

Transporting Readers Through Time: Bill Brook's Historical Novel Workshop

By Brandy Vallance

When I first saw Bill Brooks, he seemed very unassuming. I arrived to the workshop early and sat near the front row so I wouldn't miss anything. After all, having 21 historical novels to your credit gives you an air of authority. A few minutes before it was time to start, Bill took his seat and scanned the crowd. I imagined that this was something one of his Western characters would do—leaning to the side slightly, taking the table that would put his back against the wall. His blue-and-white flowered shirt was a stark contrast to this vision, but his combed-back hair and grey goatee suggested that he was a rugged individual not unlike those men of chaps and six-shooters.

One of the first things Bill said to us was, "Ask yourself what intrigues you about your chosen time period." As a historical writer, there's always a moment that clutches your imagination and won't let go. This happened to Bill when he read that Clyde Barrow had been so desperate in prison that he paid a con to cut off two of his toes with an axe. When he read that Bonnie Parker had been an intelligent married woman before meeting Clyde—an honor roll student in high school who excelled in creative writing—he was intrigued again. What would make her join up with Clyde? When they were gunned down, Bonnie still wore her husband's wedding ring. The exploration of these questions drove Bill to write *Bonnie and Clyde: A Love Story*.

Bill went on to say that, as a historical novelist, the goal is not to merely show what life was like in your time period, but to put the reader there. If a reader wants to know about history, they'll pick up a history book. Historians tell the facts; historical novelists tell a story. "The reader might not want to know so much about a Civil War battle, but about the wife who stayed behind. The reader wants to know what motivated people to do what they did. Your setting dictates how your characters will act."

Bill warned us of the danger of loving our research too much. He said, "people do all this research and try to cram it all into a novel. By page two the reader is dozing off. You don't have to let the reader know everything you learned."

As I furiously wrote down every word this learned sage imparted, Bill paused. I could tell that it was about to be a "crux of the matter" moment.

"The main thing you have to do," he said, "is pick a point-of-view character. Put them in history. Have something happen to them. Make them go through a quest to get what they want." And finally: "Keep them from getting it."

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