

Research When Writing a Book

By Paul Attaway

Down the rabbit-hole - A lesson from Lewis Carroll

Today, it's not uncommon to hear someone refer to a long, winding internet search on a particular topic as a trip down a rabbit-hole. We have Lewis Carroll to thank for this reference for the origin of the phrase lies in the opening chapter of his 1865 masterpiece, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

CHAPTER 1 – Down the Rabbit-Hole

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, “and what is the use of a book,” thought Alice, “without pictures or conversations?”

So she was considering in her own mind (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid) whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daises, when suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her.

There was nothing so *very* remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so *very* much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, “Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late” (when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but when the Rabbit actually *took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket*, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a Rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.

In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.

RESEARCH IS THE ESSENTIAL RABBIT HOLE FOR ANY WRITER

The phrase “down the rabbit hole” is defined by Merriam-Webster as: a complexly bizarre or difficult state or situation conceived of as a hole into which one falls or descends, one in which the pursuit of something (such as an answer or solution) leads to other questions, problems, or pursuits.

For me, both the scene above from Alice’s Adventures and the dictionary definition perfectly describe my research pursuits when I am working on a book. I will use, as an example, a storyline I am working on now for the next installment in the Atkins Family Series. When *Eli’s Redemption* ends, Eli’s younger brother, Walker, a character we met and learned a bit about in the first book in the series, *Blood in the Low Country*, is a high-school senior who will be heading to Georgetown University the following year. As things stand now, in the next book, Walker will head to Europe after college graduation and will see the Berlin Wall fall, the USSR collapse, and the Oligarchs of the new Russia arise. I have a few plot lines in mind where events that occurred during the Russian Revolution of 1917 remain unsettled and return to complicate life for Walker. As for the research – where to begin.

But this is a good problem because I love research. Now back to my comment above that the scene with Alice and the dictionary definition perfectly capture what research is for me. I’ll start with the definition: *a complexly bizarre or difficult state or situation conceived of as a hole into which one falls or descends*.

I began my research with the Russian Revolution and the conditions in Russia that made it ripe for revolution over a hundred years ago. I perceive the problem as a hole into which I have descended which leads to other questions, problems or pursuits. For instance, to understand the Russian Revolution, I felt it necessary to understand the Romanov dynasty, Lenin’s upbringing, the popularity in some quarters of Karl Marx and socialism at the time, the size and nature of the Russian Empire (it occupied 1/6th of the Earth’s land in 1917), etc.... I looked around at what else was going on in the world and how Russia was viewed by other countries. Of

course, World War One was raging on and the Germans were desperate to get Russia out of the war so they could focus on ending the British Empire so they could supersede it and become the next great empire as the Ottoman Empire was in its last days. And we haven't even gotten to November 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell.

STORYTELLERS MUST BE CURIOUS

So, yes, each Google search or book read begets multiple questions and topics to gain an understanding of. For me, none of this would be possible without what Alice describes above: *Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a Rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it...*

The key phrase here is “burning with curiosity.” Quite simply, I am fascinated by the Russian Revolution and what was happening in the world at the time. The dynasties of old that depended upon feudal systems and lacked any middle-class were dying and the nation state was on the rise. Capitalism and democracy were spreading, and nationalism appeared in both positive and negative ways. In positive ways, nationalistic pride prevented Marxist revolutions from spreading beyond Russia, a reality that confounded Lenin and Trotsky. The negative form of nationalism reared its head in the fascist states of Italy and Hitler's Germany twenty years later.

Finally, we learn that Alice bounded down the rabbit hole without considering how she would get out again. Okay, here is where our experiences hopefully diverge for it's my goal to climb back out with an idea for a story to tell. I'll start writing and with each step, I'll refine my research questions and execute specific, targeted dives into material I have uncovered.