Passion

Each of my books has grown from a passion: for Kansas (Passes at the Moon, Seeing Mona Naked, What Kansas Means to Me: Twentieth-Century Writers on the Sunflower State, William Jennings Bryan Oleander’s Guide to Kansas, and Ordinary Genius), for food (Secrets of the Tsil Café), for all things Scottish (The Slow Air of Ewan MacPherson), for folk music and Western history (rode), for gardens and gardening (Garden Plots), and for Charles Dickens’s A Christmas Carol (A Carol Dickens Christmas). After all, the writing of a collection of short stories or a novel means a substantial commitment of time. If I am going to spend years or more on a project, the subject of that work has to resonate deeply, has to be both familiar and mysterious, a puzzle that might be solved so that I might have a better understanding of both my passion and myself. Often, this means learning the history of a subject and a history of my relationship with that subject.

Professor Thomas Fox Averill, Washburn University
the Civil War, women’s rights, and education. Found begins in the Bleeding Kansas of 1854 and ends around 1890. Second, I wanted a continuing relationship with Nell Onnen Johnson, who appeared in my novel rode as a baby rescued from a smoldering cabin by protagonists Jo Benson and Robert Johnson, who take her with them to Arkansas. Third, I am fascinated by what I can only call “amateur science.” After the publication of Charles Darwin’s On the Origin of Species, worldviews were shifting and a passion for science gripped the intellectually curious, whether professional or untrained. Fourth, I have always been interested in women’s and feminist history, and the position of women in a culture, particularly a scientific culture, dominated by men. Finally, I can thank my wife, Jeffrey Ann Goudie, and her geologist father, Jim Goudie, for a life of collecting and learning about rocks and fossils.

This cluster of interests became passions early, when I attended the University of Kansas between 1967 and 1974 and lived in Lawrence again from 1976 until 1980. At the university I took my first class in African American literature, taught by Elizabeth Schultz. I took my first American studies classes with Stuart Levine, Norman Yetman, and David Katzman. I was influenced by the work of history professor William Tuttle and visiting historian Michael Brodhead. Local history and women’s studies were fledgling areas of scholarly interest, championed by English department members Roy Gridley and Haskell Springer.

My college education also dovetailed with the antiwar movement, the Civil Rights movement, the women’s movement, and the movement toward diversifying the literary canon to include works by Native Americans, Latinos, African Americans, and women. I entered the university as a premed student and have had a lifelong interest in science. My early passions for Kansas history, literature, culture, and science led me to research the geology and the fossil finds in the state, from the mammoth bones in the Kaw to the chalk bluffs of Western Kansas.

In Found, Nell Johnson Doerr might embody all of these passions: she could be an early settler in Lawrence, Kansas Territory, and a host of an underground railroad stop; she could be a widow of Quantrill’s raid, then an amateur fossil hunter; she could study science and have a paper accepted by a national meeting at the American Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., as the culmination of her career. With the character and the time period discovered, the next step is the research.

Research

Kansas is lucky to have so many fine repositories of history, literature, and science to help researchers gain the information and insight necessary to write Kansas history and Kansas historical fiction. Over the years, I have taken advantage of many special collections: the University of Kansas Archives and Kansas Collection at the Spencer Research Library; the Biodiversity Institute at the University of Kansas, with its cabinets and drawers of invertebrate fossils; the archives at Kansas State University; the Special Collections Department in the Axe Library at Pittsburg State University; the extensive resources at the Kansas State Historical Society; Washburn University’s archives and my own Thomas Fox

2. Charles Darwin, On the Origin of Species (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1860). I cite this edition because it would have been the one most available to my fictional character Nell.
Averill Kansas Studies Collection; the Topeka Room at Topeka/Shawnee County Public Library; and the Watkins Museum of History in Lawrence, constantly reshaping itself into an institution crucial to understanding Lawrence and Kansas. All of these places are unique in their holdings, as well as in the knowledge and interests of their staffs and volunteers.3

A Discovery

With my novel Found, I likened myself to a fossil hunter, since I was researching one, and knew that I would have to examine what I could find in many places, with each institution having the potential to bring a unique discovery. Early in my research, I learned about Benjamin Mudge, the first state geologist of Kansas. Mudge taught at what was then the Kansas State Agricultural College (now Kansas State University), where he settled in with his “cabinet of curiosities.” What a wonderful world, when scientists gathered curios, specimens, fragments of the known world, and carried these with them as what amounted to scientific “evidence.” Mudge was interested in fossils, but his study of them was also part of an agreement with Francis Snow, who taught science at the University of Kansas and who was dedicated to birds and bugs. They divided the “scientific work between themselves, in order to accomplish the largest possible results for the new State—the former [Snow] giving most of his time to living forms, the latter [Mudge] to fossil forms.”4

Shortly after his appointment to the State Agricultural College in 1866, Mudge presented a lecture in Lawrence, which surely would have been of interest to my fictional character, Nell Doerr. As the Manhattan newspaper wrote, “The earth’s history for millions of years, is written in the rocks that surround it, and yet, most of the intelligences that walk its surface, are as ignorant of this history as the mole that creeps under it.”5 I wanted Nell to attend an early lecture by Benjamin Mudge. After all, he had come to Kansas in the 1850s as a lawyer first and an amateur scientist second. His story of putting his interest in science first, and making himself into a professional paleontologist in Kansas, mirrored what I wanted for my character Nell. Surely, they would meet.

But more research into Mudge revealed another connection between my fictional character and Kansas history. Mudge, an abolitionist, once kept runaway slaves for a couple of nights in his Quindaro residence, protecting them at gunpoint from Missourians who came to fetch their “property.” He wrote to his brother about this incident (the letter, edited by a great-grandson, was printed in Kansas History).6 What, I thought, if Nell and her husband, using false names, had met Benjamin

3. Particular thanks to Katie Armitage and Monica Davis for their research help, conversation, and patience.
5. Manhattan Independent, 1866 clipping, Benjamin Mudge file, Kansas State University Archives.
Brigadier General Hugh Cameron (1826-1908) walked from Kansas City to Lawrence in 1854 and staked out a claim, which he later named “Camp Ben Harrison.” In 1896 he made a pilgrimage to Albuquerque, carrying a message of forgiveness from the people of Kansas to former U.S. Senator Edmund G. Ross, who Kansans blamed for saving President Andrew Johnson from impeachment in 1868. Cameron at one time lived in a tree near Lawrence, and in his later years came to be known as “the Kansas hermit.”

Mudge then? What if they had been the ones to pick up the runaway slaves and take them further on their Underground Railroad journey? And if they had, maybe Nell would not want to attend a Mudge lecture in 1866, only three years after Quantrill’s raid, and have to explain her widowhood and give her true name to Mudge should he recognize her. After all, she is still grieving. She stays home, writing in her diary,

I do know what has become of me, widow, now studying rock for signs of ancient life. Would Mudge recognize me, and ask me to explain my presence? Could I bear the lie I might tell, or the confession I might make? Could I speak calmly of those years, given Solomon’s murder, to a man who escaped murder though he shared the same cause?

As her passion for science continues, Nell does attend some of Mudge’s lectures.

So Benjamin Mudge became an inspiration to me, then to my character, and later in Found he writes Nell a note, congratulating her on her discoveries of bryozoan fossils. Upon hearing of his death, she writes in her diary,

Professor Benjamin Mudge, fossil collector, teacher, first State Geologist of Kansas. Benjamin Mudge, first president of the Kansas Academy. Benjamin Mudge of the legendary fossil cabinet, long ago donated to the State Agricultural College. Benjamin Mudge, whose lectures at the University here I sometimes attended, much to my benefit. His pallbearers were Snow, Popenoe, Savage and Parker, all keepers of the same flame. I wish I could have been in Manhattan to pay my respects, but I did not learn of his passing in time to travel.

A Corroboration

I have long been interested in Hugh Cameron, the “Kansas Hermit,” who lived in a treehouse in what is now the Pinckney neighborhood of Lawrence. But his first home was along the Kansas River, northwest of Lawrence. Cameron Bluffs, as his place was called, is now the site of the Westar Energy plant so visible to drivers on I-70 as they approach Lawrence from the west. Cameron was said to be an intrepid walker, attending inaugurations of presidents in Washington, D.C., every four years, the journeys always on foot. Early on, I imagined that as a recluse, and as a man who journeyed on foot, he might come to know my fictional character Nell Johnson Doerr. She would also be on foot, traveling the surrounds of Lawrence, and would also be seen as somewhat eccentric, given her pursuit of bryozoan fossils. Might they have met, become acquaintances, even found in each other a kindred spirit? I wrote some tentative passages with that in mind, again mixing the historical with the fictional. Then one research moment corroborated my fiction: after hours of studying and photographing bryozoan fossils at the Biodiversity Institute, each
fossil in a small box, labeled with fossil name, collector’s name, kind of rock, and place of discovery, I made my own discovery: a bryozoan fossil, a Fenestellidae, collected by N. D. Newell at Cameron’s Bluff. Yes, Nell and Hugh could well have known one another.

An Inspiration

Researchers are always researching, just as writers are always writing, because research and writing are ways of seeing the world, engaging the world. I remember once telling my writer-wife, Jeffrey Ann Goudie, that I was bored. “Pretend you’re a writer,” she quipped. She is right, because writers can use everything as material. During the summer of 2015, I took a vacation, a break from research, and spent time in New Mexico’s Pecos Wilderness. I was reading On the Move, the memoir by Oliver Sacks, the neurologist who made so many breakthroughs with people thought to be beyond physical and psychological hope. Sacks had a lifelong interest in nineteenth-century medicine; at that time doctors were richly descriptive, their writing dominated by the same case studies that Sacks wrote in books like Awakenings and The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat. Sacks not only has a writer’s sensibility—his attention to detail, his love of narrative—but he also embodies the writer’s sense that each individual is complicated, never to be completely reduced to a diagnosis. I did not intend to be inspired by Sacks, but I found myself wanting to create a character that Sacks would have been interested in. Thus, I invented Caleb Cunningham, a version of the idiot savant, who though uneducable, shows brilliance in finding fossils. Nell meets him in her sojourns when he is ten years old; he is nearly feral, roaming the river bluffs just as she does, but he is seemingly without purpose. She shows him her fossil discoveries, and he responds by bringing her more. They become occasional companions, and, when confronted by his mother, Nell defends her constructive use of his time and begins to pay for the discoveries Caleb makes. All is well until Caleb reaches puberty, when his “wildness” is seen as danger, and his mother, unable to contain or control him, has him committed to the Kansas State Insane Asylum in Osawatomie. Nell makes one dispiriting visit there, and Caleb slips from her life.

Of course, this additional character, inspired by Oliver Sacks, had to be researched. Terminologies to describe the young man, courtroom procedures for commitment, the asylum itself in 1877—so it was back to corroboration.

Know It Cold, Write It Hot

Each of my books has come out of research, and that is one of the motivating pleasures I have in the process of writing. The research phase, my filling up with

knowledge and detail—because I am passionate about the subject/s—is stimulating and satisfying. Thomas Berger, author of *Little Big Man*, visited the University of Kansas when I was a student. Someone asked him how long it had taken him to do so much research on the American West and how he kept track of all the details and events of such a long span of time; after all, his narrator, Jack Crabb, is 111 years old. Berger answered that he simply read and read, never making notes, and then sat down and wrote the novel. Surely, he must have had a masterful memory, and he always intended to mix fact with fiction and truth with lies, but his answer has led to one of my mottos: Know it cold, then write it hot.

I try to learn everything I can about a subject—the facts and the truth—then I let fiction take over, letting it grow organically out of what I have come to know and think about while researching. This process is like cooking. I have all the ingredients I need and an idea of what I want to make, but I am not sure how the dish will turn out—or, in fact, whether it will turn out at all. Again, that is why passion is important, because writing fiction has its false starts, its stumblings and misdirections, its unpredictability—in short, its frustrations. But the better the ingredients, the better the dish is likely to be. And there is always more research, the fact-checking research that writers, editors, and copy editors do after a manuscript is complete.

Research, the Other Side

When I wrote my 1825 historical Western, *rode*, a novel about a man and his horse, I wrote a scene describing how my main character, Robert Johnson, first came into possession of The Stud. The scene involved sugar cubes, and I was pleased with how it proceeded. Only one thing nagged at me, and so I researched the history of the sugar cube. I learned that in fact, the process of cutting blocks of sugar into cubes did not begin until 1841, when the wife of a sugar manufacturer cut herself with her “sugar snips,” bloodying the chunks of sugar she was readying for an important tea party. She complained, and her husband, Jakub Kryštof Rad, presented her with sugar cubes, red and white, some three months later; he patented the cutting process in 1843. I quickly rewrote my scene with chunks of sugar instead of cubes. An incorrect detail, like a misspelled word or an ungrammatical sentence, spoils the reader’s experience and undermines the authenticity and credibility of the historical novel.

The first edition of Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* contained several errors about Kansas history during the territorial period, the most egregious being her misuse

of the term “Jayhawker.” The errors were all corrected by the second printing, so readers must have responded quickly to her historical mistakes. I admit to being one of those soured by Robinson’s carelessness with details, though the book went on to receive the Pulitzer Prize in 2005. Still, when writing historical fiction, I hope not to sour others with missteps. I have to double-check everything, not trusting my instincts, my initial research, or my hope that someone will not question every detail. Still, like every other writer, I am not perfect.

There is nothing like having a book in print in order to see mistakes. A thoroughly checked manuscript can still contain errors, ones that, it seems, cannot be noticed until the published book is in hand. When my novel rode came in the mail, I tore open the package, pulled out a beautifully printed book, and began to thumb through for a look at the fonts, the generous margins, and the small horseshoes next to page numbers. Within a minute, my eye fell on page 48. My hero Robert Johnson has just swum his horse across the Mississippi, along with a box his friend Hiram has asked him to float to the other side. There, Johnson meets a black man, who thinks Johnson might have something for him.

“But you not the man with the food?” he whispered. He, too, had swum the river, his shirt clinging to a miserably scrawny frame. “He said there’d be a man. A box. Food.”

“Who said?” asked Johnson.

“Don’t have no names,” said the black man. He shook his head. “A mighty tall man. Good with horses. Like your horse there. But he don’t use no name.”

Could the man be Hiram? He’d packed Johnson elaborately, the box and more food than he could eat. “I have a name. Robert Johnson,” he said. “What’s yours?”

“Jackson. Like the president.”

That was my forehead-slapping moment: an error uncaught in spite of all my research and fact-checking, and too late to correct until the second printing, when “Like the president” was removed because Andrew Jackson, though well-known in 1825, was not president until 1829.

My novel Found is a series of false documents, what an article in a recent New Yorker magazine blog called “archival fiction.” Because each entry is dated, I spent hours with the perpetual calendar, making certain that the date of Nell’s diary entry about going to the bank doesn’t fall on a Sunday (when the bank would be closed) or making sure that the sixth Sunday after Quantrill’s raid was indeed September 27, 1863. Documents have their own style, too, one that changes over time, and so my research included reading letters and diaries and journals, but also looking at how they were written, what they looked like on the page, how people were greeted, and other conventions of the time. Because I was writing what I purport to be the letters and diaries of Nell Johnson Doerr, I also decided early on to write as much

of the material as possible by hand, to get the physical feeling Nell would have had of putting pen to paper, something many of us never do in this day of keyboards, computers, e-mails, text messages, and Facebook posts. Yet another part of research is experiencing, when possible, what a character experienced, so I went to Calhoun’s Bluff, off US Highway 24 east of Topeka, long known as a site rich in fossils, and found several with the same thrill Nell might have had. I also spent an hour on a sandbar in the Kansas River looking for fossils, particularly bryozoans.

Finally, though I researched extensively in the realm of science—particularly geology and fossils—I had to spend hours with the *Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science* in order to understand what scientists were actually writing about, what contributions were being made by “amateur scientists,” and what people knew about geology and paleontology in any given year. For example, any student of Kansas geology knows that Permian is one of the layers of rock in the state. But in my research at the University of Kansas, I found *The Rocks of Kansas* and discovered that the Permian question was not always settled.\(^{10}\) The book is mostly a list of identifiable rocks and fossils, but an addendum to the listing consists of letters between a variety of geologists, discussing Kansas rocks and layers. After being encouraged by one of her teachers to read the book, Nell writes:

> In their book, Swallow and Hawn note the existence of Permian rocks in Kansas, which greatly excited a Mr. Meek, who supposed he had the right to announce what he called an “exclusive discovery.” Hawn certainly makes a passionate defense of his and Swallow’s right to publish their examination of Kansas fossils and, with it, the claim of the Permian. Of course, I gain this perspective through hindsight, and through my tutorials with Samuel, dear man that he has already become to me.

> I won’t say to Samuel my true thoughts, that none of their bickering is science in the least. Unless, that is, someone might study the science of how animals protect their lairs, how men fight over their claims, as early settlers so often did in K.T.

Not only did I do the necessary scientific research to write *Found*, but I also experienced the other side of research by soliciting help from professionals in the field. These include Rex Buchanan of the Kansas Geological Survey, and Roy Beckemeyer, a longtime editor of the *Kansas Transactions* and an expert in paleoentomology. They asked many questions of the manuscript, and I went back to corroborate, discover, and rewrite for accuracy and clarity. I make the usual disclaimer in thanking all who look over with a manuscript: all errors are mine.

**History and Fiction as Collaboration**

A final collaboration and research—less fact-driven, less about historical accuracy, less about detail and more about sensibility—comes through my engagement with literature. Kansas has a rich array of literature set in the time period of my novel, 1854–1889.

*The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton*, by Jane Smiley, was published in 1998.\(^{11}\) Smiley reports that after the 1995 bombing of Oklahoma City’s Murrah Federal

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Building, she asked a historian friend about other episodes of political violence in American history, and his answer was unequivocal: “Bleeding Kansas.” She began her research, and her novel is meticulous. The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton takes its form from the travel narratives so popular in the nineteenth century—another example, perhaps, of “archival fiction.” Each chapter begins with a quotation from Miss Catherine E. Beecher’s A Treatise on Domestic Economy, published in 1841—ironic, because Lidie Newton is not the typical “domestic” woman of her time.

Lidie Harkness, plain and somewhat ungainly, marries Thomas Newton in Quincy, Illinois, and they make their way to Kansas in 1856. They settle in Lawrence because Thomas, unknown to Lidie, is smuggling guns (those famous Sharps rifles that appear, factually or mythically, in the literature of Kansas Territory). Thomas is murdered by Missourians, and Lidie, seeking revenge, travels to that slave-holding state, where she collapses by the side of a road, and is taken in by a plantation owner whose household nurses her back to health. In the 452 pages of Lidie Newton, Smiley includes massive gleanings from her research of the time period, and the reader, like Lidie, gains a more thorough and balanced sense of life in Kansas and Missouri. The novel corroborated my own desire to create a strong woman character from this region during this time period. The book also warned me against one of the sins of historical fiction. At least one review admired Smiley’s research but wished that she had not felt compelled to include everything she had learned. I certainly understand that temptation, as the research phase of historical fiction is so filled with richness and wonder.

John Wood’s collection of poetry, The Gates of the Elect Kingdom, was another inspiration. In his introduction, titled “Proem,” he writes,

*I originally considered subtitling The Gates of the Elect Kingdom “An Historical Poem” because it is based on historical characters, historical events, and what is certainly one of the great visionary moments, probably the last of such moments in pre-War, Mid-nineteenth-century America—the founding of the Hoadite community in Kansas. In fact, the story of Wilhelm Hoade, his visions, his coming to America, and the establishing of his community is a compact American epic comprising all the best and most hopeful dreams of pre–Civil War America.12

The author researched extensively in the realm of science—particularly geology and fossils, spending hours with the Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science in order to understand what scientists were actually writing about, what contributions were being made by "amateur scientists," and what people knew about geology and paleontology in any given year. He then created research notes, such as those pictured here, for his fictional character Nell Doerr.

Excited by these claims, I looked up Hoade and followed Wood’s citations and claims for Hoade’s community and legacy. I found nothing. The work is based on historical possibility, but not historical truth. And yet the claims Wood makes, though not fact, come to fruition in a series of deeply moving poems of hope and failure on the Kansas prairie. Wood, like one of the characters in the final poem, “knew age drives / memory Heavenward in spite of error / and that it edits, that it corrects the past / into Paradise.” Perhaps many writers of historical fiction could be accused of doing the same thing in their manipulations of the past.

Bruce Cutler certainly does, at the end of his poem cycle A West Wind Rises, about the 1859 Marais des Cygnes Massacre in southeast Kansas. The book, first published by the University of Nebraska Press in 1961, was obviously influenced by the centennial of Kansas statehood. Through multiple voices, Cutler tells the grim story of border violence in Bleeding Kansas. He ends his cycle of poems with the hanging of one of the perpetrators, William Griffith, in 1863. One of the survivors of the massacre is allowed to cut the rope that will drop the gallows floor. Macabre, yes, and yet Cutler’s final image is one of birth and rebirth, not of death, of the land made free again, of two swans emerging from the river named for them and slowly spreading wings and gaining air. “That was the myth. / And now the land was ready once again. / It was the time. It was time for them.”

Among the other literary works I read for inspiration were three great books: On the Origin of Species, by Charles Darwin, for its call to discover the fossil record that would corroborate his theory of evolution; Remarkable Creatures, by Tracy Chevalier, for its fictional, though accurate, portrayal of Mary Anning, a remarkable woman who had a talent for finding fossils on the English coast and whose discoveries still inhabit the British Museum; and The Signature of All Things, by Elizabeth Gilbert, for the creation of Alma Whittaker, botanist and prototype for the passion of amateur science throughout the nineteenth century. Together, these three books explore the discoveries and adventure of that era. The latter two re-create and create, respectively, the kind of woman I wanted Nell Johnson Doerr to be. In fact, I often create characters in fiction who I wish had been in the world at one time.

Time, of course, is one of the subjects of historical fiction—how the past became the present. As Joseph Stanley Pennell wrote in his great post–Civil War Kansas novel, *The History of Rome Hanks and Kindred Matters*, “There are no dreams of now that were not then.” Historians and fiction writers must parse the past and connect it to the present as we try to understand how people of the past lived and thought, but also to understand the way people of the present live and think, and why.

Perhaps we can never solve the riddles of time, but we can try to re-create the landscapes, the historical events, the thought processes and sensibilities of other times, because surely if they were part of the human experience once, we can imagine them into existence once again. Historians and fiction writers are time travelers, enhancing their own lives, and their readers’ lives with a stronger sense of the past, with a grounding in the present, with a better sense of what is possible for the future. I sometimes jokingly tell my historian friends: If you want to know the facts, read history. If you want to know the truth, read fiction. But both history and fiction are more complicated than simple dichotomy. We live in a complicated world, and we always have. For every moment, the most important subject of both history and fiction is the “now” in which, and for which, writers write and readers read.  