

The Challenges of Writing Historical Fiction: Part One by Author Ronald E. Yates

Those of us who write historical fiction are faced with a plethora of unique challenges. In fact, there are so many that it would be difficult to deal with all of them in one post.

I will break the challenges down into several parts which I will share with you over the next several blog posts.

This first post deals with one the greatest challenges when it comes to writing historical fiction: How to balance historical accuracy with artistic license.

I spent 27 years of my life as a journalist with the Chicago Tribune. Working for a newspaper taught me some basic skills regarding reporting, which is the reporter's word for research. Journalism is an empirical discipline. That means, like science, it is a search for truth and, like science, you use trial and error, observation and analysis to uncover that truth.

For the scientist or scholar or historian, empiricism means arriving at a truth via observation and experimentation. For the journalist, the empirical tools are Observation and Interviewing. I believe any successful journalist, author or scholar must master both of those skills—along with the ability to respect the language and to write evocatively.

If you are using the empirical tools of observation and interviewing correctly and skillfully, you will find that the information you are gathering is mostly accurate.

Accuracy when writing historical fiction is critical. That may sound like a paradox. It is not. A critical element in historical fiction is the way people communicate with one another. You want to make sure your characters if they are in the 19th Century (as mine are when the Finding Billy Battles trilogy begins) are using the correct lingua franca.

You don't want your protagonists and antagonists using 21st Century colloquial speech or slang in 1880s Kansas. For one thing that destroys the sense of time and place and for another, it reveals to the reader that the author has not researched the era enough or is too lazy to learn and employ the vernacular of the time. I see this mistake all the time especially in American films that are set in earlier periods.

When a character in a book or film set in the 19th Century says something like: "This sucks" or "Are you nuts?" or "Give me a break!" I am immediately turned off to the story. It happens all the time—maybe not as obviously as those examples, but you get what I mean. I am sure you have heard or read similar out of time and place comments.

In the new Ben-Hur film, for example, during the climactic chariot race, Messala shouts at Judah Ben-Hur, "Are we having fun yet, brother?" I wager that phrase was never uttered by an ancient Roman. That kind of out of place comment is a distraction, an intrusion and it demonstrates either a lack of knowledge of the time the story is set in or even worse, no regard for the ear of the audience.

So that is a big issue for me. Another is in making sure places are accurately described. For example, in writing the first book of my Finding Billy Battles trilogy I had to describe, the Kansas towns of Lawrence and Dodge City as well as Denver, Colorado as they looked in the 1880s and 1890s. I used the Kansas Historical Society to find old maps of Lawrence and Dodge City. I did the same with a historical group in describing Denver. I also had to describe the Wadsworth Old Soldiers Home in Leavenworth, Kansas where Billy Battles first meets his great-grandson. In the book, the two sit on the veranda talking. In reality, as a student intern at the Kansas City Star in 1968 I actually interviewed a 98-year-old Spanish-American War veteran on the same veranda.

In *The Improbable Journeys of Billy Battles* (Book 2 of the trilogy), I had to describe what Honolulu, Yokohama, Hong Kong, Manila and Saigon looked like between 1894 and 1899. Because I lived and worked in these locations during my time as a foreign correspondent, I already knew what they looked like from the 1970s to now. During the years I worked in Asia and Latin America, I made it a point to collect old maps and books about places like Saigon and Manila. I was always fascinated by what Asian cities looked like during their colonial periods, and I also knew that someday I would write a novel or two about them that was set in the 19th Century.

I think it is essential to establish historical credibility with readers. Once that is done, then you can allow fiction to run rampant in your story. I believe readers are willing to suspend belief in things that a character does IF the author has nailed the time and place of an event accurately.

Haute Couture, ca. 1898: People, for the most part, behaved differently in the 1880s and 1890s. Having them do and say things that people do and say in 2016 is to ignore accuracy and precision. Relationships between men and women were very different (at least in public) in 1895 than they are today. Men—at least most men—demonstrated a particular deference toward women. It was simply the gentlemanly thing to do. Those who didn't observe such conventions were regarded as cads, brutes or beasts—to use the patois of the time.

Women did not wear pants in 1895—at least not on the streets of places like Denver, Lawrence, Kansas or Manila. They did not carry handguns and shoot villains on sight—at least not frequently. In fact, most women who wanted to dispatch an abusive man did so with poison—at least that is what my research of 19th Century crime records found—the legend of Lizzie Borden notwithstanding.

If you want your heroine or female antagonist to blow the brains out of a brutish man or to give him 40 whacks with an ax, you can certainly write it that way IF you have established historical accuracy and trust with your reader.

In my mind, that is how you balance accuracy and artistic license in historical fiction. The reader must believe that the time, the place, and the conduct of your characters are consistent with the era about which you are writing. Can your protagonist or antagonist act out of character within the epoch in which your book is set? Absolutely. But if they, do it is seen as an anomaly and not something the reader (or people alive at that time) would expect.

That is not a bad thing. It can give your story tension, even texture. But you must use it sparingly because you don't want it to become commonplace throughout the story.

Another area that is critical to good historical fiction is the way things smelled, the way things felt and the way things sounded in the period about which you are writing. For example, in describing Dodge City, Kansas when Billy Battles arrives there as an 18-year-old newspaper apprentice, I wanted to make sure the reader knew how the place smelled because of the thousands of Texas cattle in pens on the outskirts of town waiting to be loaded into boxcars for Kansas City and Chicago. Then there were the stinking buffalo hides that were piled 30- and 40-feet high south of the Arkansas River. Streets in those days were not paved and were usually littered with horse apples, garbage, stagnant water and road kill.

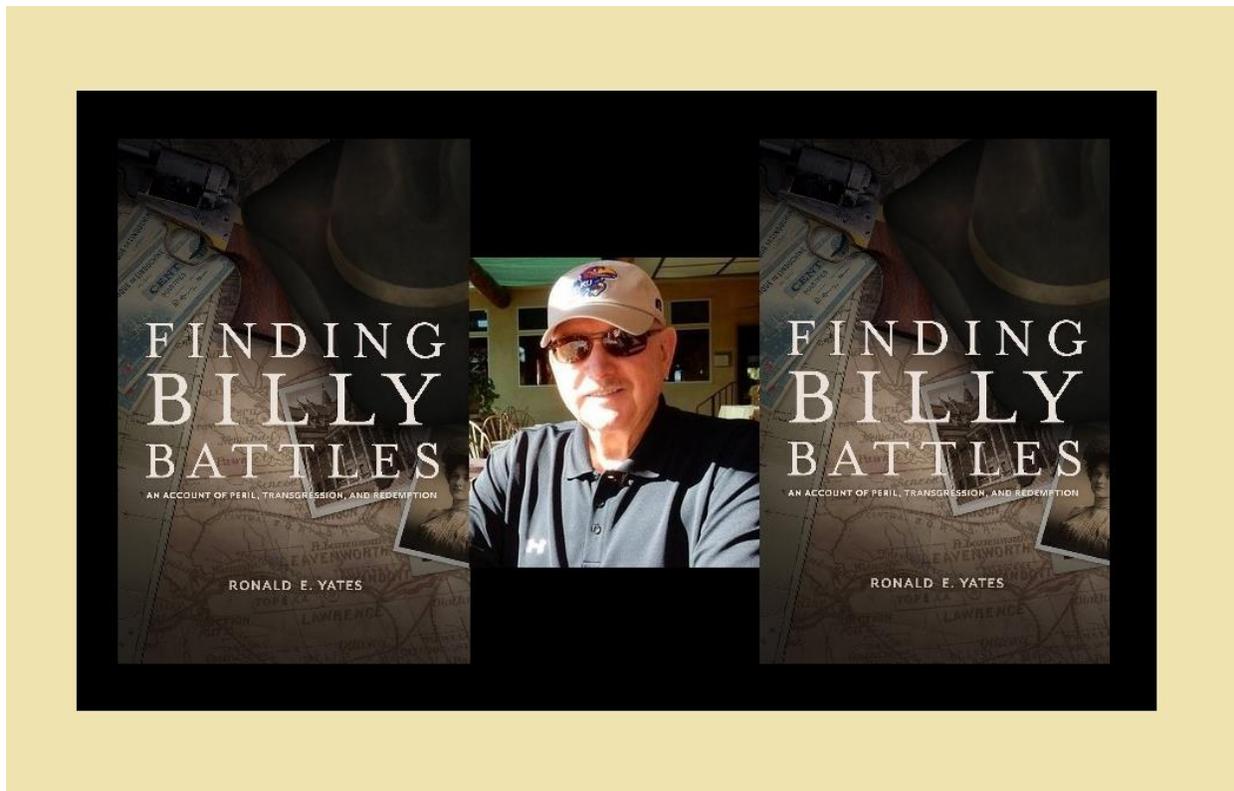
Dodge City, Ca 1879: Not a very pleasant sight—or smell.

Clothing in the 19th Century, especially women's clothing, was often uncomfortable. Cloth was abrasive, irritating and heavy; buildings were often unpainted and built from coarse wood, and the food was not always fresh or prepared with

the greatest attention to sanitation and safety. In Book 1 of my trilogy, Nellie Cashman (a real Irish woman who operated the Rus House Restaurant in Tombstone, Arizona) runs an ad in the Tombstone Epitaph that proclaims to her potential customers: “My kitchen is clean and free of cockroaches.” I found that ad while looking through old copies of the Epitaph.

All of these things, and I am sure I haven’t included everything here, need to be considered when balancing accuracy with artistic license. For me, this is second nature. Paying attention to accuracy is what I did for a quarter century as a journalist. The artistic license didn’t come into play until recently when I began writing fiction—or what I like to call “FACTION.”

Written and Submitted by Ronald E. Yates



Finding Billy Battles (Finding Billy Battles Trilogy Book 1) by Ronald E. Yates

When a great-grandson inherits two aging trunks and a stack of meticulously detailed journals penned by his great-grandfather, he sets out to fulfill his great-grandfather’s last request: to tell the story of an incredible life replete with adventure, violence, and tragedy. The great-grandfather’s name is Billy Battles—a man often trapped and overwhelmed by circumstances beyond his control.

For much of his 100-year-long life Billy is a man missing and largely unknown to his descendants. His great-grandson is about to change that. As he works his way through the aging journals and the other possessions, he finds in the battered trunks he uncovers the truth about his mysterious great-grandfather—a man whose deeds and misdeeds propelled him on an extraordinary and perilous journey from the untamed American West to the inscrutable Far East, Latin America and Europe.

As he flips through the pages of the handwritten journals, he learns of Billy’s surprising connections to the Spanish-American War, French Indochina, and revolutions in Mexico and other Latin American countries. But most of all he learns that in finding Billy Battles he has also found a long lost and astonishing link to the past.

One Special Book Review: 5.0 out of 5 Stars. Fantastic Historical Fiction. Most of my relatives are normal, boring people. They have interesting anecdotes and some cool experiences, but overall, there is nothing that will make me sit back and listen to them for hours on end. Billy Battles is nothing like these people.

Apparently taken partially from a real-life person, this tale is told through the great grandson of Billy Battles reading through the personal journals of his life as a young man, exploring the world and discovering himself.

Having studied history, the research involved in this book is striking and very thorough. The language, the details, the people and cultures, are very true to life, and I have to take my hat off to Ronald Yates. Yet the book doesn't just rest on being factual. Through the journals, I got a very close look at Billy, and the people he met, which humanized several actual historical characters, without taking any undue liberties to make them fit a certain mold.

I read this book in a day and half the night, and I don't regret the lost sleep. Reviewed by Dan Clarke

Global Library: Historical Fiction, Action and Adventure

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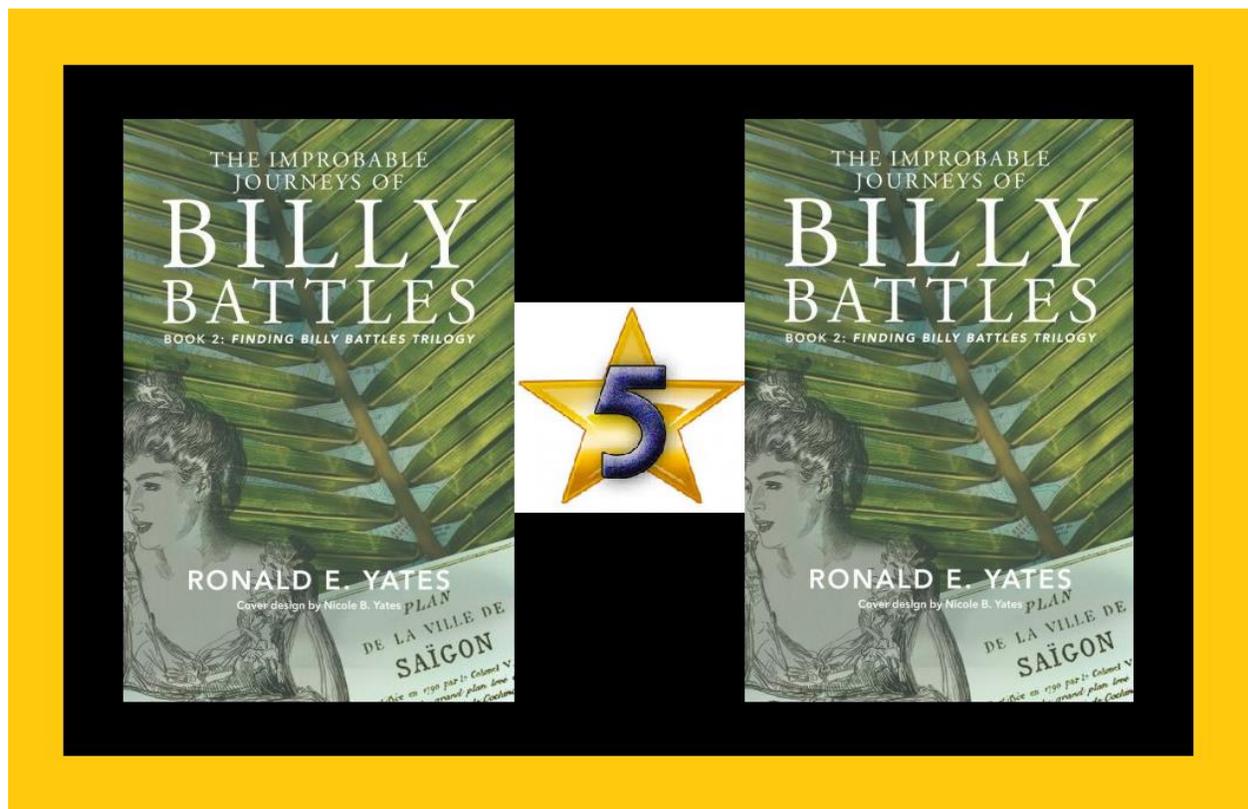
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**The Improbable Journeys Of Billy Battles (Finding Billy Battles Trilogy Book 2)
by Ronald E. Yates**

Billy Battles is definitely not in Kansas anymore.

As Book 2 of the Finding Billy Battles trilogy opens, Billy is far from his Kansas roots and his improbable journeys are just starting.

The year is 1894 and Billy is aboard the S S China sailing to the inscrutable Far East. Trouble is not far behind. He has met a mysterious and possibly dangerous German Baroness. He has locked horns with malevolent agents of the German government and battled ferocious Chinese and Malay pirates in the South China Sea.

Later, he is embroiled in the bloody anti-French insurgency in Indochina—which quite possibly makes him the first American combatant in a country that eventually will become Vietnam. Then, in the Philippines, he is thrust into the Spanish-American War and the brutal anti-American insurgency that follows. But Billy's troubles are only beginning.

As the 19th century ends and the 20th century begins, he finds himself entangled with political opportunists, spies, revolutionaries, and an assortment of vindictive and dubious characters of both sexes. How will Billy handle those people and the challenges they present? The answers are just ahead.

One Special Book Review: You can't help but be intrigued and fascinated by the intrepid, larger-than-life protagonist in Ronald Yates' entertaining and thoughtful second book of his Finding Billy Battles trilogy. This time, you see how Billy's tumultuous life begins to impact him in middle age as he seeks his next adventures to distract him from past grief and guilt. Yates has an effective way of revealing interesting details of exotic places during historic periods—this time primarily in the Orient of the late 19th and early 20th centuries—while weaving in a fascinating tale of a man in perpetual motion. One can't help but find interesting parallels at Yates' deft hand between Billy's unrest and that of French Indochina and the Philippines during a time of conflict and pushback over European colonization. Ray Elliott, Author of, *With the Silent Knowledge*, *Iwo Blasted Again*, and *Wild Hands Toward the Sky*

Awards:

Three Pulitzer Prize nominations by the Chicago Tribune, The Peter Lisagor Award from the Society of Professional Journalists, The Inter-American Press Association Tom Wallace Award for coverage of South America, Three Edward Scott Beck Awards for international reporting.

Global Library: Historical fiction, action and adventure

5 Star Review: The Improbable Journeys of Billy Battles is the sequel to Finding Billy Battles. I jumped right into this book without reading the first in this trilogy and found it to be a compelling story based on fact and expanded by narrative fiction.

*****Ted Sayles who is the great-grandson of Billy Battles inherits Billy's journals and while writing this trilogy he stays very true to the language of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. While this book opens in 1894 with William (Billy) Battles heading for the Orient aboard the SS China it covers his time in the Far East, Latin America, and Europe.

*****It is aboard the SS China that Billy meets German Baroness Katharina von Schreiber. She is gorgeous and regal, far out of reach of a Kansas scribbler (journalist). Since you have probably read the book's description, I wrestle with what to share with you from this amazing story and journey that Billy Battles is about to embark on. I have decided to quote this passage to whet your appetite. I quote:

*****"Katharina's cabin was a bit larger than mine was, and like mine, its walls were covered with dark mahogany panels. In addition to the two overstuffed chairs and writing table, she also had a small dining table. That is where we settled, she on one side and me on the other.

*****"I'm sorry, I have nothing to offer you to drink." Then she paused, stood up, and walked to her wardrobe where she produced a tear-shaped bottle of Glenglassaugh single malt Scotch whiskey and two heavy cut crystal glasses. "Except for this."

*****She returned and placed the glasses on the table in front of us. "May I?" she asked, and then uncorking the bottle, she poured two fingers in each glass. "This was my late husband's favorite."

*****I shuddered imperceptibly at that remark but pulled the glass toward me anyway. Images of Katharina pushing Baron von Schreiber over a cliff or poisoning him with arsenic-laced Wiener schnitzel flooded my mind.

*****I forced those macabre thoughts out of my mind by focusing on the rich amber hue of the whiskey as I uneasily swirled the glass around and around in front of me.

*****What was I doing? I found myself thinking. Why was I in Katharina Schreiber's cabin about to drink expensive single malt Scotch whiskey with a woman who had just admitted she had killed, but not murdered, her husband?"

*****Murder, mystery, intrigue, people, places and events that were intended to divert Billy's attention from his past soon gets him embroiled in Katharina's past, with the German government, not to mention Chinese and Malay pirates. Later on, he finds himself perhaps the first American to be involved in the Anti-French insurgency in Indochina which will later be called Vietnam and involve America. War will not end there as he is forced into the Spanish-American War while in the Philippines.

*****Just as life takes many unexpected turns for Billy Battles so will your desire to keep turning the pages of this book to find out what is it about Billy Battles that causes him to try to escape his past, endure his new reality and find measured peace as he heads into the twilight of his life.

*****I invite you to read The Improbable Journeys of Billy Battles as it is a journey worth your time. Be sure to read Finding Billy Battles (book one in this trilogy) while waiting for the author to write the final book in this amazing trilogy.

*****Author Ronald E. Yates life experience as a foreign correspondent for the Chicago Tribune in Japan, China, Southeast Asia, and Central and South America gives him the authority with which he writes. It is important to point out he won "three Pulitzer Prize nominations and several other awards, including the Peter Lisagor Award from the Society of Professional Journalists; The Inter-American Press Association Award for coverage of South America; and three Edward Scott Beck Awards for international reporting. He is a graduate of the William Allen White School of Journalism at the University of Kansas. He lives in Murrieta, California."

*****I really enjoyed "The Improbable Journeys of Billy Battles" (Trilogy Book Two) by Ronald E. Yates. Ronald E. Yates is the author of the "Finding Billy Battles" (book one in this trilogy) and "The Kikkoman Chronicles": A Global Company with A Japanese Soul, Aboard The Tokyo Express: A Foreign Correspondent's Journey Through Japan as well as three journalism textbooks: The Journalist's Handbook, International Reporting and Foreign Correspondents, and Business and Financial Reporting in a global Economy.

Review by Theodocia McLean (Book Marketing Global Network).

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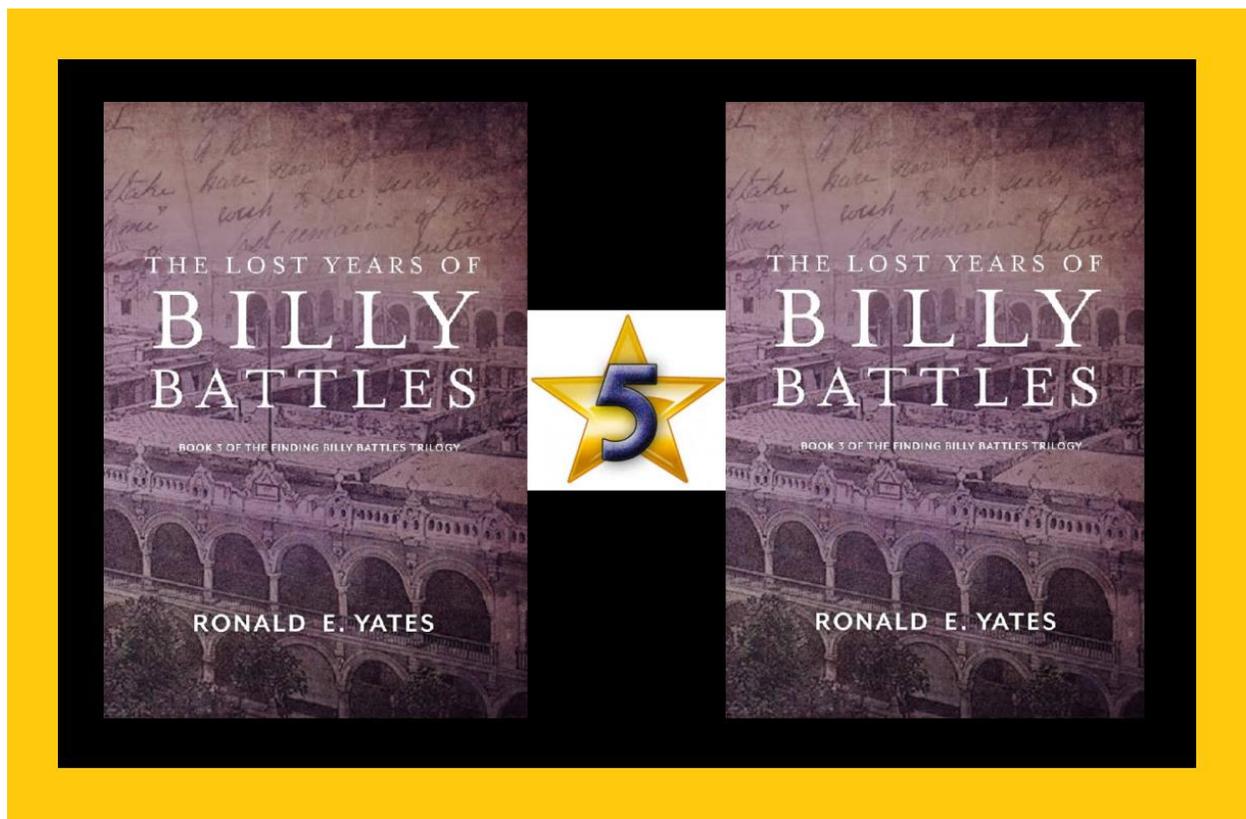
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**The Lost Years Of Billy Battles (Finding Billy Battles Trilogy Book 3)
by Ronald E. Yates**

Where in the world is Billy Battles?

As Book Three of the Finding Billy Battles trilogy begins, we know where Billy is. He is in Chicago with his wife, the former Baroness Katharina von Schreiber living a sedate and comfortable life after years of adventure and tragedy. That changes with a single telephone call that yanks Billy and Katharina back into a life of havoc and peril.

Persuaded by a powerful old friend to go undercover for the U.S. government the two find themselves in Mexico during the height of the violent 1910-1920 revolution. There they encounter assorted German spies, Mexican revolutionaries, devious political operatives, and other malefactors. Caught in the middle of the 1914 American invasion of Veracruz, they must find a way out while keeping their real identities secret.

Later on, disaster strikes. It is a tragedy Billy is all too familiar with and one that will send him plummeting into a chasm of despair and agony. Then, Billy vanishes leaving family and friends to wonder what happened to him. Where is he? Is he dead or alive? What provoked his disappearance?

In Book 3 of the Finding Billy Battles Trilogy, those questions are answered, and the mystery behind Billy's disappearance is ultimately revealed.

5 Star Review: Saying goodbye to an old friend is always hard and that is how I feel as the "Finding Billy Battles Trilogy" comes to a close with book three titled "The Lost Years of Billy Battles". The fictional Ted Sayles has done a remarkable job reading and producing this trilogy from more than a dozen journals written by his great grandfather Billy Battles. It is the historical significance woven skillfully within the element of fiction that makes this trilogy a must read for history buffs and fans of action and adventure novels.

*****After years of travel, relationships with foreign governments, wars of American making and wars forced upon us, not to mention the Chinese and Malay pirates; Billy and Katharina finally enjoy a few peaceful years where Billy is an editor for the Chicago Record-Herald and Katharina a successful author. It is inevitable that this serene period wouldn't last forever. One phone call to go undercover will find them *"caught in the middle of the 1914 American invasion of Veracruz"*.

*****Just when danger subsides, I found myself holding my breath when the unthinkable happens. *"Katharina wasn't the one the five men were after. It was me. But when they couldn't find me, they decided to take Katharina to use as bait. That was the first revelation. Next was who the men were. The man who had dragged Katharina out of the house was Mason Bledsoe, son of Nate Bledsoe, the man I had killed in 1889 on my family's homestead in Western Kansas. When I heard the name, my knees buckled and my heart raced for a moment."* It was the ransom note that made Billy's heart sink.

*****Of all the dangers Billy and Katharina had been exposed to in their life together, how will this one match up? When Billy is nowhere to be found, what reason will be uncovered? How will Billy Battle close the final chapter in his journal? Will Ted Sayles effort to canonize the legacy of his Great Grandfather Billy Battle live on for future generations?

*****There is no doubt in my mind that Author Ronald E. Yates' extensive historical research, skilled character development and impeccable story telling has brought the reader to a successful conclusion in this thought-provoking trilogy. I invite you to read the entire "Finding Billy Battles Trilogy" as it portrays, as much a glimpse into history, as it does into one man's life.

*****I loved The Lost Years Of Billy Battles (Finding Billy Battles Trilogy Book 3) by Ronald Yates as a final testimony to the life and times of Billy Battle.

Review by Theodocia McLean (Book Marketing Global Network).

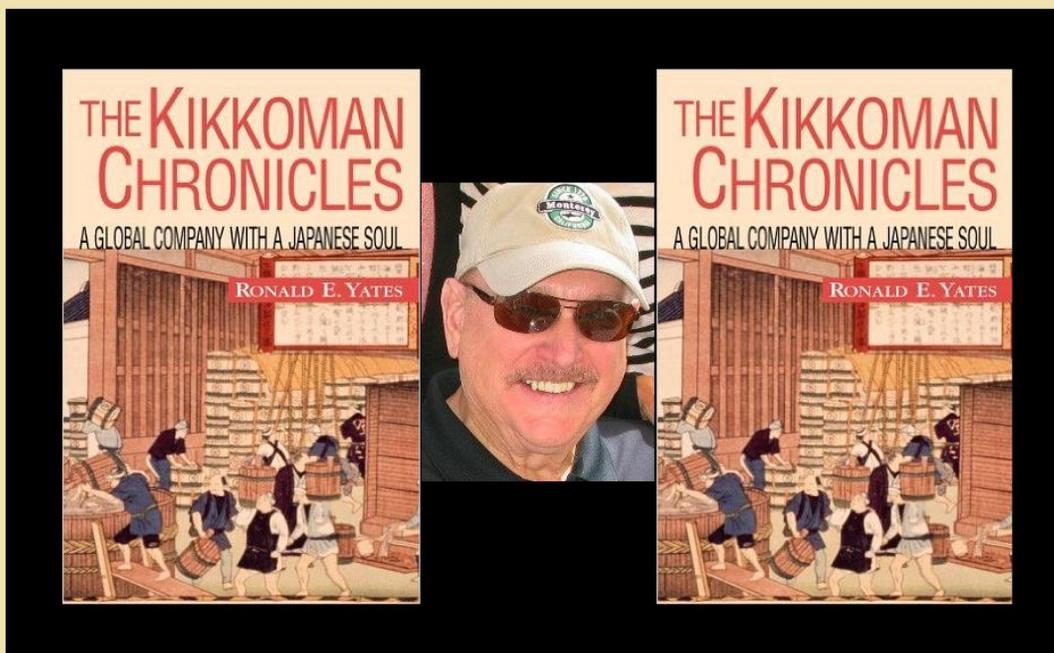
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The Kikkoman Chronicles by Ronald E. Yates

Combining ancient craftsmanship with modern technology and marketing innovations, Japan's Kikkoman Corporation has quietly become a \$2 billion market leader. This book tells the fascinating story of how

Kikkoman changed the course of international marketing, shrewdly adapting to 20th-century realities while never turning its back on centuries of tradition.

Global Library: Business, Marketing,

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About Ronald E. Yates: Ronald E. Yates is an award-winning author of historical fiction and action/adventure novels, including the popular and highly-acclaimed Finding Billy Battles trilogy. His extraordinarily accurate books have captivated fans around the world who applaud his ability to blend fact and fiction.

Ron is a former foreign correspondent for the Chicago Tribune and Professor Emeritus of Journalism at the University of Illinois where he was also the Dean of the College of Media.

His award-winning book, "The Improbable Journeys of Billy Battles," is the second in his Finding Billy Battles trilogy of novels and was published in June 2016. The first book in the trilogy, "Finding Billy Battles," was published in 2014. His latest book is entitled The Lost Years of Billy Battles. It is book #3 of the trilogy and will be released in May 2018.

Ron has been a presenting author at the Kansas Book Festival and the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books, among other venues. He is also the author of The Kikkoman Chronicles: A Global Company with A Japanese Soul, published by McGraw-Hill. Other books include Aboard the Tokyo Express: A Foreign Correspondent's Journey through Japan, a collection of columns translated into Japanese, as well as three journalism textbooks: The Journalist's Handbook, International Reporting and Foreign Correspondents, and Business and Financial Reporting in a Global Economy.

Before leaving the world of professional journalism where he toiled 27 years, Ron lived and worked in Japan, Southeast Asia, and both Central and South America where he covered several history-making events including the fall of South Vietnam and Cambodia; the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing; and wars and revolutions in Afghanistan, the Philippines, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, among other places.

His work as a war correspondent resulted in several awards, including the Inter-American Press Association's Tom Wallace Award for coverage of Central and South America; the Peter Lisagor Award from the Society of Professional Journalists; three Edward Scott Beck Awards for International Reporting, and three Pulitzer nominations.

Ron is a proud graduate of the William Allen White School of Journalism at the University of Kansas and a veteran of the U.S. Army where he served in the Army Security Agency.

Available Books:

- Finding Billy Battles: An Account of Peril, Transgression and Redemption
- The Improbable Journeys of Billy Battles (Finding Billy Battles Trilogy Book 2)
- The Lost Years Of Billy Battles (Finding Billy Battles Trilogy Book 1)
- The Kikkoman Chronicles
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