

Anachronisms



In 10th grade, my English teacher, Mr. Simmons, put *anachronism* on our vocabulary test, and gave us the definition to memorize: “Something out of place or time”. Anachronisms are at issue in my professional work as a futurist and in my fiction writing. My futures work involves remembering that the future isn’t mostly the same as today, with a few changes (e.g. using only brainwaves to drive an internal combustion engine, gasoline-powered, four-door sedan).

My fiction writing has to involve intent focus on what would and would not be present in my stories, and since I’ve focused mainly on writing fiction set in the past, the potential for anachronisms is high.

Mr. Simmons used a broader definition of *anachronism* than most people do, most often, people use it to mean something in the present from the past, which no longer belongs. That’s the least of my worries. A story set in 2013 could have a butter churn standing in the corner, since such things can still exist as antiques (though the thing ought to be explained) but a story set in 1916 cannot have a mobile phone or a woman fighter pilot in it.

The arts of fiction and foresight involve thinking intently about these things. Everything matters. All the details count, and wrong details count multiply, and do only harm. It’s probably harder in futures, because we really don’t know what will change and how much. But in historical fiction, we can at least rule a lot of things out.

The biggest problem is not in material things, but in values and attitudes. It’s too easy to shine a current-day light on the past or the future which supposes that people back then or in that future will have the same values as today. They won’t or didn’t. I’ve learned to be humble about all this, it’s hard to get it right and you need to keep a watchful eye on yourself, and work

at it.

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