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Historical fiction and history: members of the same family

Abstract
Historians and the writers of historical fiction appear constantly at odds with each other. It would be more fitting if the way in which they complement each other was given due recognition. Historians seek to produce an interpretative account of the past bounded by a strict adherence to certain types of source material. This necessarily places a limitation on what they might write about the past. Writers of historical fiction, while using and doing justice to historical research, are not subject to the same limitations. They have more licence to use imaginative narrative to complement and extend the historical account. It must be recognised, however, that both disciplines are dealing with the human condition. As a result historians make use not only of primary sources, but also of imaginative writing from the era that they are studying. Writers of historical fiction, in turn, make use of the perceptive accounts of historians. Fundamentally, the limits placed on both disciplines are those derived from rationality. While members of the same rational family, they may have a different view of what counts as reasonable and this is not a cause for concern or contumely.

Historians and the writers of historical fiction appear to be constantly at odds with each other. Historians complain that their disciplined research is bowdlerised by fiction writers, and fiction writers complain that their integrity and respect for historical research is unacknowledged by historians. While conceding that in individual cases either group may have a point, as general charges they obscure the real affinity between the two. Rather than being perceived as being in some senses antagonistic to each other, the work of historians and of writers of historical fiction should be recognized as complementary. They can be said to be members of the same family: with differences, admittedly, but also with enough similarities to make claim to a strong family resemblance.

In the ongoing conflict between historians and writers of fictional history the emphasis is often on the manner in which fiction writers make use of the work of historians. The focal question should be, rather, what contributions do the writers of fiction make to historians? The answer lies in the particular view of a society or an era that a fiction writer lays out for examination. Historians seek to understand and interpret the past. Among their sources is the writing of the past. The history of ancient Rome cannot be properly understood without recourse to the writings of, for example, Seneca, Cicero, and Ovid. These writers were writing of their times in both factual and fictional modes. Both modes are important to the historian. The same point is true of any era or period in history.

Novels in general may be categorised as 'literary fiction' and 'popular fiction', even though the boundary between the two definitions is not so strictly established that there is no overlap or argument about how certain texts are to be judged. A similar distinction operates within the works of writers who, like the historians, seek to revisit the past. We are aware that not all novels and biographies that are catalogued as 'historical' reflect rigorous research. For this reason we have chosen the term 'historical fiction' rather than 'historical novel' in an attempt to differentiate between the work of writers who claim to present an authentic picture of the past, and those who have utilised an historical setting or character but taken the account of historical events or people beyond that which has been established by the work of historians as having occurred, or which might plausibly have occurred. Within this latter category we place romance (bodice rippers), fantasy and time travel, stories of witchcraft and magic that include the supernatural. These subgenres have their place and appeal, but not as texts which complement or complete the work of historians. In the same way, writers of historical novels will differ from one another in their judgment as to how to use the work of historians and how far they feel free to develop an independent story line. The definition of one type of text as historical novel and the other as historical fiction is therefore a semantic device to confine our argument to claims about those novels written with respect for historical accuracy as far as that can be ascertained. We do not wish to argue that all novels set in the past can be appropriately used as an aid to studying history, a fact acknowledged by those in the field of education. In a paper which explores the appeal of historical fiction for young readers, and thus its usefulness for teachers, Alun Hicks and Dave Martin recognise that between the extremes of an historical novel and a modern novel 'there is a range of texts which are harder to classify. Classification of the historical novel is further complicated by the range of genres found within it' (Hicks & Martin 1997: 50-51).

Later we will discuss two books that we believe come within our definition of historical fiction. For clarification it may be useful to give an example here of one historical novel which, although very readable, has serious inaccuracies. *Stealing Heaven: The Love Story of Heloise and Abelard* is a novel by Marion Meade. In the first chapter she describes Heloise leaving the abbey at Argenteuil to go to Paris, riding pillion on the butcher's horse, with her few worldly possessions packed into bundles that were lashed on to the saddle (Meade 1979: 30). This is a lively scene, but one that would never have happened. While there is some conjecture about Heloise's family, it is clearly established that she was educated at Argenteuil Abbey, and only members of rich and noble families would have had that opportunity. It is almost impossible to accept that the member of such a family would have been sent forth riding behind the butcher on his horse, or even that, in the twelfth century, a butcher would have been able to afford a horse. While Heloise's mode of transport may seem a trivial detail, the whole scene as described by Meade distorts Heloise's situation within her milieu, and gives an inaccurate picture of the society of that time. In another flight of fancy Meade describes Heloise and a young female companion trudging about France on foot, looking for Abelard, subsequent to the nuns being expelled from their abbey (Meade 1979: 284-91). Again, while this makes for dramatic narrative it is too far from what would have been permissible or plausible during that period. In most situations, if a nun left her abbey for any reason and did not take up residence in another abbey, she would have been outside the law, literally an outlaw. Within this book there are other examples, but these must suffice.

The writer of historical fiction may make use of the available historical research and feel able to go beyond its limitations, but only as far as equates with what is plausible and possible. The writer of historical fiction can

certainly go beyond the known, to imagine and speculate and then weave that speculation into a narrative. The speculation must still be consistent with the facts or, where necessary, make it plain that the writer is overstepping the mark quite deliberately. Limitations are more strictly imposed on the discipline of history -- one cannot go beyond the acknowledged facts to create others, and any account, explanation or interpretation must be consistent with these facts. We ignore the debate as to what constitutes a fact and how it may be recognised. An historian may, and often does, write a fluid and compelling narrative, but must eschew any flight of fancy that would distort the integrity and rigour of his or her work. Both the historian and the writer of historical fiction may work from the same established facts while coming to differing conclusions about the significance of those facts or the weight to be given to them. In this way the writer of historical fiction, using a different account of narrative, can challenge, complement and extend the work of the historian and, in doing so, even suggest new avenues to follow. Both historians and writers of fictional history, including historical biography, work from a common base. They are concerned with material from the past, and they present their accounts in narrative form. Historians present an analysis reached after rigorous research. Fiction writers, using an historical theme or setting, provide a way to access the past, drawing on the work of the historian, but adding the essential elements of storytelling. Instead of historians and historical fiction writers acknowledging the different approaches, however, and then working in harmony, they often find themselves in contention. As already suggested, historians complain that writers of fiction plunder the results of their hard work, with no regard for the integrity of their research; that fiction writers attempt to substitute easy reading for disciplined study, and finally, that in this substitution they present bad history and their distorted version is accepted by the general reader as accurate. As early as 1867 Edward A Freeman complained that historians had to battle against the popularly-held and false perceptions about England after the Norman Conquest, perceptions gained from Scott's *Ivanhoe* (Freeman 1868: 825 note W). In Victorian England, the historical novel gained broad support because it was easy to read, yet considered educational and also, as James Simmons describes, 'light amusement unspoiled by Utilitarian and Evangelical insistence upon practical values' (Simmons 1973: 7). In other words, despite the objections of historians, people felt that they were gaining knowledge and being entertained at the same time. Writers of historical fiction who followed Scott, such as GPR James and James Grant, began to favour the romance of the narrative at the expense of historical accuracy, which strengthened the historian's claim that novelists had no claim to the work of serious historians. The proposition that historical novels could not teach history and, even worse, instilled an inaccurate view of the past into its readers, seemed to be increasingly justified.

This perception that historical fiction is prejudicial to the accurate understanding of history has been echoed, in our own time. Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River*, which portrayed the early days of the Australian colony, was strongly criticised by historians even though Mark McKenna claims that Grenville thought 'seriously about writing the history of her ancestors "taking up land" on the Hawkesbury River in the nineteenth century' and she 'subsequently clings to the hope that we may see her novel as history'. McKenna contends that Grenville's response to the historians was that she was simply coming to the past in a different way, with 'empathy and understanding' (McKenna 2006: 15). During an interview on the BBC Book Club Grenville explained that she 'wanted to recreate the nineteenth century as if it were the present time', and later in the session she states that we 'can learn as much about the present as the past' from fiction (Grenville 2009). Grenville's view is in sympathy with that of Russel Nye who writes that history and literature are intimately related in 'their concern with the relevance and meaning of

experience' (Nye 1966: 153). That is, literature and history can be equally concerned with the questions that men and women ask themselves about the world in which they live, and it may be that historical fiction presents the past in a form which allows the reader to simultaneously appreciate the present in a more telling way than can a straightforward historical account. This is not to deny that the historian may also look for elements in the past to shine light on the contemporary world. Supporting this idea Geoffrey Barraclough defines the historians' search of the past to reflect the present as 'an attempt to discover, on the basis of fragmentary evidence, the significant things about the past and significant means significant now' (Barraclough 1960: 41). If we accept that historians and writers, not only of historical fiction, but of all forms of literature, explore and reveal the fundamental questions of existence, it follows that the two approaches have a relationship with each other, coming from a shared impetus, and that this relationship places them within a wider discipline that embraces both literature and history. This relationship can be compared to that of members of one family who share common features, but who are not identical in every way. Both literature and history draw on the imaginative treatment of certain facts that have been selected from the myriad available. The different nature of either discipline means, however, that the boundaries imposed on the historian are different for the writer of historical fiction. The novelist, starting from a similar base, may follow a different approach to that of the historian who must accept stricter constraints. Nye explains:

> Good historical writing, I believe, is under constant tension, with the imagination always pushing outward against the restraining discipline of historical plausibility … The literary artist has boundaries as well to his imagination and the highest form of literature is infused with this same tensile quality. But there are limits beyond which the historian has no right to go, a territory of imagination into which the literary artist may penetrate, but denied to his compatriot. (Nye 1966: 157)

In this paper we wish to argue that in order to understand our past, historical fiction, rather than being an unsatisfactory substitute for the formal reading of history, completes that understanding and appreciation. Thomas Macaulay goes as far as to say that 'history begins in novel and ends in essay' (in Knowles 2004: 499) although one must doubt that he meant that literally. We would argue that this idea should be expressed the other way around: history begins with an essay and ends in a novel.

Despite the tensions mentioned earlier there is acceptance by some historians of the value of a fictional account of an historical period. Juanita Ruys points the way in her argument against the unqualified dismissal of fiction from medieval studies and her support for the use of rhetorical *memoria* as a median path between alterity and identity, particularly in relation to the history of medieval women about whom little was recorded: 'For a start there is no sacrifice of academic rigour as the first resource is always the documentary evidence where this is available, yet, equally a way forward is possible when such evidence is lacking' (Ruys 2004: 229). This need to extend the available documentation is supported by Gabrielle Spiegel who states that 'historians rarely apprehend a past world as such, but merely the textual remnants that have survived the ravages of time' (Spiegel 1997: 47).

In the nineteenth century there was not the sharp division between the two narrative forms that is perceived today. Historical writing was judged to be the same as literature. As late as the twentieth century RG Collingwood saw only one major difference between the work of the historian and the novelist:

> Each of them makes it his business to construct a picture which is partly a narrative of events, partly a description of situations, exhibitions of motives, analysis of characters.
> As works of imagination, the historian's work and the novelist's do not differ. Where they do differ is that the historian's picture is meant to be true. (Collingwood 1946: 245-6)

We agree with Collingwood that there are elements that combine to complete both the work of an historical novelist, historical biographer and historian. We wish, however, to disagree on two particular aspects. First, while both historians and novelists draw on their imagination as well as describing events and situations, the emphasis, focus and scope in the texts differs in significant ways. Amy Kelly establishes her particular approach in the preface to *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings*:

> This account of Queen Eleanor and her century is offered as a study of individuals who set their stamp upon the events of their time, rather than a study of developing systems of politics, economics or jurisprudence. While it is hoped that it is conformable to what is known of institutions it explores a different area, using many materials that the historians of institutions must perforce, for reasons of brevity and clarity, leave aside, yet which is part of the tradition that is history in a wide sense. (Kelly 1950: v)

Kelly's comments draw attention to the parameters that outline her themes, and which differ from those she perceives as being the province of historians. One way to express these differences is in the 'study of individuals', more specifically in the exploration of the inner life. Academic and novelist Patricia Duncker states:

> Novelists are not often professional historians. So it is rare that a novelist, approaching a particular period, will be aware of the recent, significant debates in historiographical scholarship. But historians, apart from those on the madder fringes of psychohistory, seldom describe the inner psychic lives of the people they address. This is novelist's territory. We both read the past, play it like a score, but in different registers. (Duncker 2002: 51)

It is the different registers, as fugal themes, that create the harmonic whole.

Our second and more serious reservation about the statement by Collingwood is his idea that only historians can be considered to write what is meant to be true, or even that this is what is expected of them by the reader, who presumably assumes that historical fiction is not meant to be taken seriously as a source of historical knowledge. There are many writers of historical fiction and historical biographies who lay claim to and who demonstrate serious research. In drawing on this research they can claim that their texts have integrity. Where the narrative goes beyond the known 'facts' the novelist will seek to ensure that this also is compatible with all that is known, in the quest to make sense of the narrative. This search for a plausible pattern is part of the novelist's craft, as Duncker asserts:

> The novelist observes, creates and manipulates patterns, repetitions. Plots, which are causal, cannot operate without them. These are the ironic methods fiction uses to teach its meanings. Random, unconnected events may be the stuff of life

> but they cannot be the stuff of fiction. Nor of history. We desire meaning and significance. We look for connections and causes. We look for a pattern, and when it is not to be found in the evidence, we find it anyway, so great is our desire for the reassurance that our lives are not senseless and beyond our understanding. (Duncker 2002: 47)

Duncker's observations meld the final goals of historians and historical fiction writers, while confirming that their approach to the text is not the same. There is still the necessity for the writer of historical fiction to stay with the known or what is compatible, in much the same way that the historian and even the scientist are constrained. Without such a limitation the writer runs the risk of destroying credibility and authenticity. A writer of historical fiction is allowed, as we have earlier stated, more flexibility within a narrative than is an historian. This does not mean that there are no constraints or limitations on this writer, who risks losing credibility if the narrative strays too far from what is already known or deemed possible. Sarah Johnson cautions writers against inaccuracies:

> Historical accuracy is important, if not critical, to readers of historical fiction. Although minor slip-ups may not pass their notice, significant blunders will draw readers out of the story making them suspicious of the novel's overall quality. Mistakes in individual word usage may not matter, but incorrect dates, or placing historical characters in times or places when they weren't really there, aren't nearly as forgivable. The more familiar the readers are with the period the less tolerant they will be of anachronisms or other errors. (Johnson 2005: 9)

Readers of historical fiction and biographies, because of their interest in history in general, may come to the text already possessing a sophisticated level of knowledge about the historical period or person. Writers of historical fiction and historical biographies bear this in mind. They are under the same requirements as are historians in regard to the known facts. Historical fiction represents a particular period in history, or historical personages. As such the fictional account of history should also meet the three criteria for historians established by Collingwood: the picture must be localized in space and time, everything in the historical world must stand in some relation to everything else in one historical world, and the picture stand in a peculiar relation to something called evidence (Collingwood 1946: 246). Despite these unifying criteria historical fiction and historical accounts are not mirror images of each other. Instead they reveal the same image from different angles and points of view.

The historian is not limited to dates and facts, but is limited nevertheless by the constraints of his or her discipline. Nye explains that, 'the historical and artistic imagination, whose functions may be much the same, must operate under different conditions' (Nye 1966: 157).

In a review of the novel *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel, the writer Carmel Bird gives a good account of these different conditions:

> Historical fiction does what all fiction does: creates a world in which characters live and die … But the historical novelist takes over your musings and engages your senses, setting the scene, painting the landscape, animating the bodies, minds and souls of the characters. (Bird 2009: 20)

Thus Bird has highlighted the effects produced by the writer's craft, effects that allow the reader to identify more completely with the experiences and emotions of the historical characters and their world.

To come to an appreciation of an historical period or event is, in one sense, to journey into the past. A person planning to travel to unfamiliar territory may begin by consulting maps and guides, looking up schedules and timetables, sorting out different currencies, and deciding on the important landmarks, cultural icons or particular features to be visited. This essential information could be said to represent the province of the historian. Having set the framework, the traveller to a foreign land also expects to imbibe local atmosphere, have chance encounters with interesting people, and come to an awareness of the 'otherness' of foreign parts. The knowledge thus gained, often subconsciously, could be said to be the province of the fiction writer. Both approaches to travelling to the past are necessary if the journey is to be fully appreciated and understood. In the same way the work of historians and of historical fiction writers complete and complement the experience of the reader. Patricia Duncker reminds us of the traditional association between historians and novelists:

> It is not only professional historians who write history, and as some recent historiographical debates bear witness, it is not only novelists who invent fiction. The common term for a novelist in the nineteenth century was 'an historian'. George Eliot describes Fielding as an historian. The French word for 'story' is *histoire*. I cannot and do not want to avoid the connections. (Duncker 2002: 37)

Thus she reinforces the connection between historians and all novelists. The connection between historians and writers of historical fiction, which has a specific focus on the past, would be even closer, as not only a sense of place but also of time is vital. In his essay 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', Bakhtin concludes that:

> Time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins. An event can be communicated, it becomes information one can give precise data on the place and time of its occurrence … It is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground essential for the showing-forth, the representability of events. (Bakhtin 1981: 250)

Bahktin's reflections lead to the question of the reader's understanding of and ability to contemporise historical accounts. To this end historical fiction plays an essential role. The evolution of historical fiction since the nineteenth century is well documented following the novels of Sir Walter Scott, who is regarded by many as the writer of the first authentic historical novels in English. Since Scott there have been significant developments, especially since the end of World War 2, with established writers such as Umberto Eco and Peter Carey entering the field. This has led to historical fiction now being given a legitimacy and relevance that it came to be denied in the period after Scott. This shift in attitude could be explained by changes in modern society's own attitudes and expectations. Milda Danytè identifies 'post postmodern' novels as a new kind of historical fiction:

> First the new historical novel does not celebrate the national myths or the national heroes as did the nineteenth century

> novel, but, at the same time, it does not parody the past in postmodern fashion. Instead it prioritizes unofficial memory and celebrates popular culture in the broad sense. Furthermore, unlike the traditional historical novel … or the postmodern historical novels, in which the ideology of the past, though presented with irony, dominates the characters, in these post postmodern historical novels, the protagonists find an alternative set of values in popular culture. (Danytè 2007: 34)

The lives of ordinary people are now given a place in historical fiction. Even when people of significance together with their exploits and achievements are described, it may be against an egalitarian background. This allows readers to relate more easily to the period. They are not just reading about remote god-like creatures who shaped the world's destiny. Rather, they are reading of ordinary people dealing with the minutia of existence or, at times, coping under extreme circumstances. This may be one reason historical fiction is becoming more accepted as a legitimate teaching tool. We suggest, however, that for a book to be of value in the understanding or teaching of history it must meet certain criteria. The text should not contain contradictions or distortions of the known event in history. Themes that provide insight into and understanding of the contemporary world have value in assisting students to see the relevance of studying the past to understand the present, and to reflect on how the future may unfold. These criteria might act as guidelines for educationists. There is an increasing understanding of the use of historical fiction within the classroom as can be seen by the work of such educationists as John A Smith and Dorothy Dobson (1993), Esta Pomotov (1995), David Kelly (n.d.) and Laurel Singleton (1995). Their work indicates that that the use of historical novels in classroom teaching is being evaluated and encouraged. Janie McManus describes the benefits she has found in the use of historical fiction in her classroom. 'The facts of history that students learn through reading these books serve as a reference point when we study these time periods in social studies. The reading helps build background knowledge, desperately needed by my students as this is their first modern history class' (McManus 2008: 2). Although McManus' emphasis is on books for children she highlights the value of all historical fiction in the understanding and study of history. Her work and that of others in the field reinforces the analogous familial relationship between historical fiction and history.

Writers of historical fiction are not just casting about for an interesting plot. They begin with a concept of history and work from there because that history is relevant to the present. Duncker, coming from a different angle, asks why a writer would choose to write historical fiction:

> In the end all novels take on the mask of the historical novel as they step back from us into the past. So why do we write self-consciously historical fiction? What indeed is history, so far as historical fiction is concerned? For every writer who attempts the project of remaking history must have, whether they are aware of it or not, a quite concrete notion of what history is, what it means, and what its ultimate significance must be to us, the past's inheritors. (Duncker 2002: 39)

One of the inherent difficulties in understanding the relationship between history and historical fiction is the focus on narration to the expense of all other elements of both the work of the historian and that of the novelists. Certainly they share a narrative approach to their subject, but there are other elements that need to be considered. Kalle Pihlainen recognises this:

> The argument I wish to pursue here is, then, that although the process of narrative construction is quite similar in both literary and historical narratives, the difference that the referentiality brings is reflected in the narrative form, or rather the system of signification that the narration employs …
> Thus, although the fictionality of a narrative is significant with regard to the freedom of construction it provides, it is not this fictionality, but the resultant complexity in form that makes the difference; complexity not being of course a *necessary* outcome of fictionalisation. (Pihlainen 2002: 42-43)

It is this 'complexity of form' that allows writers of fictional history to claim that rather than demean the understanding of history they make a valuable contribution to its understanding. This will be looked at more closely later, in the examination of two texts.

We are making an even stronger claim in saying that historical fiction completes the work of the historian. Pihlainen does not make that claim but he has touched on the crux of the matter in alluding to the different forms found in fiction and in history, in contrast to Collingwood's assertion that there is only one difference between historians and novelists. Pihlainen asserts that 'the level of complexity involved in historical narratives is not equal to that in literary ones' (Pihlainen 2002: 47). This is supported by an appraisal of fiction by MC Lemon that permits 'free play to the imagination' and 'enables the story teller to intensify the emotions he wishes to excite in a manner and to a degree a factual story could not achieve'. His question then is: 'Could Cervantes have communicated such a rueful critique of the obsolete medieval concepts of honour and chivalry by means of rationally argued moral essay, rather than by a fictional narrative' (Lemon 1995: 46). Both the brain and the emotions need to be engaged when reading. Mere academic reading does not fulfil this. Vincent Leitch in his appraisal of 'reading' texts concludes: 'As it stands, normative academic reading is today often narrowly focused, unduly submissive, overly dutiful, obsessively impersonal, and too accepting of the institutional and social status quo' (Leitch 1992: 125). This statement could be considered not only a strong endorsement for the need to adopt a more critical reading of academic texts, but the need also to read texts that have a less prescribed approach to the subject matter, without sacrificing authenticity and integrity.

Much has been written about the intentions of the historians. Less attention is given to that those of the writers of historical fiction. Duncker offers a pithy summation:

> The pleasure of historical fiction, for both the writer and the reader, is simple. The novel is an ideal form for conveying information, the sense of landscapes, customs, objects, interiors, carrying us into another country of imagined worlds. Fiction is the original form of virtual reality. We want to live for a while in another world and forget our own. (Duncker 2002: 39)

Duncker rejects the 'History Enables Us to See Essential Truths More Clearly' proposition (Duncker 2002: 38). While not wishing to espouse that particular concept, particularly when it is headed in capitals, we would assert that well-researched historical fiction enables the reader to a clearer understanding of an historical period or person. It is important to acknowledge that the reader is an essential dimension when considering the effect of a text. The reader's appreciation and understanding of the text is a natural progression of the work

of any writer. Hans Robert Jauss, while examining approaches to literary history examines this aspect of the process:

> In the triangle of author, work and reading public the latter is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but even history-making energy. The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its audience. For it is only through the process of communication that the work reaches the changing horizon of experience in a continuity in which the continual change occurs from simple reception to critical understanding, from passive to active reception, from recognized aesthetic norms to a new production which surpasses them. (Jauss 1970: 8)

This judgement by Jauss concerning the importance of reader reception and response could be applied to the reading of all texts. The nature of that response and reception relies not only on the previous knowledge, experiences and culture of the reader, but also the text itself. Therefore a reader will respond differently to the reading of an historical account of, for example, the French Revolution, and historical fiction based on the same event, because the texts themselves, while based on the same information, present it not only in a different style but also from a different disciplinary base. This is in accord with the statement by Pihlainen that 'the interesting question to be asked is regarding the specific means that the various narratives utilize in producing knowledge' (Pihlainen 2002: 40). The 'specific means' within either text will have a profound effect on the way in which a reader approaches and responds to a text, and in doing so they read the fiction of the time. Collingwood asserts that 'all history is the history of thought', and that historians seek to understand history by re-enacting the thoughts of those taking part in the events he is describing (Collingwood 1946: 215). An historian not only describes the slaying of Julius Caesar but also tries to put himself into the minds of the assassins. To discover what that thought was 'in the widest sense of the word' the historian must think it again for himself. This dictum could apply equally to the writer of historical fiction. There could be, however, a vast difference in the way this thought re-enactment is revealed within the text, with the writer of historical fiction having a strong advantage. He or she has greater licence to describe scenes, develop characters, introduce minor characters whose reflections are pertinent and relevant, as well as creating a detailed social, cultural and geographical background. Novelists are allowed a broader canvas, a wider brush and strong vivid colours, as opposed to the more sober and objective approach required of an historian. To demonstrate this concept I wish to examine two recent novels of historical fiction. The first is *The Pelagius Book* by an Australian writer, Paul Morgan and the second is *Evening in the Palace of Reason* by James Gaines, an American writer now living in Paris.

Pelagius, a lawyer, philosopher and teacher, is almost unknown today, but at the time he lived in Rome, in the fifth century, he was a major figure. His theology was in direct opposition to that of Augustine, in that he denied the existence of original sin and emphasized the use of reason to discover God's truth, rather than unquestioningly following the teachings of the Church. In an interview with Michael Sherrifs, Morgan describes Pelagius as having a 'quite startlingly modern, humane and humanistic view of man and a much stronger belief in original potential rather than original sin' (Morgan 2005a). As it was, the ideas held by Augustine prevailed to stamp their mark on Christianity for centuries to come.

Pelagius and the import of his teachings is best appreciated when seen against the background of a Rome that is about to be destroyed because of the venality,

corruption and complacency of its citizens. One advantage this book holds over an academic historical account is its sense of writing about the immediate past rather than, as an historian must, describing events that happened centuries ago. Morgan, through his narrator Celestius, transports us to ancient Rome. Through the experiences of characters who inhabit ancient Rome, from the bishop, dignitaries and magistrates to students and servants, the reader can appreciate something of their lives. These are living, breathing people who function against the background of a great city in decline. One of Morgan's great strengths as a writer is to create a sense of place. In the description of the Insula fabrica we envision not only a building, but are able to appreciate the life of the poorer people.

> But to walk past the Insula Fabricio each morning was to feel the unwashed excitement and romance of a big city. The ground-floor shops were full of strange-looking fish and interesting, outlandish vegetables I had never seen elsewhere. However early we passed, they always seemed to be open, even on the darkest morning, when burning lamps turned the shops into seductive, inviting caves.
> From the upper floors laughter and arguments in a dozen languages floated down. Long poles jutted out from floor above floor, with clothes flapping cheerfully as they dried in the wind. Even the tiniest balcony bore a poignant collection of potted plants. (Morgan 2005b: 39)

It is not irrelevant that this could be a description of slum apartments in any number of cities today.

War is a subject touched upon by both historians and writers of historical fiction. In *The Pelagius Book* the siege of Rome by the barbarians is depicted with a personal account that evokes an immediacy and understanding:

> Being under siege does not improve the temper. Think, reader, how one sleepless night can change your humour, making you unfit company at work the next morning. Imagine, then, the effect on your spirits of being in a walled city surrounded by a hundred thousand Barbarians. To say the least, it is not good for the nerves. We become hungry for news, all of us (even I), and listened feverishly to every market rumour, however wild - for who was to know whether it might be true tomorrow?
> They [Romans] were like frightened, angry children kicking at the shins of a parent who had failed to look after them. Some became hostile to anyone from the northern limits of the Empire, as though they carried some fearful, barbarous disease. One of our fair-haired students from the north had a noticeable Gothic accent, and was set upon by a mob one night. (Morgan 2005b: 113)

The account is not given in numbers and statistics (nor do we suggest that this is all that historians present) but in the emotions of ordinary people reacting in panic to a situation which affects them but over which they have little control. Thus it is presented in terms that allow readers to relate more personally to the situation that is being described. As Collingwood suggests this is essential if we are, as historians must, to re-enact the thoughts of dead men in order to understand how it was for them when they lived.

The story of Pelagius is told through the eyes of his friend, servant and secretary, Celestius. It is he who explains Pelagius's ideas, in reporting the

philosopher's conversation and actions. Very early in the novel Pelagius saves a young slave girl from being tortured to death, through a ruse that demonstrates not only his intelligence and quick wittedness, but also his appreciation of the weakness of others. That, more than all the statements concerning his intellect, allows us to accept Pelagius as a philosopher. After Pelagius comes to observe the state of the Church, and the law in Rome he resigns his post as a lawyer to concentrate his energies on philosophy and teaching. Celestius is sympathetic but bemused:

> In those early days I could not square Pelagius' love for the teachings of our Lord with his amused disdain for so many of the beliefs of our fellow Christians. I often wondered at the origin of this outlook, so detached and ironic, yet compassionate beneath.
> Was it a lawyer's eye, cutting through the inaccurate and irrelevant and seizing on the heart of the matter? Or was it his British upbringing, which had taught him to see a spade for a spade? (I had a fondness for this theory.) There was his love for the ancient too - Heraclitus and the others - an open-faced, free thinking, courageous way of looking at the world. I suppose in the end there was something of all of these, and much that was Pelagius alone. (Morgan 2005b: 63-64)

In these two paragraphs Morgan reveals the essence of Pelagius, developed largely through his imagination, building on, but also consistent with, what little is known. Returning to Morgan's interview, he states that 'of his actual life, you could fit it into a matchbox … so I really had to make it up and work from his spirit rather than what was known about him' (2005a). Morgan consciously sets out to present a view of Pelagius unlike that found elsewhere:

> I know in text books and things like the Catholic Encyclopaedia he's really given a hard time because he does really challenge what have become the core orthodoxies of the Christian church on original sin and this weird central aspect to so much of what people in the church think about and talk about, of being interfering in other people's sexual lives.

Morgan also admits to developing the character with a degree of subjectivity:

> And I think there is an element of Pelagius being an idealised, invented character here. He won't have totally thought this way, but certainly had that rational puzzlement and bemusement at their obsession with things that don't really matter and were more to do with their own personal failings and psychology rather than something that was socially important, or that was (God forbid) anything to do with what Jesus Christ actually said. (Morgan 2005a)

No text can be totally objective, no matter how a writer strives to pare away personal beliefs, convictions and judgements, although historians should aim to present their accounts in as an objective way as possible. A dispassionate judgment is important in academic work. Novelists, through their characters and descriptions are permitted to be colourful and emotive. They are given freer rein. The story can be told with more detail, more sense of place, through vivid and imaginative description, which is intended to evoke in the reader an appreciation of an historical era as well sympathetic response to the people who lived then.

In James Gaines' *Evening in the Palace of Reason* the writer takes us to a period in history when new ideas and advances in science were taking hold. Johann Sebastian Bach represents the old order, while Frederick the Great embodies the Enlightenment. Gaines writes: 'Frederick the Great and Johann Sebastian Bach met at the tipping point between ancient and modern culture, and what flowed from their meeting would be more than a musical expression of that historic moment' (Gaines 2005: 8). The two come together through music, when Frederick lays a trap for Bach - the setting of a theme into a fugue for six voices - a prodigiously difficult, if not impossible task. Frederick believed he was setting Bach up for failure.

Gaines' novel was well received by literary critics. Apart from its literary merit the novel works on a number of levels. Through the description of Frederick's undeniably abusive upbringing by a father who wanted a soldier for a son, not an effeminate flute player, the reader can appreciate the man Frederick became. The culmination of Frederick's father's cruelty came when he forced his son to watch the execution of his lover, Katte:

> He [Katte] refused a blindfold and a last prayerful cry - 'Lord Jesus Christ' - was interrupted by the fall of the executioner's two-handed sword. Frederick did not see the fatal stroke because just before it came he fainted.
> He returned to consciousness in a delirium. He spent the day weeping and in shock, much of the time at the tiny window of his cell, staring at the body below, on which someone (defying the king's instructions) had thrown a black cloth, now caked with Katte's blood. (Gaines 2005: 110-11)

This event led to Frederick's final capitulation. He assumed the role his father had cast for him, becoming a victorious leader of the army, a 'man's man'. He did not abandon his earlier interests in music and reading, however. He continued to compose music and maintained contact and friendship with Voltaire, embracing many of the philosophies of the Enlightenment. Gaines has led the reader through his recreation of such events to encounter not only the inner person of Frederick the Great but something of his world.

Gaines depicts Bach as epitomising the values of the 'old world' in his religious faith, his honouring the value and demands of a musical form which reached its highest level in his work, his devotion to family life. He refers to Bach's composition of the six-part fugue, the *Musical Offering*, as 'a compelling case for the following proposition: that a world without a sense of the transcendent and mysterious, a universe ultimately discoverable through reason alone, can only be a barren place; and that the music sounding forth from such a world might be very pretty, but can never be beautiful' (Gaines 2005: 12).

Gaines sees the meeting between Bach and Frederick the Great as a pivotal moment in history. On one hand he could be quite wrong. As he admits, there is no knowledge of how Frederick reacted when he saw Bach's answer to his musical challenge, although, if the task is as difficult as Gaines claims, Frederick may have said some words that required an exclamation mark. On the other hand, that meeting and challenge encapsulate the clash between old and new cultures, innovative and reactionary ideas, a desire to move forward in one's thinking while abandoning all that was worth retaining. The novel also casts light on two towering figures in history. Gaines writes that Schoenberg believes that the theme that Frederick requested Bach set in a six-part fugue was written by Bach's son Carl, who was a musician in the court. Frederick would not have been able to compose one with such a degree of difficulty (Gaines 2005: 11). Perhaps this is true, and perhaps it was an act of spite by a

second son who felt unappreciated and wanted his father to fail. Perhaps it was an act of faith by a son who believed in the genius of his father. Such musings allow the reader an insight into the actual world of people who are so noted for their achievements that we forget they are also human beings. Bach finished the musical 'joke' within a fortnight; speed that Gaines suggests indicated how urgent it was to Bach:

> In the end, it implicated the most dissonant themes in his life and in the king's as well: among others, the proper relations between art and power, and the competition between fathers and sons. Perhaps most important, the work addresses the point of greatest conflict between these two men and one of the thorniest of all issues raised by the Enlightenment, for the eighteenth century and for its latter-day descendants: the role of belief in a world of reason. (Gaines 2002: 12)

Historical fiction and history reflect a symbiotic rather than a parasitic relationship. Each gives to the other, from their respective strengths. The close relationship between them has weakened as history came to align itself to a more scientific approach, rather than being identified as a form of literature. Even so the common elements between literature and history, especially through the use of narrative, the recreation of an historical era and the attempts to establish a link between the past and the present remain. It is appropriate to also acknowledge the significance of the reader. Bird depicts a reader of historical fiction, as being 'in a position of privilege, [who] to a degree becomes a player in the history' (Bird 2009: 20). Inevitably there are differences between the work of historians and writers of historical fiction, but these differences may be thought of, as we have already suggested, in terms of family resemblances. Bearing this analogy in mind historical fiction should never be thought of as the poor relation. Historical fiction can take its place at the family table in equal company with History. Above, not below the salt.

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