

# A Field Trip May Be Just What A Novel Needs

By Stacy Juba

As part of her research for novels, bestselling writer Jodi Picoult has milked a cow in Amish country and roughed it with native Alaskans. She shudders when she remembers heading out to an abandoned New England mental institution on a winter night with paranormal investigators. Her group trudged across a field where a building had burned down with patients inside.

“I was walking with a sensitive, someone who can 'feel' ghosts,” Picoult said. “Suddenly, all the hair stood up on the back of my neck. Before I could even mention this to my walking buddy, he lifted a digital camera and held it up between us backward, over our shoulders. Although there was nothing visible to the naked eye, in the viewfinder of the camera was a white, misty, wraith-like image.”

Like many published novelists, Picoult, author of books such as *Vanishing Acts*, doesn't spend all her time at her computer or her fiction wouldn't be as richly textured as it is. Field trips like hers can expand a writer's knowledge base and provide opportunities to gather color, atmosphere and on-scene information unavailable in a research book. Even more important, hands-on exposure will show editors you did your homework. Agents and editors trust authors who strive for accuracy and readers like authors who plunge them into a world ripe with authentic details.

“There's nothing worse than reading a book and knowing some of it just rings false,” says novelist Erica Orloff.

Sure, the adage 'Write what you know' has some truth, yet if that's all we wrote, our fiction would be boring. Next time you get stuck on a scene, put on your reporter's hat and go out and find the story. Here are some tips on how to do it, and a look at how some successful novelists put the practice to work.

## Arranging Field Trips

If you want to tour a site or interview an expert, search the Internet and telephone directories for leads. Larger organizations might have a PR department that handles inquiries. Cold calls are fine, but don't subject someone to an on-the-spot interrogation; make an appointment so you both have time to prepare. You could also outline your request in a letter or e-mail. Before the visit, read up on your subject and develop specific questions. Bring a notebook to the interview and ask whether you can call with follow-up questions. Afterwards, be sure to show your appreciation with a thank you note.

Bestselling suspense author Lisa Gardner met with the Rhode Island State Police for her novel *The Survivor's Club* and even staked out a Providence courthouse to determine the ideal angle for a sniper shot. For *The Killing Hour*, she visited the FBI Academy to learn about the life of a new agent and she spent a week with the U.S. Geological Survey team, checking out remote places in Virginia for an “Eco-Killer” to abandon his victims. *The Other Daughter* led her on a hunt to Texas, where she researched execution protocol.

“I need to be able to picture something to write it,” she said. “Actually seeing Texas's retired electric chair, was so much more riveting than simply reading about it. To

walk through a maximum security prison, getting the sights, the sounds, and particularly the smell, made the whole atmosphere come alive in a way simply talking about it never would. Then I can take this experience in turn, and make it come alive for the reader.”

Stephen Coonts, bestselling action/adventure author, took a flight in the F-22 cockpit concept demonstrator at Lockheed Martin in Georgia for *Fortunes of War*. He talked his way into the V-22 Osprey simulator at NAS Patuxent River, the basis for scenes in his novella "*Al-Jihad*." While research is vital, he advises not overloading the reader with information.

“The first requirement for any writer is a good story,” Coonts said. “Once you see how the story is going to go, then do enough research to give the tale the flavor of authenticity. Salt in a little jargon, but only a little. Write around details you don't know. The easiest and best way to do research is to find an expert and ask precisely the questions to which you need answers. Shotgunning (or scattered) research is a waste of time.”

### **Making It Ring True**

Orloff recommends deciding settings from the beginning so they will seem organic to the story. She scouted out Sanibel Island for *Spanish Disco* and realized the slow speed limits would irk her impatient heroine. Orloff wanted to depict a grungy bar in *The Roofer*, which is set in Hell's Kitchen in New York City. She visited a similar place and saw that nicotine build-up had left yellow-brown stains on the bar's paneling.

“That is the kind of detail that sets good writing apart from simply writing 'dirty,’” she said. “When I speak to school kids as an author, I tell them to banish 'cheesy' adjectives from their writing like: pretty, dirty, ugly. What is dirty to the average reader may not hold a candle to what the crime lord of Hell's Kitchen thinks of as dirty. I think something that sinks a book for some readers is someone who gets a locale wrong.”

Childrens book author Uma Krishnaswami literally wrote the book on field trips, *Beyond the Field Trip, Teaching and Learning in Public Places*, which describes the rewards of school excursions. Krishnaswami returned to her India roots to research her middle grade novel *Naming Maya*. She recalls stopping to take a picture outside a police station in Chennai, India as she and her mother were walking to a grocery store.

“A policeman,” she recalls, “came charging out to scold me and said didn't I know these were dangerous times and I couldn't go around taking pictures of a police station. . . .My mother said, 'He can tell you're from 'over there.' Well, I was wearing a sari, but oh heck, Teva shoes, water bottle . . . what did I think, I could blend in just like that? The whole thing was so perfect that the scene just fell into my book and locked up that place where nothing else would fit.”

### **Keeping A Series Fresh**

Authors of series fiction face special challenges as they're portraying recurring characters and settings. To prevent staleness, Twist Phelan has taken roping lessons, cycled from coast-to-coast and gone rock climbing for her Pinnacle Peak Mysteries. Mindy Starns Clark, author of the Christian-themed Million Dollar Mysteries, convinced a paranoid owner to let her into a secret mine.

Clark advises writers to develop brief plot outlines for upcoming series installments before they write the first book. This makes it easier to spot unwanted similarities and to create unique circumstances.

“It also helps to know where you're going in the future, because it allows you to plant seeds,” she said. “I knew that my protagonist would be doing some scuba diving in a later book, so I had her mention that she was a certified diver in an earlier book. Otherwise I don't think it would've been as believable when it finally happened.”

Sharon Short, who centers a mystery series around Laundromat owner Josie Toadfern, wanted Josie's autistic cousin Guy to make regular appearances. She toured a residential home, interviewing the director and meeting an autistic man who proudly prepared tea for guests. Without that visit, Short doubts she could've made Guy a continuing character. She did her research long before she had a contract and says new writers shouldn't feel embarrassed about a lack of publishing credentials.

“Most people love to talk about their areas of interest,” she said. “Just saying ‘I'm writing a book about XYZ and I'd love to visit your museum/store/residential home/whatever and ask a few questions’ is enough to unlock most doors. And if it doesn't work. . . find someone else to ask.”

Rhys Bowen, author of the Molly Murphy Mysteries and the Constable Evans Mysteries, has one series set in North Wales and the other in 1901 New York City. She is always criss-crossing the globe to make sure she gets things right. In Wales, it can be details as small as which beer is being drunk in a certain pub. In New York, her explorations might focus on how long it takes to walk from one place to another and is the walk feasible in the narrow boots her character would be wearing.

“I don't feel you can write about a place without experiencing its soul,” Bowen said. “Choose a setting and characters because you feel passionately about them. . . If the series takes off, you'll have to live with these people for a long time.”

### **Creative Alternatives**

It can be a tough decision to travel for research, especially if you're unpublished with a family and job. Sometimes the telephone can be a cheap alternative. Audrey Coulombis, author of the Newbery Honor book *Getting Near to Baby*, needed to learn about Louisiana Cajun Country for an earlier project. Her local library directed her to people she could call on the phone. She got a feel for the language and learned about holidays such as when “Miz Lanforcaux threw her annual pig barbecue which no men, wimmins or chirrun would miss, even to do murder.” Whenever a question arose, she called one of her new friends.

“I got fascinating detail such as 'the day it rained snakes,' one of the hottest days on record, and yes, snakes just fell from the tree branches when they got too hot,” Coulombis said.

Writers can be pro-active about gathering information by keeping a journal of experiences, even if the story is not yet in hand or mind. Preserve details so that if you ever need them, you'll have a firsthand account. After traveling, store brochures, real estate magazines and maps in a “you never know” file. When Sue Owens Wright, author of *Howling Bloody Murder*, was a guest speaker at the Illinois Basset Waddle, she realized she couldn't let this opportunity slide. More than 1,000 dogs were competing in

contests such as Longest Wingspan, when they extended ears Dumbo-style. The Waddle King and Queen loafed in royal raiment atop their float.

“Unbeknownst to the hounds and their owners, while observing this bizarre event for the first time, I was also taking notes,” said Wright. “I left with plenty of background material.”

The unfortunate reality is that editors have many reasons to reject a manuscript. Don't let inaccuracy or a lack of imagery ruin your chances of publication. Small details bring a book to life, and getting them right is the obligation of a good writer.

*Stacy Juba is the author of the mystery novel *Twenty-Five Years Ago Today*. (Mainly Murder Press) More information on her books can be found at <http://www.stacyjuba.com>.*

### Five Memorable Field Trips

Successful authors know that details matter and their imaginations can only take them so far. Below, five authors share their secrets for writing authentic fiction.

**Deborah Donnelly:** “While researching *May the Best Man Die*, I toured the Seattle's Best Coffee roasting plant. I explained myself as a mystery writer when I made the tour request, but apparently no one told the gentleman who showed me around. As he dutifully described all the specialized equipment, I kept asking questions like, ‘If one of those sacks of coffee beans fell on you, would it kill you?’ and ‘If this place burned down, would the coffee smell really good?’ He kept edging farther and farther away from me... Eventually, he learned the reassuring truth about my odd profession.”

**Janet Evanovich:** “One time I was meeting a bounty hunter for lunch in a crowded Au Bon Pain in downtown Washington and this guy came in dressed in leather. I was trying to find out what he did and how successful he was. He did this arm thing and reached for something on the table, and all you could see was this illegal *Dirty Harry* gun. The place cleared out and we were the only two people left. It was important for the Stephanie Plum series as it gave me perspective on crowd reaction, and made me think about how I was putting my heroine in this atypical and unsavory job.”

**Jayne Ann Krentz:** “I was entranced by the glorious red-rock country of Sedona, Arizona with its stark beauty and compelling light. The mystical atmosphere added to the impact. I immediately decided to set two books against a fictional version of that vivid backdrop. The result was *Light in Shadow* and *Truth or Dare*, two novels of romantic-suspense featuring a psychic heroine. The field trip inspired the story, rather than the other way around.”

**Robert J. Sawyer:** “Much of my novel *Hominids* takes place at a real science facility, the Sudbury Neutrino Observatory, which is located a mile and a quarter beneath the Earth's surface, in a nickel mine in Sudbury, Ontario. The trip was fairly arduous. The mine-shaft elevator only got us down the mile and a quarter vertically, but we also had to hike a mile through dark muddy tunnels to get to the lab, and then go through a complete clean-room decontamination procedure before entering. But I learned hundreds of details, like the wording of signs, the location of doors and the sort of food they had on hand down in the lab that I couldn't have found out any other way.”

**Jessica Speart:** “I went down to South Florida to research the illegal parrot trade for my book *Bird Brained*. You can own whatever you want down there as long as it’s been captive bred. I was meeting people in the area and someone said she had mountain lions in her backyard. I went to her house and there were multiple cages. She said, “Would you like to go into one?” I knew it was stupid, stupid, stupid, but your brain gets nutty. I said ‘Sure.’ I thought she was coming in with me, but she gave me this tiny wooden rake and closed the door. There were two females on opposite perches of the cage and they were looking at me like lunch had just walked in. I figured they were going to use the rake as a toothpick when they were done with me.”

*Compiled by Stacy Juba*