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SUNDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2011

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Author Wayne Johnston helps kick off WordFest this week.



Herald Archive, Postmedia News

Author Wayne Johnston has spent a good amount of time talking about the literary licence he takes in his books.

Wayne Johnston defends literary licence

'If it's fiction, that means it's made up'

ERIC VOLMERS
CALGARY HERALD

Wayne Johnston admits that his newest novel contains an experiment of sorts, a way for him to both prove a theory to himself and offer a "told-you-so" to his critics.

It all has to do with straddling the line between fact and fiction, and the idea that readers are much less sensitive to this than purists might think.

It's very clear that "Vanderland," the mammoth mansion at the heart of Johnston's eighth novel, *A World Elsewhere*, is based on the Biltmore Estate, a real-life behemoth built by the rich and reclusive Vanderbilt clan in North Carolina as a garish symbol of America's Gilded Age. (And if it isn't clear, the author spells it out very clearly in his introduction.)

But the native Newfoundlander changed the name of the family from Vanderbilt to Vanderlyden. This was not because he was worried about being sued. It relates back to criticism he received for his novels *Colony of Unrequited Dreams* and *Navigator of New York*.

In those books, the author used real-life historical figures — former Newfoundland premier Joey Smallwood and Arctic explorer Robert Peary, respectively — to spin tales of fiction.

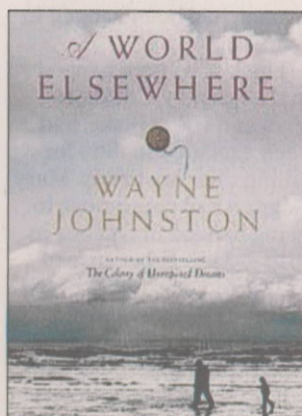
"People have said to me about *Colony* and about *Navigator of New York*, 'You could have saved yourself a lot of trouble simply by changing the names of your characters,'" says Johnston, on a break from a book tour at his winter home in Arizona. "They'd say, 'Why didn't you just call Smallwood, Joe Smith?'"

"But, in fact, just the opposite is true. People would then have said that I was trying to have it both ways; that I was trying to write about Smallwood without owning up to it. So, I've taken up the gauntlet that was set down for me and I've changed the names. But, everyone who reads the book, when they read the name Vanderlyden, they read the name Vanderbilt. It bears out my thesis that changing the names makes no difference whatsoever."

It seems Johnston has spent a good amount of time talking about the literary licence he takes when writing historic fiction. Like *Navigator of New York*, *A World Elsewhere* takes place in the 19th century.

Some of the historical figures who make appearances — Henry James, for instance — go by their real names in the novel, while others do not. But Johnston has never made apologies about the fuzzy line between historic fact and flights of fiction in his work.

"The only thing that a writer who combines history and fiction is obliged to do on behalf of the reader is be consistent," he says. "If, in the first 200 pages of a book, you've been playing absolutely fast and loose



with history, you shouldn't change in the last 100 pages to getting the history exactly right. A lot of people don't understand what the purpose of it is artistically, but I think, really, anything goes as long as the people you are writing about are deceased.

"I think the onus is on the reader to understand what to me is self-evident, which is that a historical novel is still a novel. Historical is the adjective but novel is the noun. And the noun trumps the adjective all the time. If it's a novel, that means it's fiction. If it's fiction, that means it's made up."

A World Elsewhere starts with a friendship between two characters who meet at Princeton in the 19th century. Landish Druken is the son of a wealthy and callous Newfoundland sealer; American Padgett Vanderlyden is the heir to a vast railroad fortune who lives in "Vanderland."

Years later, after being disowned by his father, Druken comes to live with his old friend, who hires him to tutor his isolated daughter in the massive mansion.



Wayne Johnston takes part in WordFest, running Oct. 11 through 16. Tickets and info at 403-237-9068 and wordfest.com.

As with some of Johnston's past novels, the action is told through the culturally specific lens of a displaced Newfoundlander.

And, as with all good historic fiction, the time and place is supposed to resonate with a modern audience. The author first visited Biltmore in 2002, when he was a writer-in-residence in Virginia. He was taken by the audacity of building a castle-like structure in the wilderness of North Carolina.

"A book can be read on many levels, and I think this book could be read a hundred years from now when people forget what an economic mess 2011 is and who caused it," Johnston says.

"But, sure, it's meant to have a contemporary relevance. This house could easily be seen as America. It's crumbling from within because of pride and hubris and vanity and a desire to build a perfect place that will exclude the rest of the world. You couldn't find a better definition of the United States in 2011 than that."