# INTERNET FICTION

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A fine ceremony at The Club on June 8 recognized the best authors in the Golden State and was the finale of the 75th annual Commonwealth Club of California Book Awards. Thoughts of writing were in the air, and as an occasional author, this prompts me to observe how the Internet, along with changing everything else, has changed the way we write.

As a devotee of the modern novel, over the past couple of years I've begun to notice how many of the works of fiction I read are deeply embedded in a field of knowledge or a place. The writers incorporate copious details about the region, the profession, the historical epoch, in which their stories are set. I love these novels, because while being entertained, I learn a great deal about mathematics or beekeeping or life in Kabul. I sometimes marvel at how much information these authors impart as they create the backdrops for their novels.

Then came a moment when I was writing a column and couldn't remember the name of a small village I had visited abroad, and I looked it up online and was able to find a map and zoom down to see the street names, the location of the railroad station and the river flowing through town. I was able to reconstruct everything I needed from a vague memory three decades old, and then to work the specific information into the story I was telling. Instantly, I had total recall of the place where my tale was set.

What a leap forward this is from the tools available to the writer of the past. Authors had to be alert to the specifics of the places and activities they used as settings for their work.

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They kept copious notes, writing up their day's experiences or sketches of local color. If they needed to check some facts, they might find help at the local library, or talk with someone they knew who was familiar with a place, an industry, a historical episode. They generally wrote about what they knew – a cowboy about cowboying, an ambulance driver in the Spanish-American War about life in a war zone, South Africans about South Africa, a farmer about farming.

James Michener was a master of the traditional art of embedding a story in a place. He took up residence for years in particular locales – the Eastern Shore of Maryland and Hawaii, for example. He circulated socially, interviewed key people and became a part of local life while he gathered material for books like *Chesapeake* and *Hawaii*. I can still remember, when I arrived to live in Honolulu in 1977, how memories of Michener's presence in Hawaii were fresh among the people I met. They still debated his writing about Hawaii – did he accurately portray island history and life, who were his characters in real life and how much did he embellish or change their stories? Michener spent a period of his own life in Hawaii, and his life and writing became part of the story of the area about which he wrote.

With the Internet today, it's easy to mobilize information about any place, process, people or event with the click of a mouse. Faulty memories can be enhanced; a story concept can be easily filled out in vibrant color, with great detail. It is a great tool for the writer, who can now easily illustrate his or her concepts.

But is it always honest? Does it lead to a style of writing in which an author can take a theme or concept and set it in a context of which the writer has no experience and with which he or she has had no direct contact? Life in wartime Poland? No problem – just summon up the online memories of refugees from an oral history project and weave them into the story. The daily routines of a beekeeper? Just tap into *www.beemaster.com* or any of a dozen how-to web sites for honey producers. A remote region in Myanmar? Use that same mapping function I used to call up the name of a lake and figure out how long it would take for characters to get from one side of the lake to the other.

I believe the availability of all this information online is helping to create an explosion of interesting fiction. It makes the job of writing more accessible, and less labor-intensive than for scribblers of the past. But after recognizing the importance of the Internet as a tool for fiction authors, I am paying just a bit more attention to the authors' biographies. Do the authors have direct knowledge of that about which they write?

In the end, it may not matter. After all, it's fiction, and the point is to enjoy it as an art form. Ω