The historical novel is a genre of literature whose story is set during a period that predates the author's own time, often by a significant number of years. A historical novel generally involves substantial research by the author concerning details of the period. The genre became widely popular during the 19th century Romantic period, advanced by great novelists such as Sir Walter Scott.

The purpose of the historical novel extends beyond that of entertainment, though many excel at this in their own right. Authors have often intended to deliver a message, advance a cause or ideology, or popularize history and present a time period to the public; none of these intentions is necessarily exclusive of the others. Historical novels are commonly set during eventful periods in human history, depicting a conflict or a transitional moment in time. Some historical novels span a lengthy duration and may include many accurate details about the past.

A prominent example of a historical novel that deals with the notion of time is Mika Waltari's *The Egyptian*, published in 1945. First written in Finnish, *The Egyptian* is set during the reign of the pharaoh Akhenaton, more than 3,000 years ago. The novel is centered on a fictional character, Sinuhe, the personal physician to the pharaoh, who recounts the tale of the pharaoh's decline and fall. The tale also parts from Egypt and describes Sinuhe's extensive travels throughout the ancient world. Published immediately following World War II, Waltari's novel was intended to explore the violence and brutality of the human condition and to imply that this has changed little from ancient to modern times.

The legendary Greek conqueror Alexander the Great has been depicted in numerous works of literature. Nikos Kazantzakis’s *Alexander the Great*, written in the 1940s, is one modern example intended primarily for a younger audience. Kazantzakis was already a prominent author and philosopher by the time he penned the novel. *Alexander the Great* is a flattering depiction of the hero from a Greek author with a sense of pride in Greek history. However, Kazantzakis does not entirely succumb to glorification of the hero, presenting his faults and human qualities as well. The modern reader can thus relate to an ancient heroic figure.

The intention of delivering a powerful message through a classic work is exemplified by Henryk Sienkiewicz's historical novel *Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero*. Published in 1895, *Quo Vadis* is the Polish author's most famous work. The story is centered on a romance between a Roman patrician (Marcus Vinicius) and a young Christian woman (Lygia) at a time when Christians faced violent persecution by the Roman authorities. The novel conveys a strongly Christian message, implicit in the title as well as in the vivid depictions of Christian martyrdom. Sienkiewicz received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1905. *Quo Vadis* has withstood the test of time, having been adapted to several film interpretations.

Popular interest in the time of imperial Rome and the birth of Christianity is evident by the reception of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* in 1880. The author, Lew Wallace, was an American Civil War general, politician, and novelist. The book has been acclaimed for its accurate descriptions of the Holy Land of 2,000 years ago, though Wallace had never set foot there. Set during the reign of Tiberius, *Ben-Hur* is a tale of a Jewish aristocratic named Judea Ben-Hur who is falsely accused of murder by a Roman
officer, Messala. Like *Quo Vadis*, the story deals with a pivotal moment in time as Christianity emerges within the Roman Empire. *Ben-Hufs* exceptional popularity helped to make the historical novel a popular literary and cinematic genre in the United States.

The author of *Ivanhoe*, Sir Walter Scott, is often credited as the father of the historical novel. Scott’s 27 historical novels established the standard structure of the genre and greatly influenced later writers. His interest in the European Middle Ages is reflected in *Ivanhoe*, published in 1819. The story is set in 12th-century England during the time of King John. *Ivanhoe* is not only a tale of chivalry, combining fictional characters and actual events, but also a critique of the persecution of Jews in England. *Ivanhoe* helped to rekindle popular interest in the Middle Ages during the 19th century.

Leo Tolstoy deviated from the conventional novel with *War and Peace*, published as a series between 1865 and 1869. This ambitious story is set during the Napoleonic period and specifically during the Russian campaign. The Russian author spurned the “great man” paradigm of history in favor of capturing the daily human struggles during warfare. As such a human, Napoleon does not fare well in Tolstoy’s depiction, whereas the personal interactions within Russian society form the narrative. This notion of “history from below” is central to Tolstoy’s understanding of time and the movement of events.

Perhaps the most significant antiwar novel written is Erich Maria Remarque’s 1929 classic *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Remarque’s novel was timely; it was published in German during the interwar period. The novel is set during the First World War and is narrated by a young German soldier, Paul Baumer, who is engaged in the infamous trench warfare emblematic of the conflict. Baumer experiences the horrors of war and comes to recognize the deception of blind nationalism. The novel breaks sharply from the traditional portrayal of warfare over time, in which it has generally been glamorized. So powerful is the message in *All Quiet on the Western Front* that the novel was banned as subversive by the Nazi party in 1933.

A host of other distinguished novels could be added to this list. All of the aforementioned historical novels have film adaptations, which have also contributed to the popularity of the genre. Historical novels continue to connect readers to the past and to the passage of time.

**See also**
Dostoevsky, Fyodor M., Flaubert, Gustave, Novels, Time in, Tolstoy, Leo Nikolaevich


Bonanno, James P.

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