



December 2023

Writing About War in a Time of War
by Michael Cooper

Michael Cooper arrived in Jerusalem in 1966, lived in Israel for eleven years, studied at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and graduated from Tel Aviv University Medical School. Now a pediatric cardiologist in Northern California, he volunteers for medical missions twice a year serving Palestinian children who lack access to care. Foxes in the Vineyard, set in 1948 Jerusalem, won the 2011 Indie Publishing Contest grand prize. The Rabbi's Knight, finalist for the 2014 Chaucer Award for historical fiction is set in the Holy Land in 1290.

Historical novels set in wartime offer the reader a varied buffet; whether the wars result from the aggression of an imperial power or from conflicting claims to territory, whether the wars are localized or metastasize to multiple battlefields. Whatever the case,

wartime presents the reader with all the potential elements for compelling stories: drama, heroism, tension, intrigue, action, heartbreak, and perhaps romance. And the effect of armed conflict on history itself can be dramatic since the outbreak of war is an accelerant to history, often with dramatic changes in human and natural topography. But in the end, what the reader of wartime historical fiction wants is a page-turner that seamlessly weaves the stories of individual human beings into the history of conflict.

When it comes to wartime historical fiction, I'm sure we all have our favorites. Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is mine. Set during the Spanish Civil War

around 1938, it contains all the elements listed above, especially excelling in a tragic love story.

But, as with all historical fiction, important questions for the writer arise. What do we owe to the real historical characters in our stories? When we dramatize their lives and weave them into the fabric of our historical fiction, how much artistic license do we have? Where does creative license end and misrepresentation begin? How far off from known facts is it fair to go, and how does one even approach renowned figures when historians frequently have differing opinions of their true nature? And when we stray from the hard historical facts, should we include an addendum explaining where our story deviates from “true” history?

Just as the recent past and present can be ambiguous (who really shot JFK? Who really won the 2020 election?), the past is filled with people and conflicts that hold no definite shape or coherence. It is the work of the historian to research the provable facts and turn them into something called history. As historical novelists, we face these challenges and pitfalls of portraying the prominent figures involved in past events, and in the end, given the frequent ambiguity of history, we can only strive to create a good story without losing characters to history, or losing history to characters.

As writers and readers of history, we seek out the compelling tension between knowing and unknowing—to engage with our historical characters in the grip of their threatening present, infused with their anxiety at the uncertainty of outcome, the unknowable darkness of future. Though we, knowing their future, are touched by the poignancy of their ignorance.

But now, in our present, it’s our turn to be anxious in our ignorance in a time of great uncertainty—with war in Ukraine and in the Middle East, and at a time of civil strife in our own country bordering on civil war. Now it’s our turn to share the anxiety of having no idea as to the outcome of all these conflicts.

At this hour, it is for us as writers and readers of historical fiction to hold up a mirror to time past that reflects on current uncertainties and current paroxysms of violence, and to ask the obvious question—what does history have to do with the present?

In a word? Everything.