

A VERY REAL TRIP IN TIME

Janet Lunn

Résumé: L'auteur parle de l'un des plaisirs insoupçonnés des romans historiques: la nécessité de faire des voyages. Par exemple, pour son roman *The Root Cellar*, Janet Lunn a refait le périple de ses personnages canadiens qui ont participé à la Guerre de Sécession.



Photo credit: Anthea Weese

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I love the research that goes with writing historical fiction. It's what makes time travel possible — for the writer and for the reader. It's also more interesting than the research for straight history because of the hard-to-find details of everyday life that are so essential.

I have always loved digging into the past and it's no wonder. I grew up surrounded by it, in a community where you could reach out and touch it. We lived in Vermont in the US and I remember veterans from the Civil War marching in the Memorial Day parades. They had been soldiers who, in their own childhoods, had known people who remembered the Revolution of 1776.

I live now in rural Ontario, in a house, the first part of which was built in 1820. My time-travel story, *The Root Cellar*, is about this house and the people I've imagined loving it as I do. The story began for me in my kitchen — a long, low, wooden room dominated by an old fireplace and a bake oven. The first Christmas we lived here I found I was almost smelling the mincemeat and roast geese cooking over the fires of Christmasses past.

The second year in the house produced our ghost. I did not see her — I have never seen her; my husband did — but she sent me scurrying to the county registry office to find out who she was. No luck. All the same, by this time she had taken on a character and a personality in my imagination. Other characters had formed around her. I was caught. I began to map out a story about a girl named Rose and our ghost. The story got away from me, all the way back to the mid-nineteenth century. It was time for research.

At first it was easy. In 1967 my husband and I had written a history of Prince Edward County where I live. I mined it meticulously for its every last nineteenth-century detail. Then one of my characters, Will Morrissay, went off across Lake Ontario to Oswego, New York, to fight in the American Civil War. When he didn't come home at the war's end, Rose and her nineteenth-century friend Susan went in search of him. I followed them. I couldn't hitch a ride on a schooner sailing across the lake as they had done; I had to take a bus all the way around.

In Oswego I talked to local-history buffs, I went to the library, to the historical society, and to Fort Ontario — where the soldiers had been recruited — and

found that the regiment Will had joined had been the first to march into the defeated Confederate capital when the war ended. What a find! I wrapped a whole chapter around it.

I spent a few days walking around the town, getting a sense of it. I don't like writing about a place where my feet haven't walked.

From Oswego I took the train to New York City — as my young friends had done in 1865. Again, in New York, I walked the streets and spent days in museums and libraries etc. I found things. In the historical society I found a train timetable that showed me when Rose and Susan would have gone from Oswego to New York and what they would have paid. I found pictures of the old Central Railroad station.

From New York I went to Washington DC (where the curators at the historical society were suspicious and the Library of Congress was a wonderful place to work in) and from there to Richmond, Virginia. Throughout my journey I took voluminous notes, countless pictures.

I came home. I read Bruce Catton, Shelby Roote, Louisa Alcott & Co. on the Civil War. I scrutinized Mathew Brady's war photographs. I listened to music from the period. Then I wrote, then I went back to my notes. Then I wrote again, then back to my notes — over and over, trying to make the history as intrinsic a part of my story as the characters who had set it going in the first place.

Finally, it was finished. I sent it away to my publisher, but the memory of my trip with Rose and Will and Susan back to the middle of the nineteenth century will always be with me.

Janet Lunn is the author of many award-winning books, including *Shadow in Hawthorn Bay* and *The Story of Canada (with Christopher Moore)*. *The Root Cellar* was the winner of the *Canadian Library Association Children's Book of the Year Award* and was named an *ALA Notable Book*.