

TRUE FICTIONS

Television producers, like authors, should be granted poetic licence to bring history alive, writes **Charlotte Gray**



Last April, I saw history come to life. On a snow-covered mountain near Kananaskis, Alberta, I watched a thin line of men and women wearing woolen clothes, shouldering canvas backpacks, dragging wooden sleds, and trudging up a steep slope. Fifty film extras (each with a personal avalanche transceiver) no doubt found the going as tough and bone-chilling as the original prospectors had. Although those backpacks and wooden sleds were empty, their grunting, aching clamber up the *faux* Chilkoot was no fun in sodden leather boots, scratchy woolen jackets, patched trousers, and long skirts heavy with damp.

I was on set to observe the filming of *Klondike*, a six-hour television miniseries based on my 2010 book, *Gold Diggers* (HarperCollins Canada). The series, produced by Scott Free Productions, has a budget of \$25 million and a cast that includes Sam Shepard, Tim Roth, and Richard Madden. Early on in the 55-day shoot, four camera crews attempted to recreate the epic trek by Klondikers over the Chilkoot Pass, as photographed in 1898 by E.O. Hegg and described in my book's opening chapters.

Every time I start a book, I face a challenge: to bring history alive on the page.

Scriptwriter Paul Scheuring and the producers of *Klondike* faced a similar challenge. We write for different media, but we each want to bridge the gap between then and now. If we constantly approach the past as a foreign country, it will remain there.

However, the constraints on a television writer are much tighter than those on the author of a book. Once I've got my reader hooked, I can take my time. On television, the action must be packed into tight segments wrapped around commercial breaks. Television audiences (and executives) need an uncluttered storyline, plus a handful of strong characters to carry the viewer from beginning to end.

Gold Diggers followed six characters sequentially; for *Klondike*, the producers expanded the role of Bill Haskell, a young prospector who joined the Rush early, and dropped another of my characters, the English journalist Flora Shaw, altogether. And *Klondike* has two elements that fit 2013 Hollywood tropes rather than 1890s Yukon reality: a bromance, and a hot heroine.

Do I mind? Not at all. *Klondike* is a fictionalized miniseries, not a documentary. Its audience will be vastly larger than the readership any Canadian non-fiction writer could hope to attract, and the script has re-

mained true to the essence of the prospectors' experience. My source materials for *Gold Diggers* were the diaries, letters, and memoirs of six real people. But I don't own those characters, and the showrunners have a right to tweak the material. The themes remain the same: the hunger for adventure, the manipulation of male admirers by smart women, and the extraordinary selflessness of spiritual leaders.

I'm impressed by the balance between authenticity and contemporary appeal in the production. Take, for example, Belinda Mulroney, a red-haired, 24-year-old Irish miner's daughter who arrived in Dawson City in 1897 and within months became the richest woman in the Klondike (a fortune not earned on her back). The real Belinda left a lively memoir of escapades and sharp business practices. She was smart and successful, and her brash self-confidence made her attractive to sex-starved miners. But the real Belinda Mulroney was no beauty. A rare black-and-white photo shows a dumpy, square-jawed woman in grim wire-framed glasses and an unflattering hat.

A reader can ignore the photo and stick with the spirit; a television viewer cannot, so the (attractive) Australian actress Abbie Cornish has been cast. Some of the details of Belinda's wardrobe are accurate for the era. A beautiful velvet coat has the right lines: double-breasted and -waisted, with elaborate filigree clip-fasteners. But the pants that Cornish wears in a dogsled scene are skintight – unthinkable in the late 19th century. Still, I regard it as a victory that this forgotten woman will be rehabilitated.

After a couple of days at the Chilkoot Pass location, I explored the newly built set for Dawson City on a ranch outside Calgary. Today, the real Dawson City looks like a shabby film set, with Gold Rush-era streetscapes interrupted by mobile homes, modern stores, and ugly, anachronistic signage. *Klondike*'s imagined Dawson City, inspired by archival photos, is all too realistic. Unpaved streets curve around tree stumps, boxes of cartridges for Colt 45s sit on the general store's shelves, and there is mud everywhere.

It is truer to the non-fiction story than the authentic Gold Rush town three thousand kilometres further north.

Klondike will air on the Discovery Channel in early 2014. Charlotte Gray's most recent book is *The Massey Murder: A Maid, Her Master and the Trial that Shocked a Nation*, which appears with HarperCollins Canada in September.