

Historical Fiction

Definition: Historical fiction is stories set in the past. Historical fiction seeks to recreate the aura of a time past, reconstructing characters, events, movements, ways of life, and the spirit of a bygone day. The time period--and its portrayal--is at the core of the story.

Historical development:

- Developed from the romantic movement of the early 19th century.
- Appeals to the romantic desire to escape from the present.
- Historical fiction before World War I tended to be idealized and filled with patriotic sentiment.
- Historical fiction today attempts to reassess and understand the past rather than glorify it.
- After World War I, historical fiction declined in popularity. During the 1930s to 1960s, historical fiction regained popularity. The youth rebellions of the 1970s brought a rejection of the past and a clamor for relevance in fiction.

Characteristics of historical fiction:

Unobtrusive history

- depends on a believable and reasonably accurate setting; often includes actual historical personages
- events in historical fiction are creations of the author's imagination; they are not history

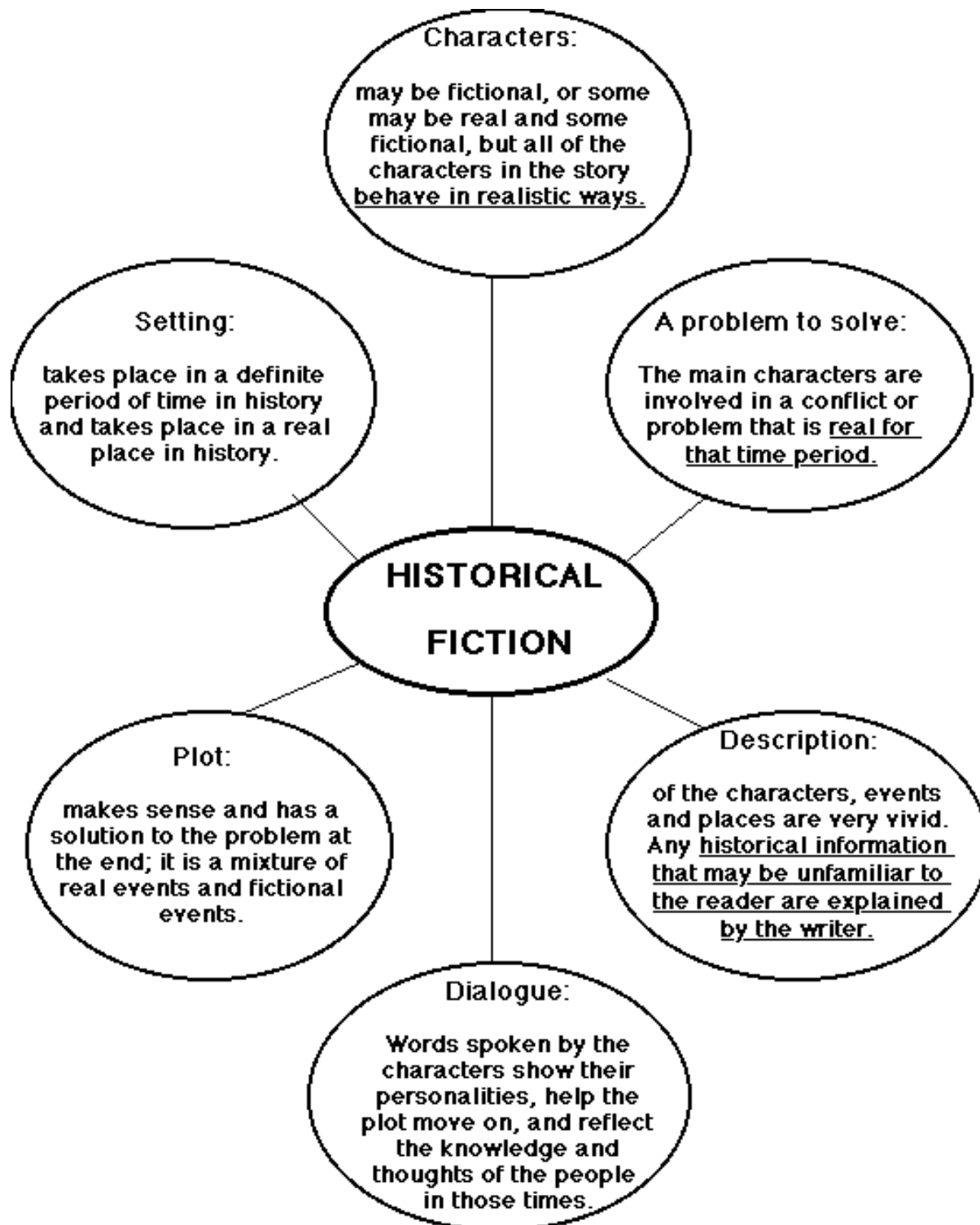
Authenticity

- conveys the flavor of the period--its sights, sounds, smells, characteristics
- uses language appropriate to the setting (time and place)
- faithful to the facts of the period

Sensitivity

- writers of historical fiction must be sensitive to and balance the various opinions of an era
- ignorance and prejudice have no place in the author's telling of the story or perspective of the era

The chart below describes the characteristics of the historical fiction genre.



There is another very important characteristic to be considered when classifying a work as historical fiction. Consider this: *Is the author creating a clear picture of another historical time period, and is this essential to the telling of the story?* If it isn't about a historical time period different from the one the author lives in, it is a piece of modern realistic fiction.

Several books we read today were written about a time long ago and are considered by some to be historical fiction. However, at the time it was written, it was a contemporary piece of work. In other words, the author wrote about things happening in his/her time. The book *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott is such a book.

Evaluating historical fiction:

- tells a good story
- conveys the flavor of the historical period
- authentically captures the people of the period, their values, and their habits
- uses dialogue to make the characters sound authentic but not artificial
- faithfully uses historical knowledge to avoid distorting history
- fairly and sensitively portrays different sides of the compelling issues of the period
- gives us insight into contemporary problems as well as helps us understand the problems of the past