandmama.”

During a tour of Abney Park cemetery led by the Music Hall Guild of Great Britain and America, Griffin found the graves of nineteenth-century crowd-pullers George Leybourne (Champagne Charlie) and Albert Chevalier, and of Nelly Power, the original singer of the music hall standard, “The Boy I Love is Up in the Gallery.” “Nelly’s story, as related by our guide at her graveside, was as dismal as the foggy November afternoon of my visit,” Griffin says. She appeared in the halls from the age of eight, and by fifteen she was a star, one of the biggest names in the business. “She was catnip to the audiences, and also, unfortunately, to a series of unscrupulous rogues attracted by her money and pert beauty.” But her last years were pitiful. She died alone, probably from venereal disease, in a rented room above a pub in Islington, aged thirty-two.

Griffin’s research also revealed that the music hall was a place where strong women could control their own careers and choices. Griffin’s protagonist, Kitty Peck, reflects the spirit of the young Nelly Power, but Griffin deliberately made her character more wily, resourceful and independent: “I’ve been careful to ensure that she is not a victim – not a syphilitic, chaotic alcoholic, vulnerable to sexual exploitation or manipulation, as many of the performers were. We tend to think of music hall as something archaically jolly, with a jaunty ‘end-of-the-pier’ humour of songs

and routines, but that picture is very far from the reality. Nelly’s story is ultimately depressing and sordid. I cherish a *Goodreads* reviewer who wrote that I ‘seem to cover everything in life that is unsavoury.’ I’ve used aspects of Nelly’s story to inform the gritty darkness in the Kitty Peck books, but the truth is – despite what some people might think – I probably haven’t gone far enough! Hopefully I’m writing to entertain, not depress my readers.”

In my own fiction I tend to focus on lesser-known women in history – untold stories themselves, if you like. I have a list of women I would like to write about, and I don’t suppose I will manage to get around to them all. The sixth-century Frankish princess Riginth, with her murderous mother, the Merovingian Queen Fredegunde, and her ill-fated journey to be betrothed to a Visigothic prince, is very tempting. I hope I will get to ‘write her’ one day. But my first three novels focused on the early medieval period, and there are still many more untold stories in that era before I can get around to opening up a whole new trench of sixth-century research to tell Riginth’s story.

Playing untold stories forward into future books is a recurring note in the authors’ responses to my questions. I quite often have stories glanced upon in one novel that I then develop in a later novel. Several readers told me they wanted to know more about Dia, a female troubadour who appears in my first novel, and now I have a new story in development with a female troubadour protagonist. Similarly, Japp says, “I could not get the idea of the executioner out of my head. A few years later, I created another saga where the hero is an executioner. I had room to focus on making this man exist and to show the way he felt, since he is not at all a sadist, but rather an educated man. It was fascinating to explain his denial.” Kate Griffin plans to include her research on Victorian stage machinery, make-up, props and the mechanics of illusion – “they all offer rich potential for murderous intent” – in her next two Kitty Peck novels. Livi Michael says she may use her untold stories on her website.

S.G. MacLean says she refers to the story of the young boy hanged for stealing buttons and bows when talking to writing groups about deciding what to put in, and what to leave out. She knows, from the reactions of audiences, that in a small way, the harsh ending of that young boy’s life is not forgotten ❀

Recent novels by the authors: Livi Michael, *Accession* (Penguin, 2016), S.G. MacLean, *The Black Friar* (Quercus, 2016), both reviewed *HNR* 78; Andrea Japp, *The Lady Agnes Mystery* (Gallic, 2015), reviewed in *HNR* 74; and Kate Griffin, *Kitty Peck and the Child of Ill Fortune* (Faber, 2015), reviewed in *HNR* 75.



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