

Guest Post: Author Suzanne Morgan Williams on Digging Deep & Getting It Right – Research Tips for Fiction & Nonfiction

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Cynsations is celebrating its 20th anniversary by switching to a quarterly publishing schedule, featuring in-depth interviews and articles. Thank you for your ongoing support and enthusiasm!

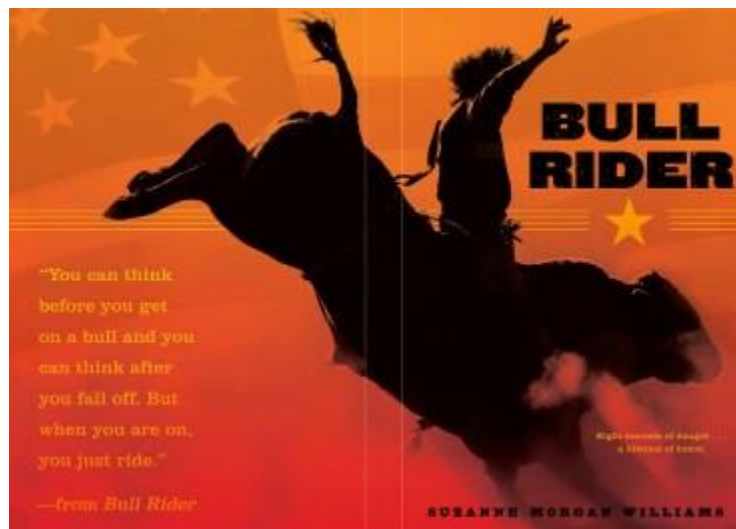


By Suzanne Morgan Williams

Sometimes our books are kids' first introduction to a subject. They will compare our work to what they learn later, so it's doubly important to get the information right. In nonfiction, we promise facts, or as close to facts as we can find, from different sources and points of view. Fiction requires

research, too. Real details in setting, weather, science, or history will make the story believable and the text sing. Get something wrong and your reader may doubt the rest of the book. I've written both nonfiction and fiction, and here are my best tips to help your research go smoothly.

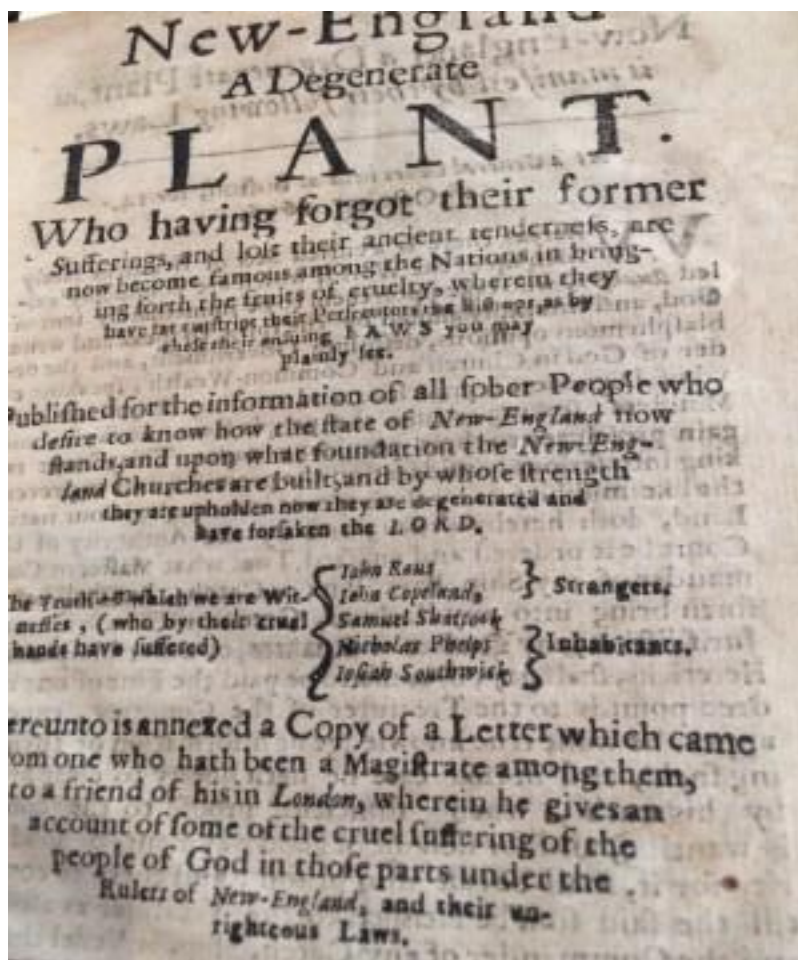
In general, for fiction: Know what you need to know but remember it's your story and you can make some things up. It's fiction after all. In my tween novel, *Bull Rider* (Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2009) I had a crescent moon rising over the mountains around 10 P.M. Oops, it's a fact – that can't happen. I changed the phase of the moon. But, when I needed the characters to take a bus from Winnemucca, Nevada to Redding, California, the bus schedule (yes, I checked) showed only one bus that left in the middle of the night. I decided fiction is fiction, and my bus left in the morning. But if anyone questioned me, I could tell them why I made that decision.



For nonfiction: Every fact must be checked. Two or more sources are best. Whether the sources are books or web based, read the backmatter and text notes to see what the author's primary sources are. Sometimes two or three different authors cite the same primary material. Then, although there are several authors, you've only found one source. That may be all that's available, but two is still better.

Initial research: You know how to use Google and the library – but think about your sources. On the internet, government, university, and non-profit organizations are usually reliable. I've also used eye-witness blogs and interviews. Be sure to write down titles, call numbers, and URLs for your own reference and bibliography. If you only have a single question, you may finish quickly. But for nonfiction, historical, or scientific research you're just getting started.

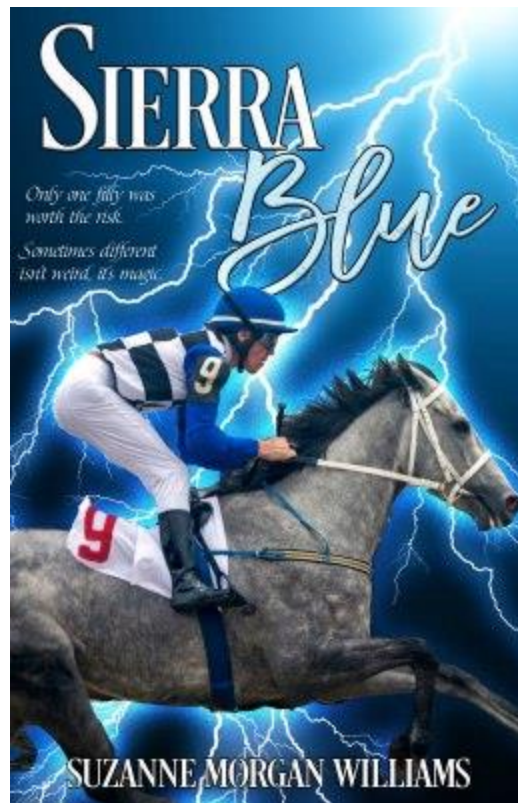
Tip: Books: Search for university classes on your topic and look at the syllabi. What books are required? If the same book shows up in three or four different universities' courses, that may be a basic reference you should start with. Get it from the library or buy it. If your library doesn't have it, try Interlibrary Loan.



From the archives at Massachusetts Historical Society. I needed an appointment and an advance list of materials I wanted to see.

Nothing is more thrilling than seeing the original. On a research trip for a historical novel set in 1660, I visited the Massachusetts Historical Society and was able to read an original copy of an article printed at that time that is central to my manuscript.

Websites and blogs: Check your sources! Print whatever you are going to use, and file it in a binder, download it, or copy and paste it to your own computer files. It takes time to produce a book. The page may have been taken down when you need it again to answer a question or check a fact. You may not even remember exactly what or where it was. Keep your own files. I highlight text that I'm citing.



Expert Interviews and Vetting: Many projects require you to track down an expert. In my just released MG/YA novel, *Sierra Blue*, a young teen risks her friendships in a new community to save an injured racehorse. I consulted two experts – one was a racehorse breeder to tell me what injuries would be serious enough to put the horse's life and racing career in danger but could still be recovered from. Then I contacted an equine

veterinarian to learn what treatment would be required. Then back to the horse breeder – how do you bring a horse back to racing condition after that kind of injury? Luckily, most experts are happy to share their knowledge.

Tip: Experts will disagree. In fiction, one should be fine. In nonfiction you may want to consult a couple of experts to get a broader view of your topic and learn what disagreements there may be and be prepared to address them.

Finding experts: If you know someone, great. That racehorse breeder is my cousin. The equine vet also treated my goats. If you don't have a personal connection, you can search the internet or ask around. You might contact the author of a book you've read or someone at a research institute or college. If one name keeps popping up in your research, that may be your expert.



Dr. Elisabeth Lau treating my goat, Hawkeye.

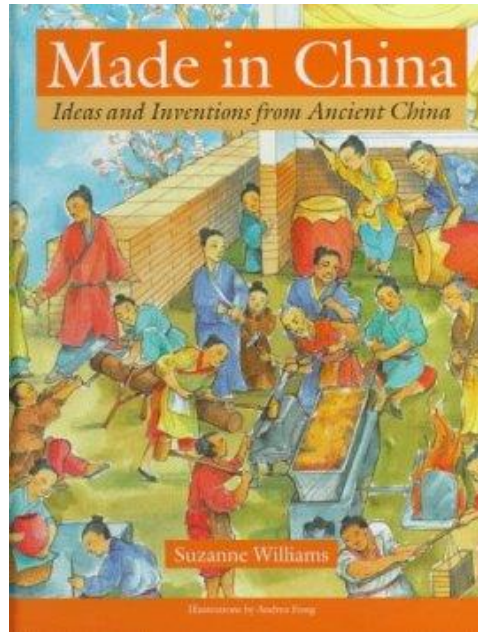
Tip: Don't always start at the top of an organization. If a director, chairman, or head of a department says, "no," you are done. Chatting with the secretary always helps. Who do you need to talk to? Who will be most open to speaking with you? Would they make the introduction? This will save you time, you'll likely find a cooperative expert, and you may get more leads for your project.

Interviews: Once you've found an expert and agreed to talk, do your research. You don't want them to think you expect them to write your book. Read enough before the interview that you know what points need clarification. What else can they add to what you've already learned? Your list of questions depends on your project but here are three I recommend ending with.

- What do you wish my readers knew about your subject?
- What question do you wish I had asked you? (Then let them answer it!)
- Can I get back to you if I have more questions?

Tip: At the end of your interview, ask if they will check your work when the manuscript is ready. Don't ask them to read the whole thing – only the pages relevant to their input. In my nonfiction book on Chinese inventions, *Made In China* [illustrated by Andrea Fong (Pacific View Press, 1997)], I consulted different experts for almost every page. I asked the director of a planetarium, "How many stars are visible, unaided, in a clear sky?"

Later, I he checked the page. I'd added a zero to his answer and increased the number by about 27,000. Boy, did I need that final check.



Tip: Don't be afraid to ask. If you are wondering about a question, your readers will be, too. And you aren't really planning to poison someone although you may need to know what would happen if your character did. In my first novel attempt, a body washed ashore. What would it look like? I held my breath and called our county coroner. She was lovely, although her description of the corpse was not. She probably had a good story to tell her family that night.

Honorariums and Acknowledgements: If you ask the expert to vet a lot of pages or chapters, offer an honorarium. You are using their time and expertise. If you only have a paragraph or two to be checked, a thank-you note may be enough. Send them a book if the work is published. Ask if you can list them in the acknowledgements. Some people don't want to be named for whatever reason. Others really appreciate it. If they agree, ask exactly how they want to be listed – Dr. Amy Jones, University of Oz, or Amy Jones, cowardly lion expert.



Ice fishing with Inuit students in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut, Canada, previously printed in Highlights Magazine, used with permission.

Site Visits: Of course, nothing rings as true as your own experience. This is where your background, memories, and site visits come in. I made four trips to the Canadian Arctic for different projects, including my book, *The Inuit* (Franklin Watts, 2004). My experts ranged from revered Elders to ten-year-olds who shared stories of their first hunts. An ice fishing trip became a Highlights article as well as the basis for a scene in a manuscript set in the Arctic.

Notes and photos: Sometimes visiting a place is just what's needed to add authenticity and depth to your text. Don't forget to listen, smell, and touch as well as look around. Take photos. They'll refresh your memory, and you can use them in talks, school visits, and articles. I visited my cousin's Thoroughbred barn in Kentucky – part of the background for *Sierra Blue*. I'd always thought Kentucky horse farms had miles of white fences. Not so. They are gray. You'll find that on one page in the novel, but the detail is authentic.



Thoroughbred pasture, Lexington, Kentucky.

Tip: Museums, parks, arboretums, zoos, and cultural centers post useful explanations of their exhibits that can send your project in new directions. Check out their gift shops too. They often sell books on your subject. On a research trip to Plymouth Plantation in Plymouth, Massachusetts, I took photos, spoke with the re-enactors and artisans, and learned from the informational signs. I had an appointment to interview an expert there. Afterwards, he referred me to a historian who eventually vetted several chapters of my manuscript.

Tip: When you plan to visit an archive, museum, or cultural center, be sure to call ahead. Many archives require an appointment to work in their libraries and some may even ask to approve your research in advance. And you don't want to arrive on a day when the institution is closed. That said, if they know you are coming, they may work with you to set up a special appointment for your visit.

Tip: If your book is illustrated, the illustrator will need to do photo research, too. Any photos you can reference or share will cut down on their work load and add to their understanding of the project. Your photos may help avoid mistakes or omissions in the illustrations or cover art. If the project will include photos, a file of possible photos and their sources is useful for your editor and book designer.



With re-enactors at Plymouth Plantation.

Keeping Track: I learned this the hard way. When I write nonfiction now, or even for heavily research chapters in fiction, I create a second copy of my manuscript which I update, at the end of each writing day. If I've used a fact or quote, I write the source directly into that second manuscript following the fact. That way, all my citations are within that second text. This saves hours or days of time when an editor asks for a fact check or an annotated manuscript. Of course you'll have revisions, but you can cut and paste on the annotated manuscript too. I don't interrupt my flow of writing to do this, but the habit of ending the day with keeping track of my sources is one of the most important shortcuts I've learned.

Research can be fun, even life changing. You may make friends and visit new places. You'll increase your level of expertise and make lasting memories. Plan, work smart, and get your facts right. Enjoy the journey – your readers will benefit.

Cynsations Notes



Suzanne Morgan Williams is the author of the middle grade novels, *Bull Rider* (Margaret K. McElderry Books), *Sierra Blue*, and eleven nonfiction children's books with more books on the way. From the time she wrote her first book, *Made in China, Ideas and Inventions from Ancient China*, (Pacific View Press) to the present, her work has taken her into classrooms to connect with students, to universities and museums to work with experts, and to communities to share experiences.

Suzanne is a former teacher, a speaker, and workshop leader. She's worked in all kinds of classrooms from autistics to ESL, from pre-K to middle school and high school. She has teaching credentials in Washington and California as well as a Montessori Certificate and an M.Ed. in Early Childhood Education.