

# *Using and Misusing History*

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**Y**OU CAN TELL an old timer by the way he talks. Take Bob Giago, for example. To Giago, the Oklahoma City Indian Clinic will, likely, forever be "the health project."

That's what it was at the beginning, and Giago was there at the beginning. He's seen a lot, and it's reflected in his speech. He was there when people in the Oklahoma City Indian community pulled together to create a Native American Center, where various Indian programmes shared office space. They saw the desperate need for an urban Indian health project, and with the help of volunteer medical students seeing patients in the evenings at the Native American Center the health project blossomed. Eventually, it moved and became the Oklahoma City Indian Clinic. But to Giago, it's still "the health project."

If you are a novelist and you should have occasion in a manuscript to have an Indian woman seek prenatal care at that clinic, the history of the place is something your reader probably does not need to know. But if you know it, and you reveal a bit of it, perhaps by employing a character patterned after an old timer like a Bob Giago, you will establish instant credibility with your reader. You might never need to present your credentials again if you plant it in the mind of your reader early that you know what you are writing about.

A classic example of this technique is from a work of history. Legions of students have surveyed the Renaissance and the Reformation by way of the pithy prose of Henry Lucas. It's a big subject, almost more than one author could know. Yet, after working one's way through the fifth paragraph of his first chapter, which traces the claims of various parties to the crown of

Naples, and the ancestral lineage of some claimants, a paragraph that must be diagrammed to be comprehended (and even then it's even money) few people have had it occur to them to question the author's credentials for attempting a nearly encyclopedic survey of that era. Lucas never repeats such a passage, nor does he need to. The war to win the confidence of his reader is over. It was a short battle. It took place in the subconscious portion of the mind of the reader. And Lucas won it.

If you choose your opening to hit upon a strong point in your research you can do what Lucas did, though you'll undoubtedly not want to stop the flow of your story to do it. Maybe a character patterned after an old timer like a Bob Giago could make a difference in an opening scene, someone who reveals by the way he talks that he didn't just fall off the turnip truck. A quiet analysis of how his speech differs from that of others could be a vehicle for slipping in enough concrete, specific details from your research to lull the reader into accepting everything else you say at face value. But while you might capitalize on the anomaly of an old timer referring to the present in terms of the past, you must guard against referring to the past in terms of the present.

Let's look at a completely harmless example first. In a magazine article an author says, a "British-American standoff persisted in northern California until the 1845 war with Mexico resulted in the annexation of most of the Southwest, including all of California." The problem here is that the United States did not annex all of California. Alta California, yes; Baja California, no. All of California? No way. You might say, "But Baja California is in Mexico." But isn't that the point? So was Alta California.

Trivial? Yes. The author's use of the term "northern" conjures up images of the way the present state of California is divided between a northern and southern section for many kinds of references, and his "most of the Southwest" lends further support to a conclusion that he has in mind the contemporary borders of that region (except for the Gadsden Purchase). Undoubtedly the author means "the present state of California." But that isn't what he says, and he uses the term in such a way that the more one knows about the long history of Spain in America,

and the Mexican War, and the negotiations for the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo for what would remain Mexican and what would become American, the more careless the remark will seem.

If you set your novel in that region in that era it will be just such readers your book likely will attract.

In this instance the carelessness of the remark about California turns out to be merely a preface to an error of fact that follows in the very next sentence, where the author misses the date of the promulgation of the Monroe Doctrine by seventeen years. Since much of the remainder of the article concerns difficult-to-verify information about the fur trade, how much confidence would you place in that information? I believe this author got himself in trouble by the unhistorical mindset which he brought to writing history. If the remainder of the article had been flawless, then his lapse of referring to the past in terms of the present might have been overlooked. But, as is so often the case, it turned out to be a warning to a wary reader that this author was in trouble.

The quickest way I know to get into trouble in this regard is in writing about Indians. The problem here is that so much of what has been published that you might want to rely upon in your research, even reference books, especially reference books, has been written so as to distort history, and one of the most common vehicles in that attempt has been to refer to the past in terms of the present. Suppose you were to decide to set your novel among Indians. Suppose you were to choose one of the so-called Five Civilized Tribes, the Choctaw Indians.

You begin your research by consulting reference books. See if you can spot any problem with this statement from the *American Indian Almanac*, in an otherwise excellent entry about the Choctaws: "After being forced to cede their lands in Mississippi and Alabama and to move to Oklahoma, the Choctaw established their own government." The problem here is that while Mississippi and Alabama were in existence at the time of Choctaw removal (early 1830s), Oklahoma was not. "Oklahoma" has no geographical significance except as a reference to constitutionally created entities (a territory in 1890; a state in 1907). Therefore, in the early 1830s the Choctaws could not have been moved there.

Oklahoma is a term meaning "Red People," consisting of the Choctaw words *okla* (people) and *humma* (red). Because the Choctaw word *humma* has come to be spelled "homa" in the name "Oklahoma," one frequently sees the name translated as "Home of the Red Man," but "home" is no part of the term; Choctaw words for home are *aiilli*, *chuka*, and *yakni*. The term was suggested by Choctaw Principal Chief Allen Wright as a designation for the new territory being created in what was roughly the western half of the present state. "Oklahoma" becomes a term of geographical reference only very near that date (1890).

Now that we've got the hang of it, let's see if the *Columbia-Viking Desk Encyclopedia* can do any better. Can you spot the problem in its entry for "Choctaw Indians," where, in its cryptic style, we find: "Were removed to the Indian Territory in 1832"?

The problem here, as the "Indian Territory" entry in the same encyclopedia will tell you, is that Indian Territory did not come into existence until the Indian Intercourse Act of 1834. So where were the Choctaws removed to? Where, indeed. And why all the fuss, anyway? Isn't this just splitting hairs, technicalities, all just . . . history, all very similar to the trivial example about California?

No, it is not, and the reasons will present themselves shortly. To help get there, let's look at another reference book.

Consider this entry for "Choctaw Indians" from the *Basic Everyday Encyclopedia*: "After the Revolution settlers poured into the Gulf area and, in 1831-32, the C moved to a reservation on the Red R in SE Oklahoma, where they set up a US-style government." Sounds like they just decided to pick up and go, doesn't it? And it sounds like there was already a place called Oklahoma and that the good people of that place made room for the Choctaws by letting them have a reservation in the southeastern part of it.

This kind of history stands history on its head. Such an entry is called advocacy journalism. It has a point of view, in this case to pretty up two events, one of which was one of the most inhumane, genocidal, and mean-spirited episodes in American history, the forced march of the Choctaws, from their ancestral homeland east of the Mississippi River, ill-provisioned and in the dead of winter, and the other is to cover up the betrayal of the

Choctaws by the United States after their removal. If you have any interest in, or stomach for, the details of the removal, historians have uncovered them in sickening abundance, and I commend their work, in university libraries, to you.

But back to the *Basic Everyday Encyclopedia*. Note the term "reservation." What might this be?

Listen to the language of Article IV of "Treaty with the Choctaw, 1830," commonly referred to as the Choctaw removal treaty or the treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, from *Kappler's Laws and Treaties*, Vol. II:

The Government and people of the United States are hereby obligated to secure to the said Choctaw Nation of Red People the jurisdiction and government of all the persons and property that may be within their limits west, so that no territory or state shall ever have a right to pass laws for the government of the Choctaw Nation of Red People and their descendants; and that no part of the land granted them shall ever be embraced in any territory or state . . .

Ouch. Now we know why special pleaders and apologists and other practitioners of advocacy journalism have been in such a hurry to get the Choctaws into "Oklahoma" or "Indian Territory," so as to avoid mentioning where the Choctaws were, in fact, removed to, namely, their own sovereign nation, with guarantees of that sovereignty.

What might appear as mere technicalities and hair splitting regarding these examples of referring to the past in terms of the present now emerge as something more than just history. It has relevance (where public opinion cannot easily be ignored) in titanic legal battles regarding contemporary issues of Indian sovereignty that occupy the time of such people as justices of the United States Supreme Court.

What you write and how you write it will have an influence on all who read it. You may not want to deal with controversial, emotionally charged political disputes in your novel, but if you write, innocently, that the Choctaws were removed to "Oklahoma" or to "Indian Territory" you unwittingly align yourself on one side of the dispute, and you perpetuate myth or disinformation or whatever you want to call it. If you want to align yourself on one side or the other, that is your right, but get your facts

right. If you're going to write about Indians, take the time to read their treaties before you begin to write.

Just because there's a dispute taking place doesn't mean you have to be frightened away from any region or any era or any subject. You can avoid many potential problems when you set your historical novel in a place now called Oklahoma if you are aware that much of what has been published about Indians and about Oklahoma, especially for consumption by the general public or for secondary schools, has been written in such a way as to distort unpleasant events which speak volumes about the American national character, then and now (Oklahoma's Indians, overwhelmed and ignored, trying desperately to save their cultures from extinction, are still there, still pointing to the treaties, still waiting).

Awareness of the problem is your most important safeguard as you do your research. In addition to reading the treaties, you can gain this awareness in no better way than by reading *And Still The Waters Run* by Angie Debo, a book so straightforward in its approach that in the 1930s the University of Oklahoma Press refused to publish it.<sup>1</sup> Once you've gained awareness you can laugh, or cry, or get angry right along with the Indians as you read much of what has been published about them.

And for your own book, if you open by hitting upon a strong point in your research, gain the confidence of your reader, and then concentrate on the story you have to tell, you can have confidence that while you may not be writing history you'll not be distorting it, either.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> In a PBS broadcast interview in 1988, not long before her death, Angie Debo reads from the letter of rejection from the University of Oklahoma Press, in which one of her chapters detailing the fraudulent acquisition of Indian land by a number of people then prominent in Oklahoma politics was characterized as "dangerous" (*Indians*).

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