

1. What is historical fiction?

Thank you, Sally.

And thank you for inviting me to talk about historical fiction and publishing trends.

If I may, let me start with a few words about one of Myriad's ventures.

Much of Myriad's publishing is focussed on debut authors. And much of our energy is spent thinking of how best to launch their writing careers and how to build an audience for their work. To this end we devised FIRST FICTIONS, a literary festival-cum-academic conference that we organise, in association with the University of Sussex. We designed First Fictions as a way of creating a platform for new writers alongside established authors, and to discuss emerging trends in fiction.

One of the key panels at this year's FIRST FICTIONS in April was on historical fiction. Alongside Sally, who was introducing DARK AEMILIA for the first time, were three other authors: Philippa Gregory, Ros Barber and Alison MacLeod.

Here were four very different novelists, all of whom had written historical novels. And they generated a lively debate about the nature of historical fiction that is relevant to this evening's seminar.

Ros Barber and Philippa Gregory established their different identities from the outset. Ros did not want to be known as a historical novelist. She was a literary novelist experimenting with form. (For those of you who haven't read THE MARLOWE PAPERS, it is a novel written entirely in iambic pentameter.) She wasn't concerned with what people wore in her novel, with the 'costume drama' of historical fiction.

Philippa Gregory, whose novels are what most of us would recognise as commercial historical fiction, was quick to intervene. Not only did she embrace her identity as a historical novelist but she argued fiercely for the place of clothing in her novels, and the importance of describing the details: if we didn't know what Tudor women had to wear (the stays, the sleeves, the wigs), we couldn't properly understand how their every move was constrained, and how this daily discomfort both reflected and symbolised their pathetically limited social, political and economic lives.

Jerome de Groot, who I understand is speaking at the next seminar in this series, has pointed out that historical fiction written by women for women was one of the dominant forms of genre fiction in the second half of the twentieth century.

Well, the same tradition of popular, mainstream historical fiction is alive and kicking today. Philippa Gregory's novels sell in their millions, as do many others. Sarah Gristwood was a bestselling Tudor biographer before she published her first historical novel, THE GIRL IN THE MIRROR in 2011. In a piece she wrote for the *Telegraph*, she described historical fiction as 'the latest literary guilty pleasure' and pointed out that publishers packaged the novels 'as clearly divided into male and female as if the books had been tied in blue or pink ribbons. Between boys' books about battles and girls' books about love...'

This then is the bedrock of commercial historical fiction. And publishers want us to recognise it when we see it: the woman on the cover turns suggestively, and her low-cut, highly embroidered gown provides the first clue to the plot.

At the other end of the spectrum, we can also recognise that a novel about Christopher Marlowe written in verse is likely to be experimental literary fiction.

Between these two extremes lies a rich diversity of novels that we publishers are increasingly categorising as 'historical-literary crossovers'. And here in this middle ground of accessible, riveting and beautifully written novels, is where we all want to find the holy grail: the novel that combines aesthetic prestige with enormous market success.

## 2. Literary prizes as market drivers

For publishers of literary fiction, prizes are one of the most powerful drivers of commercial success.

The value of prizes extends far beyond the cheque that the author takes home. Winning, or even being shortlisted, for one of the major literary prizes guarantees massively increased book sales, foreign editions and global market reach.

Before Hilary Mantel won the ManBooker, her agent had sold no foreign rights to *WOLF HALL*; every publisher thought it was too long. After the announcement, offers came pouring in.

One of the UK's richest literary awards, as I'm sure you know, is the relatively new Walter Scott Prize. Founded just four years ago and named after the author considered by many to be the originator of historical fiction, it is worth £25,000 to the winner.

The inaugural Walter Scott Prize was won by Hilary Mantel with *WOLF HALL*.

Of course, *WOLF HALL* won the ManBooker Prize too. But Hilary Mantel was not the only author to be honoured by both prizes. Andrea Levy, Tan Twan Eng, Adam Foulds, Tom McCarthy and Jim Crace — all have appeared on the shortlists of both the ManBooker and the Walter Scott. Last year Eleanor Catton was shortlisted for the Walter Scott and won the ManBooker.

These are just a few of many examples where the distinction between historical and literary fiction starts to blur.

Indeed, in the year that Mantel won the ManBooker with *WOLF HALL*, every one of the shortlisted books had an historical subject.

More than half of the novels which have won the ManBooker since 1980 have been set in the past.

And this year is no exception: last week Richard Flanagan won with *THE NARROW ROAD TO THE DEEP NORTH*, another literary novel with history at its heart, and the third historical novel in as many years to win the ManBooker.

Another key literary prize is The Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction. Worth £30,000 to the winner, less than the ManBooker's £50,000 but more than the Walter Scott, it was established in 1996 in order to counter the male-dominated accolades of the Booker.

It challenged gender bias, but it didn't challenge the centrality of historical fiction: nine of its 18 winning novels are set in the past.

Peter Straus, now a leading literary agent and formerly publisher at Picador, has described how there used to be an imaginary template amongst publishers and agents setting out what a ManBooker prize-winning novel would constitute. They agreed, it would have:

'...an exotic location, a range of cultural and social settings, delineation of various emotional issues often revolving around the nature of love. The most important aspect stressed in all this was always an historical setting.'

This formula was widely cited in 1990 when A.S.Byatt, an academic and novelist, published POSSESSION. So perfectly did it tick all the boxes, that some even accused Byatt of writing the novel simply in order to win the Booker. Of course, POSSESSION did win and it went on to sell over 1 million copies in the English language.

Prizes drive markets and markets reflect taste. The two things are inextricably bound up in today's publishing industry. And historical fiction remains central to both, right at the heart of contemporary publishing and popular taste.

### 3. New trends in historical fiction

Interestingly Hilary Mantel was one of the judges when POSSESSION won the ManBooker prize in 1990. She had at this time published three contemporary novels and was working on her first historical novel, A PLACE OF GREATER SAFETY, based on the events of the French Revolution.

She later claimed that in the 17 years between publishing this and her prize-winning WOLF HALL in 2009, the literary landscape had changed dramatically.

So how has it changed? What is particular and exciting about the contemporary historical fiction we're reading and publishing now?

Traditionally, of course, the dichotomy was between history and fiction. Part of the appeal for fans of historical fiction, as well as for historians, has always been to point out what the writer got wrong, what would never have happened in real life.

Hilary Mantel said 'People had no hesitation in denouncing [A PLACE OF GREATER SAFETY] without having read it, because it was fiction and therefore worthless'.

For most of us, though, history is a mash-up of received wisdom, factoids, films and school books. But, like science fiction, the realist tradition of historical fiction creates a convincing world into which — in place and time — the reader expects to step fully formed.

Hilary Mantel has spoken and written eloquently about how she regretted not studying history at university and it took her years to learn how to cross the barriers between fact and fiction, 'how to fudge [the history] or knock it down'.

If the historical novelist is standing on the shoulders of historians, we know now that historians can also be indebted to novelists. Pat Barker's REGENERATION, for example, published in 1991 and another historical novel shortlisted for the Booker prize, predated any serious academic study of shellshock, or what we now know as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

It is clearly no longer helpful, if ever it were, to judge historical fiction simply in terms of its ability to record an authentic past. To do this is to miss the alchemy of fiction and the role of the novelist.

And it is when we look beyond 'authenticity' that we start to see different trends emerging and new possibilities in historical fiction.

I'm going to touch on just three examples of what I think are some of the most interesting preoccupations not only in contemporary fiction but also amongst contemporary historians: firstly, the GAPS IN HISTORY, secondly the UNWRITTEN HISTORIES and, finally, RESHAPING HISTORIES.

Each of these preoccupations, or themes, I believe, point to an emerging new model of historical fiction.

#### A. GAPS IN HISTORY

When Hilary Mantel spoke at the Institute of Historical Research three years ago, she confided that as she researched her material she wasn't prepared for 'the silences of history, the erasures, the gaps'. She said she was happy to make up thoughts but not the colour of the wallpaper in the drawing room: 'I would much rather move the action to the study where I know what colour the wallpaper was'.

But it was these silences of history, these gaps, that gave her licence to invent, to be a novelist.

'What happens in most historical fiction', she said, 'is the author dresses up twenty-first century figures in costume of the period...' and then proceeds to describe what we know. What interested Mantel was 'what is going on on the backstairs, what is said behind the hand.'

Mantel was signalling what I think is one of the key changes in new historical fiction. Our gaze has been redirected: it is here, in the gaps of history, in the spaces between what history tells us, where the novelist does her work.

Francesca Rhydderch, whose story 'The Taxidermist's Daughter' was shortlisted for this year's National Short Story Award, suggested in an interview on Radio 4's Front Row that 'history books tell us how things happened but maybe the job of fiction is to try to imagine how it felt.'

The importance of imagining 'how it felt' is another gap in traditional history. It is what Sarah Waters calls the 'poignant trivia' of the period: 'What does a dogskin coat smell like? How do you melt down a pewter cup on a kitchen fire? What is it like to share a bed with your servant?'

Emily Bullock, whose debut novel, THE LONGEST FIGHT we publish next year, explains how important this 'poignant trivia' was to her research:

'The boxing gloves, stained and flaky, let me into a sensory world not available through libraries...what it would feel like for Frank and Jack to handle boxing gloves, the intimate nature of these inanimate objects. It was through this form of literary archaeology...that I was fully able to understand the interiority of the characters: from concrete details to emotional reactions.'

It is this 'form of literary archeology' this 'world not available through libraries', the GAPS IN HISTORY, that we're seeing explored by some of today's most exciting authors.

## B. UNWRITTEN HISTORIES

Another, and related trend, are the novels that excavate hitherto unwritten histories — the novels that bring to light unsung or marginal characters.

In *LONDON TRIPTYCH*, a novel we published in 2010 and which won the Authors' Club Best First Novel Award, Jonathan Kemp interleaves the lives of three gay men living at different historical moments in the city. One is Jack Rose, a fictional young rent-boy befriended by Oscar Wilde in Alfred Taylor's infamous brothel.

In his Afterword to the novel, Kemp explains: 'I had always been intrigued by the secret histories of male prostitution...I wanted to see things from the other side: to give voice to the voiceless.'

Ed Hillyer similarly gives 'voice to the voiceless' in another historical novel we publish, *THE CLAY DREAMING*. His two main characters are based on real but marginal people: an Aboriginal cricketer touring London in 1868 and a teenage boy who was transported to Australia some 70 years earlier for stealing silk handkerchiefs.

One of the enticing aspects of writing unwritten histories is that the source material may be tantalisingly serendipitous. Ed Hillyer heard about the Aboriginal cricketer only through a brief mention in his local newspaper. He was intrigued because Brippoki was buried a short distance from his house, in Meath Gardens, Bethnal Green.

Thomas Keneally, who won the Booker prize with *SCHINDLER'S ARK* in 1982 (later made into the film *SCHINDLER'S LIST*), encountered the story of Oscar Schindler whilst he was in Beverley Hills buying a briefcase to replace his broken one. As he said, if Australians had not then possessed a reputation for credit card fraud he would have been in and out of the place in ten minutes and the story would have escaped him. As it was, he had to wait whilst Mastercard investigated his credit rating. He got talking to the proprietor, Leopold Pfefferberg, a Schindler survivor who led him into the back room and showed him a filing cabinet full of Schindler material: testimonies and documents of the time, including those of his and his wife's.

If this kind of serendipity is exciting, another and I think one of the most important aspects of writing previously unwritten histories, is the sense of moral responsibility it generates in the author. In his Afterword to *THE CLAY DREAMING*, Ed Hillyer almost anticipates criticism in telling Brippoki's story — it isn't after all his story to tell, he says. At the time of writing he was unaware of any living relatives. He could only strive to uphold what the poet Andy Croft has called a 'moral vocabulary': 'the need to bear witness, to testify on behalf of the speechless against the powerful.'

Kate Grenville, in an interview discussing her historical novels, *THE SECRET RIVER* (2006) and its sequel *SARAH THORNHILL* (2011), explained that she wanted to write historical fiction in part as an apology for her ancestors' brutality towards Aborigines. She grew up not knowing about the massacres and when she found out, she explained it was 'like uncovering a dirty secret, possibly in my family, certainly in my national history'.

Sometimes these hidden histories are closer to home.

Sue Eckstein's novel, *INTERPRETERS* (which we published in 2011) was inspired by her own childhood and how it was shaped by her parents' histories which were, in turn,

shaped by very particular world events. The trigger was a visit to Germany, and realising that Buchenwald was but a short bus ride away. She and her brothers visited the camp and its museum. She recalled:

'My mother declined the invitation to join us, as we knew she would...She has been here before. Somewhere in those woods lie her teeth, shattered by the butt of a gun. Buried beneath half a century of rotting leaves.'

The unwritten history that became *INTERPRETERS* was driven by the author's need to understand her mother's war—her assault by a Russian soldier during her flight from Berlin— its effect on her generation and its repercussions on the next generation.

It is here that we begin to see an emerging model of historical realism: one that collapses the boundaries between past and present; one that is always aware of the past interacting with the present; one that is about how we inherit the past.

Novels like *INTERPRETERS*, *THE CLAY DREAMING* and *LONDON TRIPTYCH* alternate contemporary and historical narratives, entwining the eras and yoking together the fate of the protagonists past and present.

Interestingly, the judging criteria for the Walter Scott Prize includes—along with 'originality and innovation, quality of writing, a strong narrative'—'the ability of a book to shed light on the present as well as the past'.

And Andrew Miller, whose novel, *PURE*, won the Costa Book Award in 2011 and was nominated for the Walter Scott Prize, has said:

'As its best, historical fiction is never turning away from the 'now', but one of the ways in which our experience of the contemporary is revived'.

And it is this Janus-like looking to the present as well as to the past that brings me to a third theme emerging from new historical fiction.

### C. RESHAPING HISTORIES

W.G. Sebald was, of course, influential in creating a strikingly new form of fictional testimony. And the first years of this century has seen an extraordinary burgeoning of novels seeking to craft new modes of narration, new ways to bear witness to the past. I'm thinking here of novels like Toni Morrison's history of American slavery in *A MERCY* or Hisham Matar's account of a boyhood summer in Gaddafi's Tripoli, *IN THE COUNTRY OF MEN*.

Peter Boxall, in his recent book on *TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FICTION*, argues that this political desire to bear witness through historical realism, coupled with a post-modern recognition of the limits of narrative, is what characterises a new model of historical fiction.

If, as Hayden White has argued, history is not truth but a narrative, it is a story that can be reshaped any number of times. And this is exactly what Kate Atkinson explores in her novel, *LIFE AFTER LIFE*: here the novelist confronts history head on, reshaping and retelling, imagining a different ending, imagining how a different moment in one woman's life could change the fate of six million.

Boxall points to Ian McEwan's *ATONEMENT* as an example of a novel that deliberately exposes the unreliability of historical testimony. McEwan's wartime historical sequences are organised around another plot — a domestic plot — in which a young

girl begins to understand both the power of testimony and the power of narrative — the authorial possibility of re-inventing history, of shaping a different ending.

We know at the end of INTERPRETERS that the tape Julia is about to listen to will tell the story we have just read, and it will change her life forever. The revelation here, like the twist at the end of ATONEMENT, demands that we undertake a second reading in which we become conscious of an authorial double focus and of a history that is about to be reshaped.

The task, then, of the historical novelist is no longer simply to record the past. Perhaps it is not even just to fill in the gaps or to write the unwritten histories. It is, I think, to challenge history, to reshape it, to suggest what might have been.

I want to end by returning to the ManBooker prize and a novel that anticipates some of what we are trying to identify as new historical fiction. Salman Rushdie's MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN is surely the most significant Booker novel: winner of the prize in 1981, winner of the Booker of Bookers in 1993, and winner of the public vote on the prize's fortieth anniversary in 2008, 'The Best of Booker'.

MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN is a novel much concerned with history. It turns on the moment of India's independence, on 14 August 1947, a moment that coincides with the midnight birth of the novel's narrator, Saleem Sinai. This is a coincidence that, as he says, means he is 'handcuffed to history'.

This is the new relationship between history and fiction, a new formal means of inheriting and representing the past, and a move away from an older more secure history. In Saleem's words, we are no longer in 'the universe of what happened next'.

Thank you.