



“GO, CONFERENCE!” WITH THE HISTORICAL NOVEL SOCIETY IN DURHAM

*Inside the Durham Cathedral.
Photo by Marie Powell.*

by Marie Powell

At this point, I think I could call myself a veteran of writing conferences. I've been going to them for over 20 years. In my experience, when you start attending conferences, you're mostly looking for learning opportunities or insights into current trends, and discovering new ways of improving your craft. Later, you might go to pitch book manuscripts to agents and publishers or listen for good tips on writing query letters.

At yet another stage in the writing journey, you might find yourself nodding sagely in most of the sessions. You realize you're already using that tip (whatever it was) or at least you've

heard it before. But there's always something to take away from a conference: an unusual experience, an insight from a workshop, or even just that hazy feeling of good will that keeps you writing for another year. You keep going to catch up with old friends and writerly acquaintances. Some would call that networking.

For me, the networking opportunities began the first day of the Historical Novel Society (HNS) conference in Durham, UK, when Giles Gasper, professor of High Medieval History, met me at the Newcastle airport.

Giles also co-hosts and produces the Eat Medieval food culture workshop series I've been raving about for the past



*The streets of Durham.
Photo by Marie Powell.*

“Time twists have become one of the most popular trends in historical fiction, and panelists . . . discussed their strategies of timeslip (dual time stories), time travel, and alternate history timelines.”

two years. I had helped connect him and co-host Andy Hook, owner of Blackfriars Restaurant, with the HNS conference organizers. We’d also spent a few hours Zooming about medieval history for my newest novel. But this was my first chance to meet him in person.

On the half-hour drive to the University of Durham, where the conference was held, my first glimpse of the huge Norman cathedral was like a trumpet call, urging me back in time. This world heritage site preserves the medieval flavour of Durham, with cobblestone streets, secret tunnels, and hidden shortcuts. Also, since classes don’t start until late September in the UK, the sparse foot traffic (cars must pay a fee to drive in the area) added to the medieval feel.

I had arrived the day before the conference to get over some of the jetlag before it began. That night, as I carried yogurt and cheese back from the Tesco supermarket up the winding cobblestone road, I spotted a woman who looked familiar. I took a risk, called out to her, and discovered she was award-winning author Liz Harris, (lizharrisauthor.com) who would be presenting her talk “Writing Outside the Box” on Sunday.

We grabbed a late-night supper at the Lebaneat restaurant, across from our Hatfield Hall residence. By the end of the meal Liz had worked her charm on the owner to secure the Lebanese restaurant as our informal conference bar-and-restaurant. Plus I had the best lentil soup I could imagine, with some cute little crackery snacks on the side. (You haven’t lived until you’ve tasted Lebanese Lemonade!)

On Friday, the conference began with a tour of the castle and cathedral on the Palace Green. The castle was constructed in 1072, shortly after the Norman conquest, and the cathedral heralds from the 11th and 12th centuries, on the site of the earlier diocese of Lindisfarne. Sections were rebuilt or added in the 13th century, which is the time period of my Last of the Gifted novel series, so you can imagine my excitement. Standing in that huge, ornate cathedral, facing down the nave toward the beautiful rose window, it’s easy to understand how intimidating and awe-inspiring the Normans must have been to peasants and nobles alike.

Between breakfast at Hatfield, the tours, and the welcome banquet in the great hall that evening, I discovered a crew of writers from northern England, Wales, Ireland, Germany, and San Francisco. With about 100 writers attending from the UK, Europe, the US, and other points of the globe, it seemed easy to find someone to exchange notes with or congratulate on successful

pitches to the agents and publishers throughout the conference.

The entertainment that evening included folk singer Jed Grimes, and Dr. Alice Robinson on the Northumbrian smallpipes (similar to bagpipes), who has been designated as the official piper by the High Sheriff of Northumberland (yes, that’s a thing, and she wears a lovely tall hat with a long white feather).

The next two days were a blur of inspirational sessions, plenaries, keynotes, and interviews, interspersed with agent and publisher pitches. We made our way across the bridge and down the winding roads (lucky I was following people who knew the way!) to the university’s Calman Learning Center. Award-winning fiction and creative nonfiction author Emma Darwin (emmadarwin.com) kicked off the conference keynotes, and the weekend blitz began.

High on my list was “Giving voice to the Voiceless: Women in Historical Fiction” with Catherine Mezzacappa and Tracy Warr. As I work on my new novel, I keep coming back to several points they made about how women most often needed husbands, sons, and fathers to gain positions of influence, but how they often supported other women once they got there.

As well, Giles and his team from the Institute of Medieval and Early Modern Studies took over the Saturday afternoon plenary. Giles opened the afternoon by exploring the influence of medieval food on culture. Spanning the 11th to 15th centuries, Durham professors expanded the discussion, as Daniel Newman discussed the Islamic tradition, H. Rosi Song gave us a taste of Barcelona, and Dr. Amanda Herbert discussed agricultural changes caused by merging biomes across Europe.

But PhD student Florence Swan stole the show, as she presented the dream of all dissertation research projects: taking over the kitchens of Blackfriars Restaurant in Newcastle,

built on the site of a 12th century abbey, to try out medieval recipes. Digging into 11th-13th century scrolls and manuscripts in Durham University archives, she began to explore what she called the “subtle nuances of taste.” Her project led her through salmon tarts that were much too sweet to boiled pork ribs that was so “disgusting and smelly” the Blackfriars chefs almost threw her out of the kitchen. And the sweet-and-savory tasters passed around the crowd certainly added to the fun.

Keynote speaker Julie Cohen (julie-cohen.com) definitely won the most tweets of the conference with her keynote on overcoming “the Fear” (of not being good enough) that most writers experience, and the art of reinventing ourselves as writers from one book to another or one genre to another.

Margaret Skea (margaretskea.com) deserves kudos for stepping up to the plate and delivering an excellent session on Creative Book Marketing when another speaker from the Alliance of Independent Authors (ALLi) had to cancel. She discussed promotions, peripheral marketing through articles and events, and the need to think outside the box. Collaboration, courage, and confidence is something all writers need in their marketing efforts.

Time twists have become one of the most popular trends in historical fiction, and panelists Nicola Cornick, Christina Courtney, Anna Belgrave, Alison Morton discussed their strategies of timeslip (dual time stories), time travel, and alternate history timelines.

And that’s just a smattering of examples from the conference. As well, conference attendees had a choice of two excursions on Saturday evening. Many chose the 13-course medieval feast hosted at Blackfriars. Since I was attending a feast there the following week, I decided to join the bus to the Kynren Experience, a theatrical extravaganza that galloped through two thousand years of history and legends in 90 minutes.

We sat in open-air bleachers, huddled under the freezing rain, mesmerized by the sound-and-light panorama with a cast of at least a hundred men, women, and children. (So glad I bought that rain poncho on Amazon). The event included archers and knights on heavy horses, horse-drawn carriages, re-enacted epic battles, sheep that ran on cue (to my amazement, no dog in pursuit), and even a flock of honking geese.

Every conference is a bit of a whirlwind, and we’re left at the end of it organizing notes and trying to sort through

memories. For me, this conference was also an opportunity to experience the medieval city, and live a few days of the life I’ve been dreaming onto the pages of my medieval fantasy series.

A few weeks ago, David Gaughran’s newsletter ended up in my inbox. Gaughran, author and expert marketer (I highly recommend his “Starting from Zero” course davidgaughran.com) says, “Whether it’s workshopping a plot hole over coffee, trading ad tips with a fellow Facebook nerd as we huddle over our laptops, or simply just gossiping in the hotel bar about various unprintable shenanigans, networking can be the best part of any conference.”

Although Gaughran (also a historical novelist) was not at the HNS conference in Durham, his comment holds true for me. The conference offered a weekend of soaking up history, from the glories of Norman architecture to the many bridges over the River Wear, from the sounds of Northumberland’s smallpipes and accents to the smooth, worn cobblestones underfoot. Who better to appreciate that with than other historical novelists?

By the end, this conference also offered all three of the best reasons to go conferencing: insightful workshops, a successful agent pitch, and new writerly friends and acquaintances I hope to keep in touch with in the future. It’s no wonder that, as we milled about Hatfield’s grounds the final day, our parting words most often were: “Next year in San Antonio!” ☺

If you are interested, the next HNS conference will be June 8-11, 2023, in San Antonio, Texas (historicalnovelsociety.org).