

# Primary Source Research



*Sharon E. Cathcart*



# Who am I?

- ❖ I'm a former newspaper editor/photojournalist
- ❖ I hold a certificate in medical anthropology
- ❖ I live in the Silicon Valley, CA, with my husband and an assortment of pets.



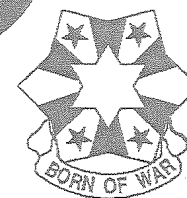
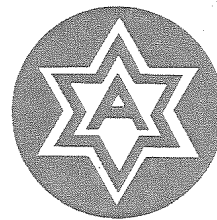


# How did this all start?

- ❖ My first book was published in 1995.
- ❖ I've done a few more since then:

**Born of War....**

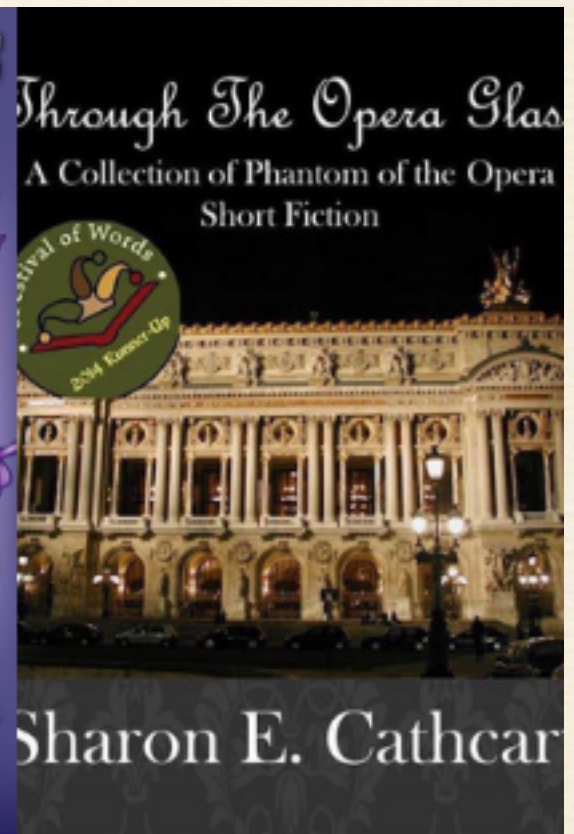
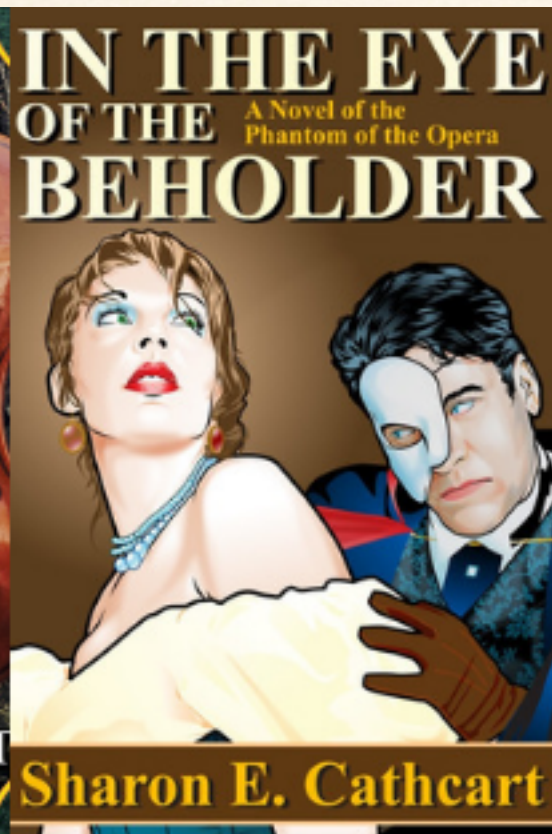
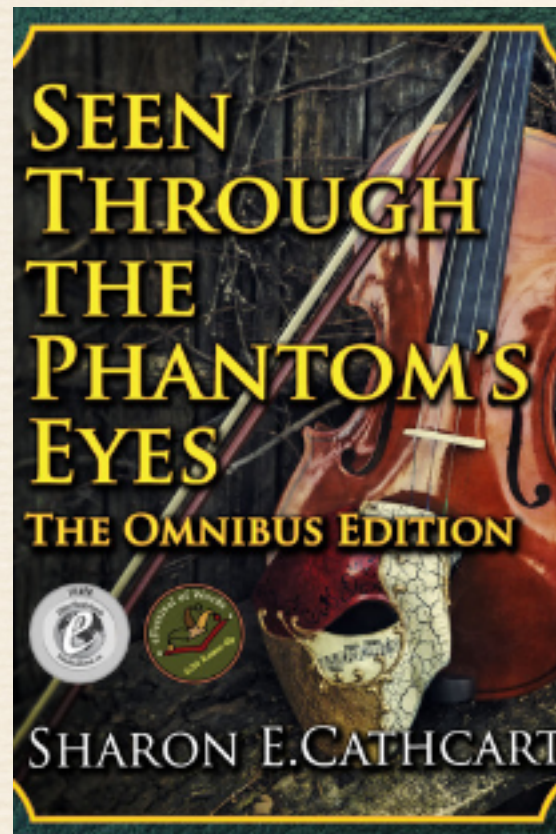
**Sixth United States Army  
1943 - 1995**



**.....Dedicated to Peace**



# I Wrote a Series



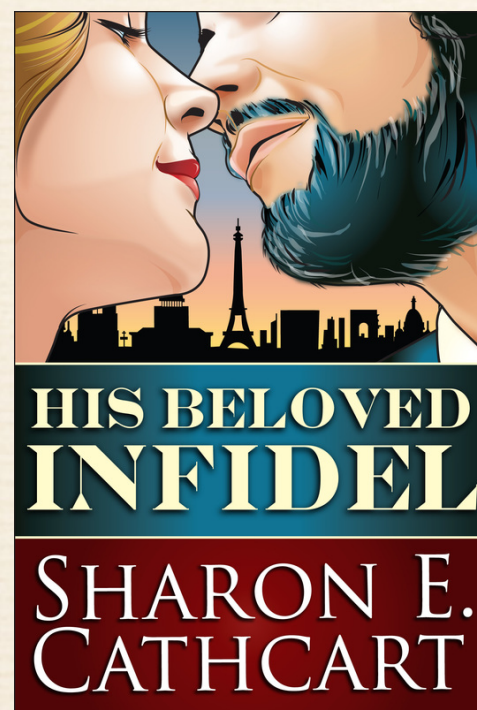
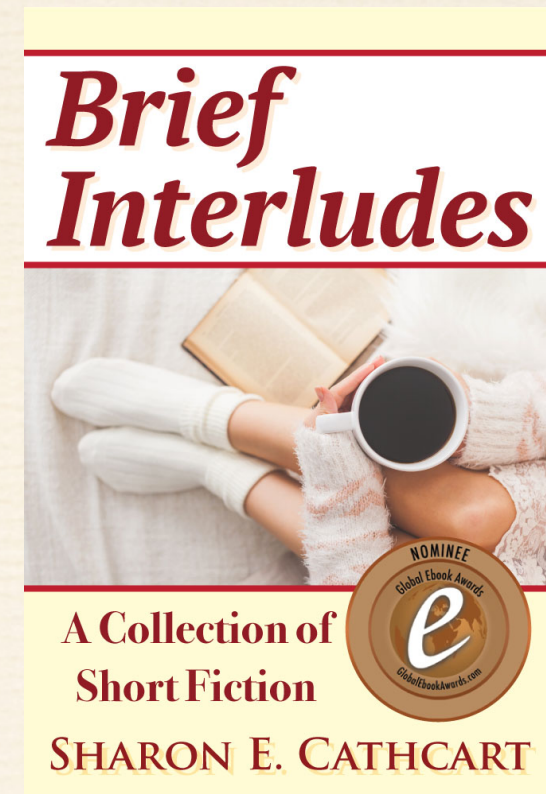
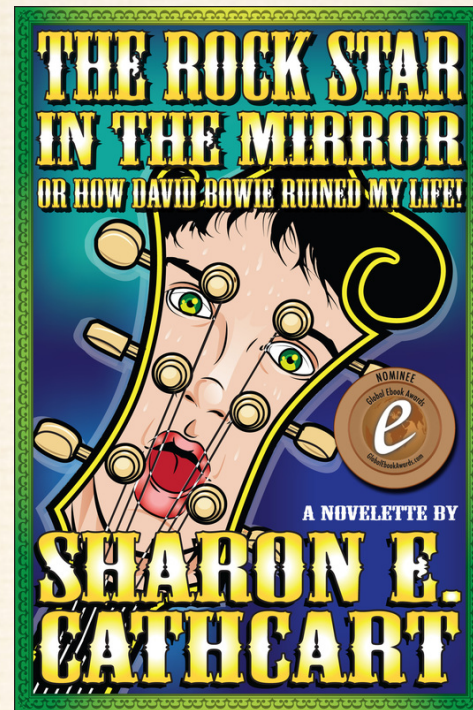
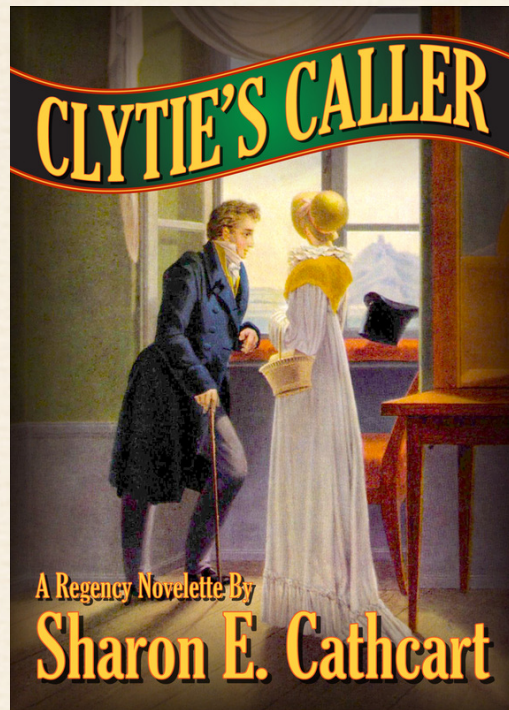


# And Another One ...



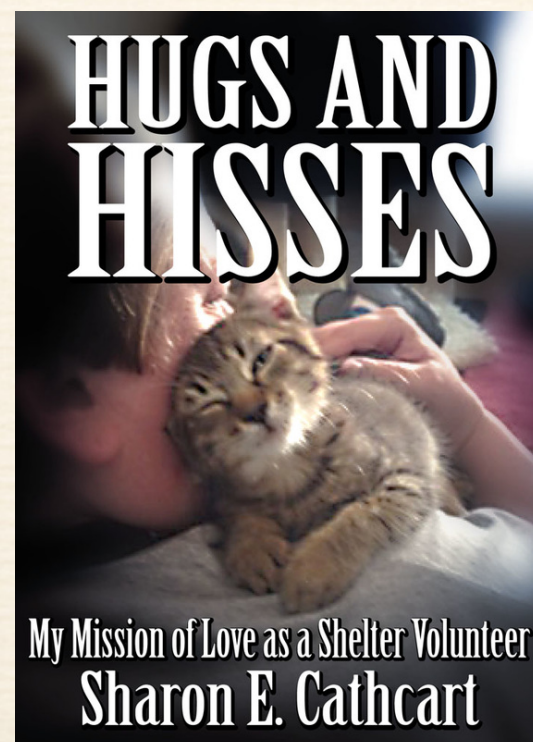
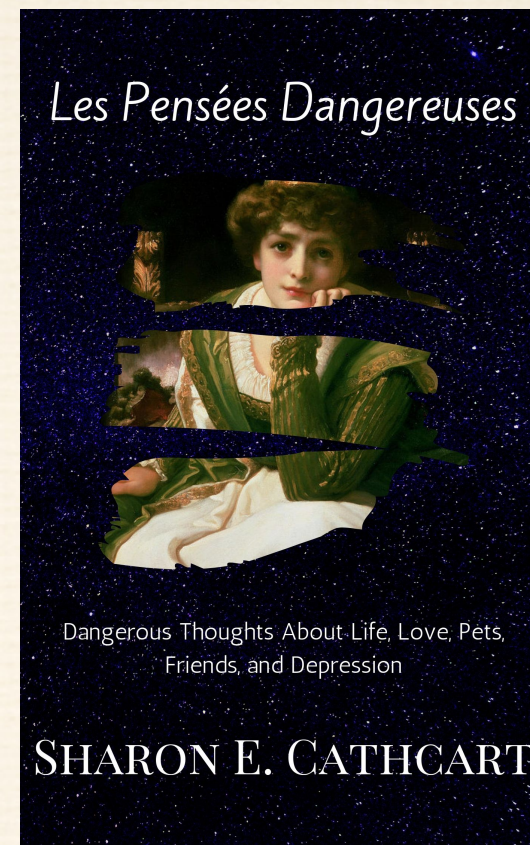
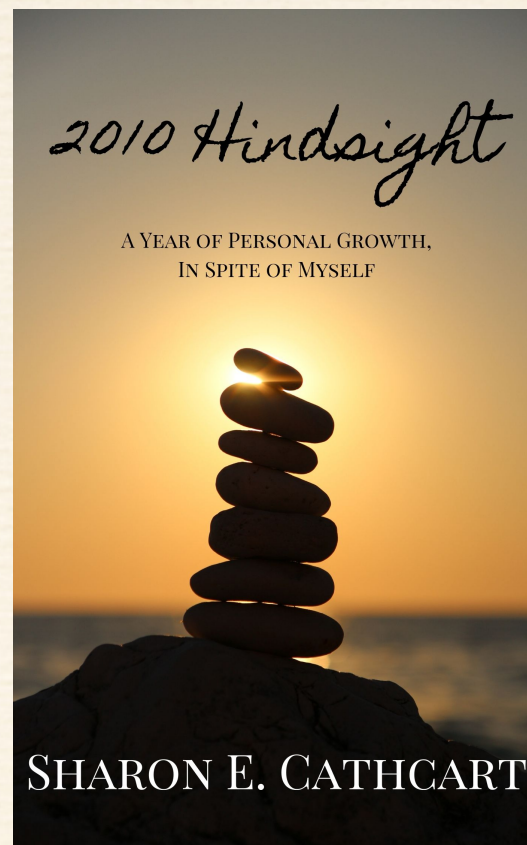


# And Some Other Fiction, Long and Short Form





# I Still Write Non-Fiction





# I Won Some Awards





So, why am I telling you all of  
that?



# Here's why

- ❖ I started out in non-fiction more than 20 years ago and have done more since then
- ❖ My emphasis in the past few years has been on creating fiction featuring atypical characters
- ❖ My background as a journalist taught me about the importance of researching a story
  - ❖ Even if you're creating a fictional world of your own, you need to understand how geography, social science, anthropology, and politics operate in the real world in order to apply them to your tale.
    - ❖ You have to know the rules before you can choose to break them.



# Categories of Knowledge

- ❖ There are four basic categories of knowledge:
  - ❖ The things you know you know
  - ❖ The things you know you don't know
  - ❖ The things you don't know you know
  - ❖ The things you don't know you don't know



# Three Primary Methods of Carrying Culture

- ❖ Music
- ❖ Language
- ❖ Food



# There Are Two Types of Research

- ❖ Primary Source

- ❖ Preferably in native language, but in translation is also fine. More on this momentarily.

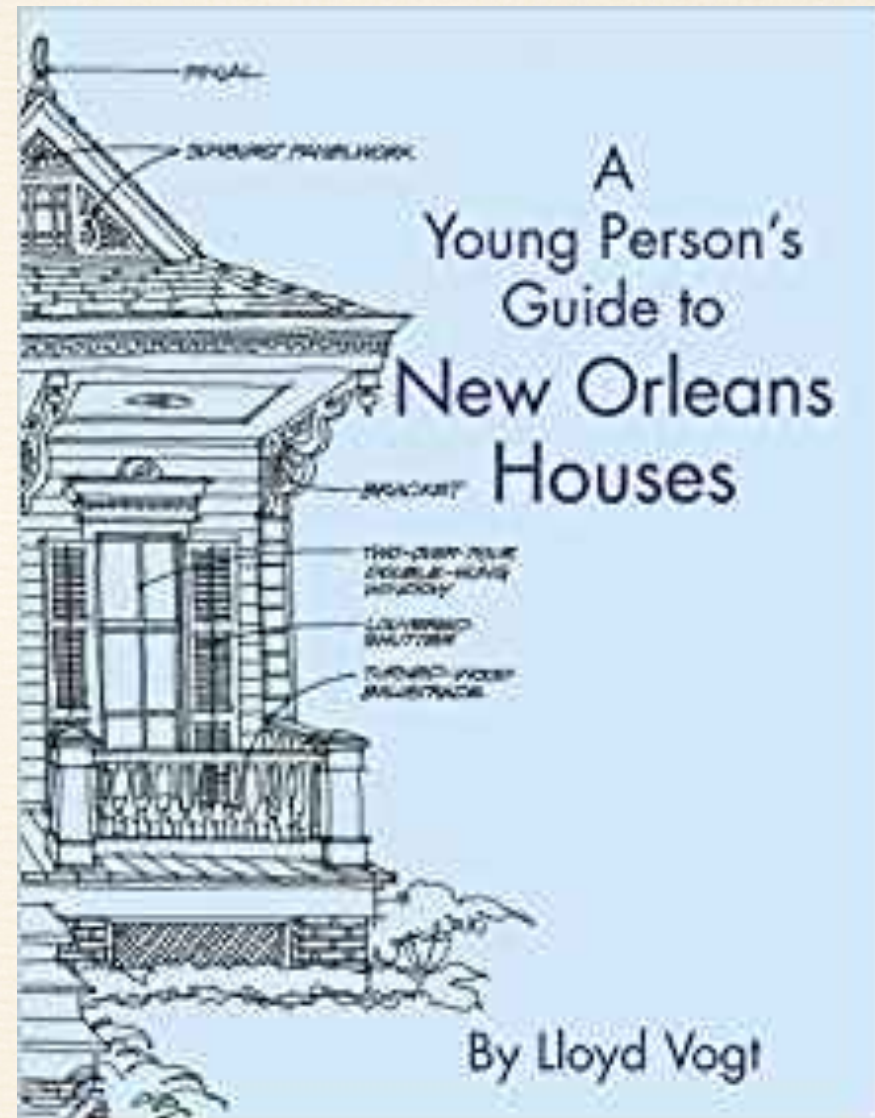
- ❖ Secondary Source

- ❖ May be scholarly, or created for a non-expert audience



# Where to start on the things you know you don't know

- ❖ Start with a children's book on the subject (this is the lowest level of secondary research)
  - ❖ I learned this trick in journalism; a kid's book will give you enough of a grounding so that you at least know what questions to ask
  - ❖ This book was a huge help while I was researching *Bayou Fire*





# So, what is primary source research?

- ❖ The best way to know something is to do it yourself.
  - ❖ See it, feel it, hear it, smell it, taste it
- ❖ But what if you can't do that?
  - ❖ The good news is, somebody has!



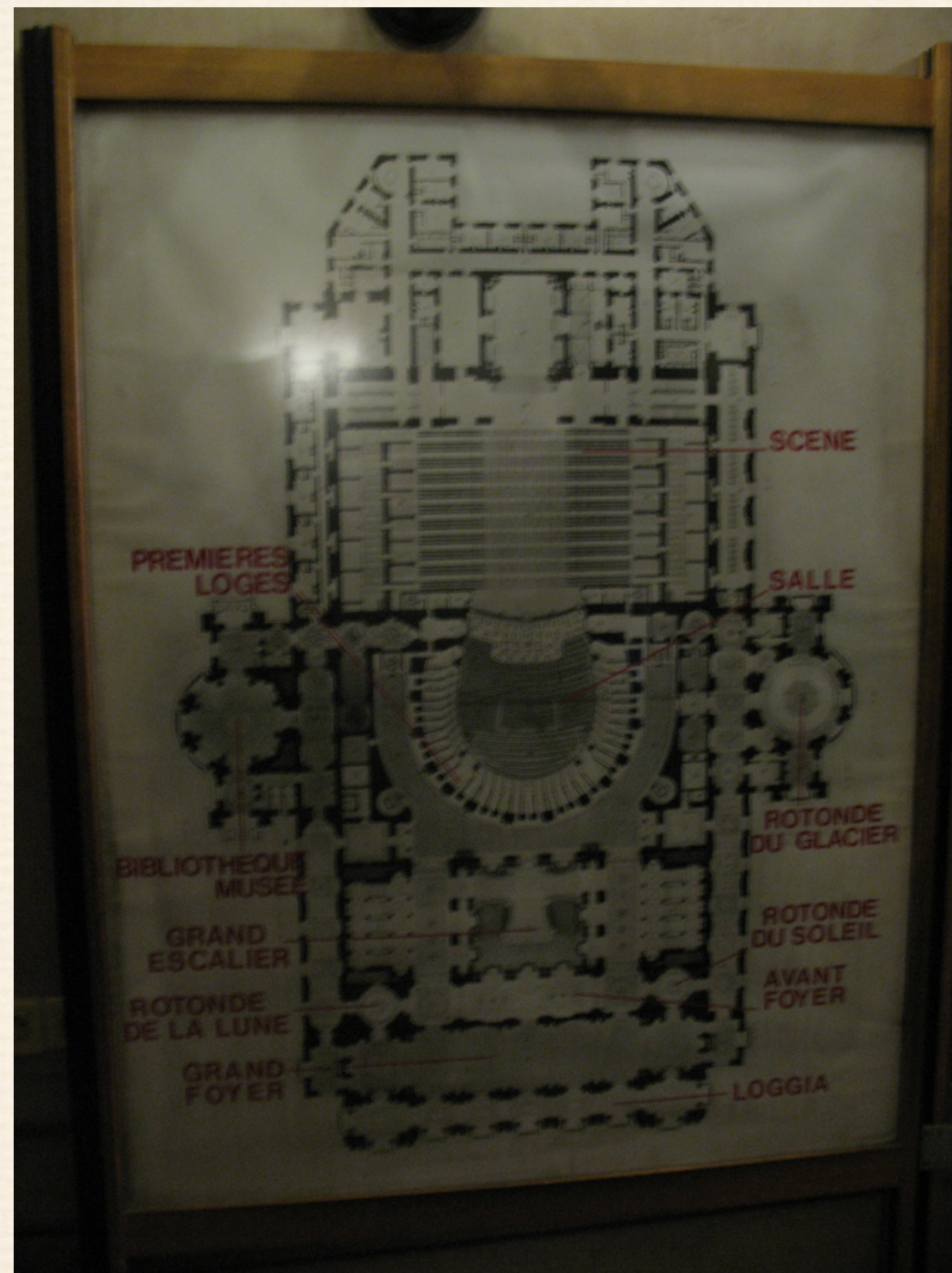
# Let's look at a couple of examples!

- ❖ This is me, on the Grand Staircase at the Opera Garnier, Paris





# Floor Plan of the Opera Garnier



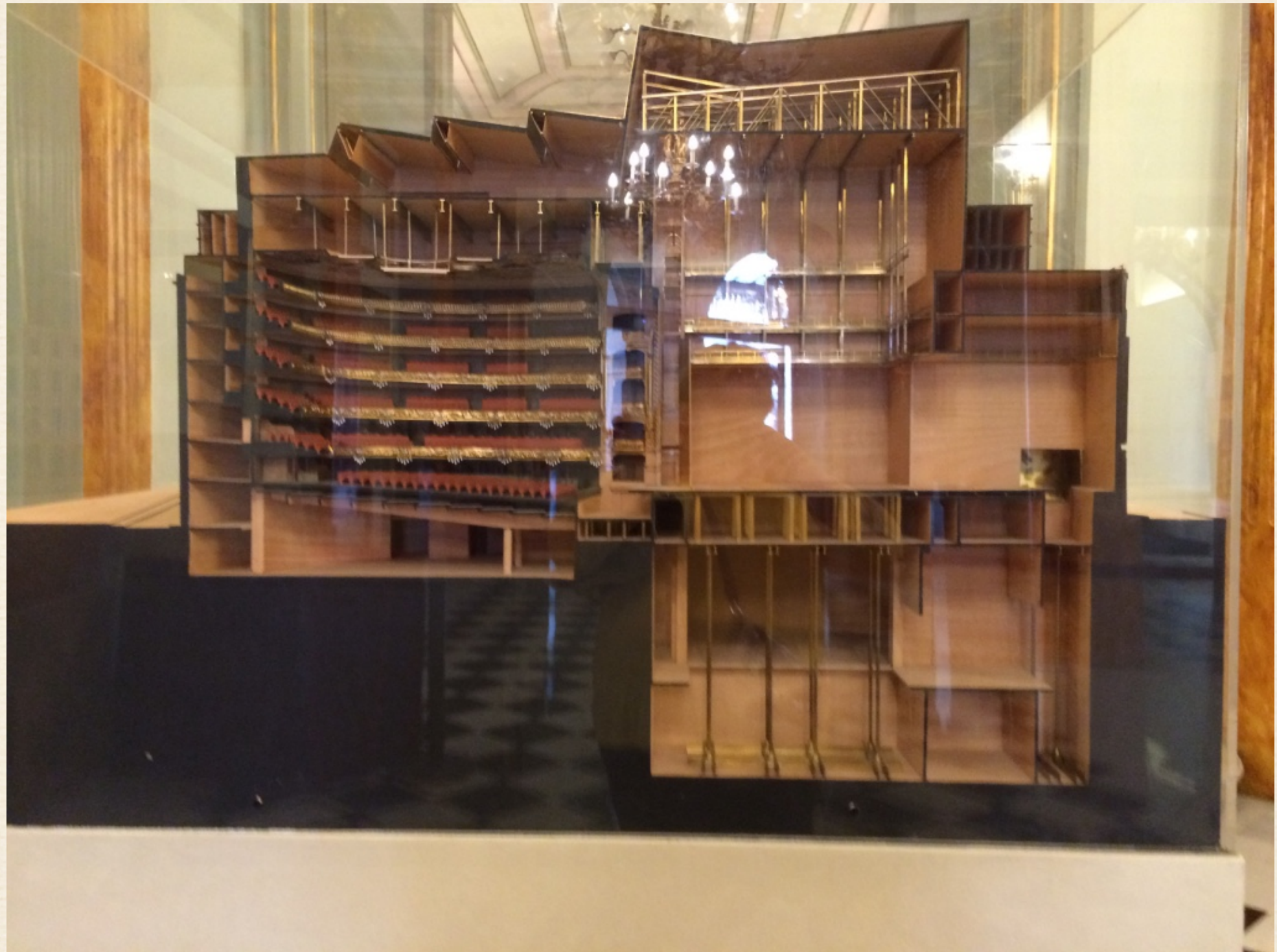


# On the Grand Staircase, Gran Teatro Liceu, Barcelona





# Cut-away Model of the Gran Teatro Liceu





# One more example ...

- ❖ Look at the differences between these two Louisiana sugar plantation houses. Let's talk about them for a moment.





# What Are Some Possible Resources?

- ❖ Museums are full of primary source items.
- ❖ So are libraries and archives
- ❖ With the advent of on-line archives, you no longer have to make an appointment with the research librarian to look at primary source documents



# What Are Primary Source Documents?

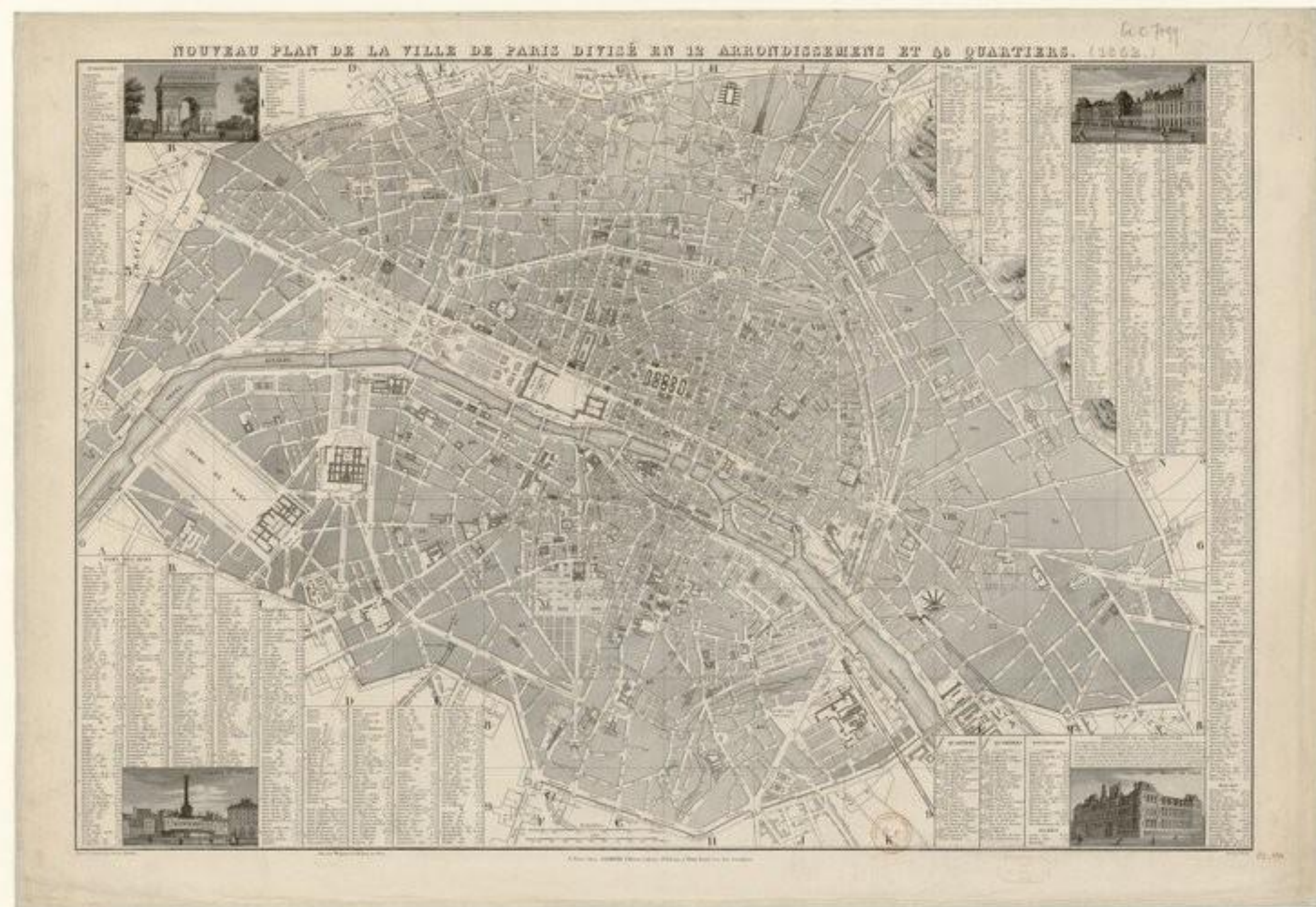
- ❖ All of those things in the bibliography of secondary source books
- ❖ Letters
- ❖ Journals & Diaries
- ❖ Maps
- ❖ Newspapers
  - ❖ Don't overlook the advertisements! You can get a lot of information from them.



# How about another example?

- ❖ What if you wanted to know how Paris looked before the 1890s? Where would you start?
- ❖ How about the National Archives, or the Bibliotheque Nationale de France (the national library)? Here's a great map that I found there while researching *Two Days in June*:





Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France



# Classes and workshops are great ways to get hands-on (primary!) experience

- ❖ When chatting with a colleague from my day job, I learned that she writes murder and suspense ... and she told me about this workshop that she attends each year: The Writers' Police Academy <http://www.writerspoliceacademy.com/>, in case you're interested).
- ❖ It's taught by a retired detective, and the authors learn about blood spatter evidence and all kinds of things ... by “playing crime scene investigator.”



# What if money's tight?

- ❖ Look into MOOCs (massive on-line open classrooms)
- ❖ These are free (or inexpensive), on-line courses taught by reputable universities.
- ❖ My favorites: <http://www.coursera.org> and <http://www.futurelearn.com>.
- ❖ I have taken courses in maritime archaeology, England in the time of Richard III, social psychology, historical fiction, forensic science, the French Revolution, and more.



# Another great choice:

- ❖ If your book is set in the present day, use Google Street View. You can walk the streets and see your surroundings just about anywhere on Earth.



# What's the bottom line for authors?

- ❖ Don't use research as an excuse not to write.
  - ❖ Decide on a timeline for how much research you'll do. Set a boundary; otherwise, you won't write anything.
- ❖ Your reader doesn't need to know everything you know. However, the more you know, the better your story will be.
- ❖ Be as factually accurate as is necessary to be interesting.



Discussion time: what are some resources you can think of, right in your own back yard (so to speak)?



Thank you for your time today!  
You can find me on social media:  
<http://sharonecathcart.wordpress.com>  
<http://sharonecathcart.weebly.com>  
<http://www.facebook.com/sharon.e.cathcart>  
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