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Dear Colleague:

Is it important for a historical novel to be accurate--truthful--in its background information? Mary McCarthy seems to think it is. In her novel, Birds of America, she has her characters going into the Sistine Chapel around New Year's Day in 1965. She was told that the Chapel was probably closed at that time for a Vatican Council. She checked and found, to her great relief, that the Chapel was in fact open that day. Had it not been open, McCarthy insisted, she would have thrown out that chapter. Working on the same novel, McCarthy called up the Paris weather bureau to check what the weather was like on February 8, 1965, a crucial day, when her hero learned that the US had begun to bomb North Vietnam. In real life it rained in Paris; and so it rains on page 330 in the novel (American Scholar, Autumn 1992, pp. 604-5).

Mary McCarthy is not alone, among historical novelists, in this fanaticism for accuracy. One wonders, why bother? Why spend all that time checking on the historical accuracy of such details when the entire book is fictional--when her hero Peter Levi never existed? Well, as a somewhat resentful nonWesterner, I think she and other white writers are simply showing off. She does it because she can! Her Western culture is the sort that keeps written records. It happens that mine, which is Chinese, does so too, almost fanatically. With a bit of archival research I can probably tell you that my great great grandpa was hauled into court on the morning of February 3, 1857 and scolded by the Yen county magistrate for abusing his fourth concubine. It's there in the records, not because my great great grandpa was a big shot, but because court procedures were kept--part of a society's consciousness of itself. However, not all cultures have written records. Not all people can show off the misdeeds of their ancestors with my degree of confidence. There is a glaring inequality here--a fundamental injustice. What to do?

Well, one solution is to assert that history is bunk, that accuracy is word-fetishism, that truth is always a social construction--a power play, that what really matters when you say anything is whether it is interesting or, more important, whether it serves a worthy social cause, and not whether it is true. In some fashionable disciplines (fortunately, not my own), truth may well have become the "t" word--a word you are afraid to say for fear of seeming naive or arrogant.

Best wishes,

