

**“IF WE DID
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THOMAS EDISON

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Making It Real . . . Researching the Historical Novel

For each hour I spend writing, I estimate I spend six more in research. Some might think that qualifies me as officially insane, but I assure you that such research is vital to the success of a historical novel, regardless of the age of your audience.

Research is used not only to convey accurate information, but to convince the reader through purposeful detail that what they’re reading is *real*. Consider the following excerpt from *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup:

When the corn is ground, and fire is made, the bacon is taken down from the nail on which it hangs, a slice cut off and thrown upon the coals to broil. The majority of slaves have no knife, much less a fork. They cut their bacon with the axe at the woodpile. The corn meal is mixed with a little water, placed in the fire and baked. When it is ‘done brown,’ the ashes are scraped off, and being placed upon a chip, which answers for a table, the ten-



Inside a slave cabin at Oakley Plantation, West Feliciana, LA

ant of the slave hut is ready to sit down upon the ground to supper.

Instead of having my character slice bacon, I have him chop bacon with an axe at the woodpile. Accurate research—tidbits, details—coupled with sensory information such as his fingers aching with cold, or his breath condensing into frosty clouds, bring a sense of realism to a novel, a sense that this is really happening.

But lest you think all I do is pore over weighty tomes looking for juicy tidbits (and yes, that is what I do), I also find it beneficial to

travel on location. I’ve attended Civil War reenactments, tromped the actual battlefield where my hero will fight, I’ve mushed a dog sled team in Barrow, Alaska, and handled heart-wrenching 150-year-old letters written by young Civil War soldiers who missed their mamas.

“It is strange being here in West Feliciana.” I wrote in my journal while in Louisiana. *“After so much research and writing, I feel as though I’ve stepped into the pages of my book, a sensation I’ve never experienced before. . . .”*

When a writer goes so far as to “step into the pages of her book,” the reader follows. And together they embark upon an adventure that takes on a life of its own, an adventure that seems *real*, in which our fingers freeze and our breath condenses into frosty billows of white.

NOTE: The above is partially excerpted from my workshop titled, RESEARCHING THE NOVEL. See my website for more information on the variety of my programs, suitable for adult writing conferences and workshops..

And We Have a Winner!

In my last newsletter I announced a writing contest. Entrants were to write a story no longer than 400 words about something coming out of the kitchen sink.

Oh boy, did the stories pour in! I must say, there are some very talented, imaginative young writers out there! We had dinosaurs,

strange little folk, and Hannah Montana bursting out of the sink. Our world was taken over by aliens and robots, and the various sinks out of which they climbed were leaky, smelly, cracked, or, in some cases, quite musical.

Anyway, it was a lot of fun hosting the contest, and I hope all of you who entered had a blast

writing.

So without further ado, and after much deliberation, late night cups of coffee, early mornings before sunrise, hmms and oh-my’s, and gosh-golly-gee-whizzes, you can find the winner’s story printed on page two.

Congratulations, Logan!

Music Sink by Logan A. (Grade 4, Graham, WA)



Uh oh, the sink is back!

The sink was no ordinary sink. Back in 1995, this bleak, white sink was discovered by Richard Roger and Peter Peterson. Richard and Peter took it home and put it in the dull kitchen. They turned the nozzle. The sink said I'm Disco and the drain said I'm Dancer. Then the nozzle started to play music. Amazingly a disco ball dropped out of the bottom, and the drain jumped out and started dancing. Then Richard and Peter started dancing. They danced all night and all day, nonstop. Richard would sleep dance and Peter just

kept dancing. This unordinary sink would not stop playing loud, funky, music. All of the neighborhood came over and started dancing. They couldn't stop dancing.

**“Amazingly,
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The authorities came to arrest Richard and Peter for not turning the music off for six weeks, five days, twenty-two hours and twenty-five

minutes. The authorities started dancing and could not stop.

The authorities called on some deaf people to come and turn off the music and the deaf people started dancing. They

could not stop dancing either.

Pretty soon everyone within a thirty-block radius had come to the party and someone said, “This is our last opportunity to turn off the music.” They threw bottles at the nozzle, however, the music kept playing.

A plumber joined the party. He unhooked the pipe with a wrench. The music stopped and the pipe dropped into the plumber's hand. It was an I-pod on full blast.

Everyone went home and slept all day and all night. Richard and Peter did not go to jail but slept all day and all night.

The End

What Makes the “Music Sink” a Winner?

There were tons of “winners” but I had to pick just one. So why did I pick “Music Sink?” What made it stand out?

First of all, understand that judging stories is a little like judging what flavor ice cream is the best. Some like vanilla, or caramel. I like chocolate. The chocolatey-er the better. So while I may have chosen “Music Sink” as the winner, that's just my opinion, and I'm just one person.

Secondly, there were some contestants who forgot to follow the rules. Oops! Not following the rules is the fastest way to get eliminated. Remember to keep your story within the word limit.

Logan's story had a beginning, middle, and end. Sounds easy, but it's amazing how many sto-

ries don't follow that simple rule of basic storytelling. Also, many stories tended to start long before the action. It would be several paragraphs before the *real* story began. Make sure you start the story with the action. Richard and Peter find a sink & when they take it home and turn it on, crazy stuff happens. Not only that, but there was a “hook”: *The sink was no ordinary sink. . . .* A hook makes you want to read more.

Also, I liked Logan's originality. Disco balls dropping out of the bottom of the sink? A dancing drain? Crazy! Hey, I like that!

Not only was the story original, but there was a problem that needed solving: Everyone who heard the music sink couldn't

stop dancing. The neighborhood was in a tight spot. No one could get any sleep. Who would solve the problem and how? Having problems in your story and making your characters figure out a solution, keeps the reader reading. They want to know how the problem gets solved.

The solution to the problem was believable, and simple: Plumber unhooks pipe with wrench; out pops I-pod; problem solved. In a super short story like this, you need super short problems and super short solutions.

But, most of all, Logan's story was just fun to read. It made me smile and laugh. And, after all, reaching the reader is what it's all about, isn't it?

Way to go, Logan!

“I liked Logan's originality. Disco balls dropping out of the bottom of the sink? A dancing drain? Crazy! Hey, I like that!”

What's in a Name?



Billy-Bob de Vinci?

I get asked lots of questions whenever I do school visits. Questions like, "How do you get your ideas?" or "Did you always know you wanted to be a writer?" But at my last school visit a student asked me something no one else had asked before: "Are names of characters important?"

Wow. Fabulous question.

The answer: YES! YES! and YES!

Names convey information about the character, including their temperaments, their possible habits or tendencies, even their physical features.

For instance, would I be more likely to name my average, ordinary carpet cleaner character "Bob" or "Marcello?" Probably Bob. Marcello might be better suited to, let's say, an undercover cop in Paris. "Bob" says ordinary, even friendly, while "Marcello" says exotic, foreign, extraordinary, friendly or otherwise. (Of course, your carpet cleaner might be an undercover cop from Paris. . . .)

How about the name "Adolf?" While in real life I wouldn't name

my pet fish Adolf, if you name a character Adolf, what are you saying about your character? Perhaps he's got a dark side, he's full of anger, he's out for revenge. Or maybe, he's simply got some insensitive parents who really like dark humor . . . (or maybe his parents are just flat out stupid). Also, because a name like "Adolf" demands explanation, the name would somehow, somewhere, need to come into play in your story. This is true of any highly unusual name in fiction.

Consider also last name and first name and how they sound together. A good example is "Stanley Yelnats" in Louis Sachar's *Holes*, a perfect name for a nerdy, nonconforming character who suddenly finds himself in a very weird & wacky situation.

It's important in choosing your names to do your best not to confuse the reader. I've read books where several of the main characters all had first names starting with the same letter of the alphabet. It started out confusing and only got worse. Whenever I write a book, I

keep a list of my "cast of characters," listing first names and last names alphabetically. I try not to have more than one character whose name starts with the same letter of the alphabet. I also try to stay away from names that look the same, such as Tim and Jim.

"Well," said Jim. "You ready?"

"In a sec," said Tim.

"Don't forget the keys," said Jim.

"Don't forget your brain," said Tim.

Jim and Tim were best friends, except Jim liked his coffee black while Tim hated coffee period.

Egads! Don't do this. You'll have your readers hating you.

While searching for just the right character name isn't rocket science, it does take time. I use the phone book. I use baby-name websites. I make lists of possible names, both first and last. And when you find that perfect name, ah . . . it's definitely time well-spent. Both your readers and your characters will thank you!

Happy Naming!

Summer Reading . . .

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