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Faking it: History and Creative Writing

Abstract

This paper examines the differences between historical and fictional representations of recognisable pasts, in an attempt to negotiate a critical and theoretical relationship between history and fiction. It argues that the 'fake' or 'counterfeit' of fiction may present us with a way of intervening in the discourses of reality - playing in the gap between the narratives of history and the actualities of the past.

Speaking at a University of Technology, Sydney, seminar on history and writing, academic Paula Hamilton said she was sick of the 'deficit' model of history, in which writers of historical novels argued that they turned to fiction because there was a 'gap' in the historical record that they wanted to fill. In this model, as Hamilton argued, it is the limits of history that make writing possible; the role of the writer is to fill in the blanks (Hamilton 2003). In practice, the 'deficit' argument takes various forms in which the writer supplies the interiority or atmosphere deemed to be missing from history, or manufactures actual historical events that lack the necessary proofs to count as history. As Canadian writer Margaret Atwood once said of the pact that she made with herself in writing her novel about the trial of Grace Marks, *Alias Grace* (1996), 'when there was a solid fact, I could not alter it … but in the parts left unexplained - the gaps left unfilled - I was free to invent' (Atwood 1998: 1515). I've heard Australian writers such as Kate Grenville, Frank Moorhouse and Delia Falconer articulate variations on this theory, but it was only after Hamilton's expression of impatience that I began to think about why the 'deficit' model is so unsatisfactory, and the various ways in which the historical novelist does something different.

One of the central problems with the 'deficit' argument is that it speaks to a very naturalised theory of history, in which historians labour altruistically in archives to unearth relics of the past, which are converted into an historical record conceived as truth. In this sense, it is merely the writer's job to extend the edifice, to make it more 'perfect', more 'complete' - without 'gaps'. For Atwood, this meant knowing 'not only who said what about Grace Marks, but also how to clean a chamber pot, what footgear would have been worn in winter, the origins of quilt pattern names, and how to store parsnips' (Atwood 1998: 1514). The novelists on the UTS panel came to a slightly different

conclusion - the factual events of the story could be altered and improved, but the period details had to be as realistic as possible (Hamilton 2003).

It has been a long time since historians labouring in the history departments of the academy have been allowed such a comforting conception of their work - at least since theorists such as Hayden White began to question the boundaries that separate history from fiction. In recent times, history has participated in the broader crisis of knowledge engendered by the spread of continental theory. Its grand narratives have been contested by regional and local narratives, its imperial models by subaltern studies and histories of resistance. Linear models of time have been subverted by spatial, sacred, circular and fragmented ones, and the tradition of discreet national histories undercut by the appearance of transnational histories. History has come a long way since Manning Clarke's omniscient eye reconstructed the settlement of Botany Bay with the imperious authority of a nineteenth-century novelist - an increasing number of historians have begun to acknowledge their lack of mastery of history, and have sought to locate themselves and their own practices of narration. As the historian Inga Clendinnen writes:

> God-historians hovering somewhere up and beyond the texts win no knee-bobs nowadays. We are increasingly ready to admit that a human hand pushes the pen or taps the keys of the word processor, that there is a needle 'I' between the past and the reader through which everything must pass. (Clendinnen 1996)

Historian Mark McKenna takes the argument even further: 'I think that in the writing of history, the writer should always be visible … [otherwise] the history almost appears on the page as if it has just dropped down from the sky, as if it comes from nowhere, and that's a lie' (McKenna 2005: 8). However, though historians at opposite ends of the political spectrum, such as McKenna and the conservative Keith Windshuttle, for instance, may disagree profoundly with one another about what happened, and why it happened, what constitutes adequate historical evidence, and what is important, they tend to agree that the object of history is to illuminate past actualities - 'the past as it actually was', as Leopold von Ranke once put it (qtd. in Curthoys and Docker 2006: 3). This places history at odds with the whole thrust of contemporary theory, which rejects not the past as such, but any idea that it can be recaptured directly - that history can function to uncover the truth.

For Clendinnen, the notion of historical truth attaches itself to an idea about the moral obligations of the historian. As Clendinnen writes, '[t]he largest difference between History and Fiction is the moral relationships each establishes between writer and subjects, and writer and reader.' For Clendinnen, the historian is a self-appointed 'clerk of record' whose function is to bear 'witness' (Clendinnen 1996). Writing about her work on documents of the Spanish Inquisition of the late sixteenth century, she states:

> … had I inserted one false detail, one imputation of motive or sensation not justifiable out of the record (including its exclusions, deformations and silences) I would have falsified an actual human and therefore moral relationship … between myself and the people I had chosen to 're-present' and between myself and my potential readers, who look to me for History. (Clendinnen 1996)

Admittedly, this is a long way from the task of the novelist, which Atwood once described as 'construct[ing] plausible whoppers, which they hope they can

induce the public to swallow whole' (Atwood 1998: 1503). However, there is a serious problem with the whole concept of the historian as 'witness bearer' and 'truth teller', not just because of issues of representation (as opposed to Clendinnen's carefully nuanced 're-present'), or even the way in which theory has cast doubt on the concept of transcendental truth but, as the work of Foucault and Said classically demonstrates, the way in which truth claims inevitably attach themselves to power (Foucault 1980; Said 1978). In this model, history plays itself out in a moral struggle over the meaning of the past, a site of contestation, perhaps, but more often one of manipulation in the service of politics or capital.

In recent times, writers such as Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje, John Fowles and Julian Barnes have probed this relationship between history and power. Their historical novels are not designed to represent the past as such so much as to inquire into the nature of historical knowledge and the process of history. For example, in Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), a fictional biography of New Orleans jazz musician Charles 'Buddy' Bolden, which incorporates fictional prose, poetry, and archival material, the whole thrust of the narrative operates as if to save Bolden from history. Collectively, works such as Ondaatje's are commonly known as 'historiographical metafictions', a phrase invented by the literary critic Linda Hutcheon to group together a number of works that draw our attention to the constructed character of history, using self-reflexive techniques such as textual play, historical re conceptualization (in which, for example, known historical details are deliberately falsified, or suppressed histories of real or imagined marginalised groups rediscovered), direct address and other devices that reflect on both the conventions of narrative and the narratives of history (Hutcheon 1988).

In Australian fiction, the most obvious example is Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001), a phantasmagorical narrative in which Sid Hammet, a forger of antiques, finds Gould's book in a junk shop, and is immediately seduced. Each time he opens the book a new chapter appears. Hammet takes the book to the experts, who tell him it bears no relationship to established historical facts, with one eminent historian suggesting that he publish it as a novel. When Hammet finishes the last chapter, the book dissolves, and he decides to reproduce the enchanted work from memory. What follows is a convoluted tale in which a sublime gothic assembly of characters meet terrible ends, viz. being consumed by a pig, crushed to death beneath a pile of falling books, or pickled as a human specimen in a phrenologist's collection. The tale is replete with reflexive metafictional devices including a prison clerk who has spent years creating false prison records, and a syphilitic Commandant obsessed by dreams of creating a new Europe in Tasmania (and, of course, there is also a real life colonial artist named William Buelow Gould and a real *Gould's Book of Fish*). The result is a piece of postcolonial revisionism in which a baroque nightmare undercuts the rational myths of imperialism.

Recently, the relationship of history to fiction has been further complicated by a narrative turn in the discipline of history itself. Of all the historians who have conducted experiments with narrative in the last few decades, Simon Schama is perhaps the most famous, especially for using the tools of fiction such as interior monologue and imaginative dialogue to tell the story of the gruesome nineteenth-century murder of George Parkman by an impecunious Harvard professor in *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (Schama 1991). Schama's history has been criticised for transforming fragments of historical evidence into sweeping dramatic scenes, in the manner of a detective novel, without necessarily making the reader aware of the great leaps between the evidence he uses, and the worlds he evokes. Clendinnen, who has written narrative history herself, believes Schama's work suffers from a 'confusion of

categories' and is a 'mistake' (Clendinnen 1996). But as the book's title suggests, it needs to be understood that Schama is interested in playing with the whole concept of historical certainty. He is acutely aware of the distance between lived reality and the attempt to narrate it - between the literary narratives of history and the actualities of the past. As he famously wrote in the afterword:

> Historians are left forever chasing shadows, painfully aware of their inability ever to reconstruct a dead world in its completeness however thorough or revealing their documentation. We are doomed to be forever hailing someone who has just gone around the corner and out of earshot. (Schama 1991: 319-20)

In this sense, the work functions to suggest that all histories are a kind of fiction.

More recently, historians such as Robert Rosenstone and James Goodman have turned to non-traditional literary techniques to bring the subjective and fragmentary nature of history into view. For example, in *The Mirror in the Shrine* (1988) - Rosenstone's book about American encounters with Meiji Japan - he employs techniques such as cinematic montage and multiple voices, often interrupting the narrative to directly address the reader on problems of historical interpretation, the people he writes about, and his own role in the text. In this way, he constantly calls attention to the problem of subjectivity, the limits of historical knowledge, and the constructed nature of the history he presents. As the editor of the radical journal *Rethinking History*, Rosenstone has also collected together the work of a diverse group of historians interested in taking advantage of non-traditional academic techniques such as memoir, short story, autobiographical reflection or fragmented narrative, and in so doing, 'answering [Hayden White's] call to write history that incorporates the techniques and strategies of twentieth century literature', while 'provid[ing] a strong critique of the epistemology, narrative strategies, and truth claims of traditional narrative writing' (Rosenstone 2004: 4).

In the wake of poststructuralism, it is tempting to view the non-traditional or experimental texts of both history and fiction as an intellectually more rigorous kind of work, as the only form of narrative that avoids duplicity with power. The idea is easily supported with reference to the work of theorists such as Barthes or Lyotard, who tend to bring out the non-traditional or experimental text as a kind of panacea, placing it at the apex of what is in many ways another grand narrative of cultural progress. At the same time, Barthes and Lyotard argue that novels written in a realist mode are innately conservative - a criticism which is merely compounded when the text in question is an historical one (Barthes 1967, 1990; Lyotard 1984). Hence, historical novels written in a realist mode are often derided as dishonest or 'bogus', as the writer Amanda Lohrey once said (quoted in Grenville 2006), as acts of 'bad faith' (classically defined by Sartre as using weak evidence to prop up a widely-held belief), as the products of guilt or nostalgia, as a yearning for an artificial past, as an offence against history and aesthetics - as 'fatally cheap', as the novelist Henry James once wrote (quoted in Clendinnen 2006: 28). This was certainly the central question to tax the minds of the audience to the UTS panel on history and writing; as the poet and academic Kerry Glastonbury put it to the panel, 'Why have you chosen to work in such a conservative form?'

For the teacher of creative writing, I think there is a problem inherent in privileging one kind of writing (such as experimental) over others (such as realism). I also question whether the entire genre or form (i.e. the historical

novel) should be dismissed as innately 'conservative', an idea that refuses to engage with the mainstream of Australian literary production in recent years, as well as the spate of popular historical novels that have forced many bookshops to open entire sections devoted to the genre (at Abbey's in Sydney on the shelf next to crime, fantasy and science fiction there is now a section devoted to the historical novel), and conceives of the audience for such works as dupes. For myself, I am suspicious of the romantic aspects of many popular historical novels and suspect individual texts of harbouring reactionary views, but for the genre as a whole, I find, like the querulous academic in a short story by historian James Goodman, 'I wanted to like them, I really did' (Goodman 2005: 239).

One of the problems with critical approaches to the historical novel genre relates to a broader problem in literary criticism generally, that being the way in which realism, a term which basically evolved as a period description (i.e. the classic nineteenth-century novel) has been extended well beyond any meaningful application to encompass any kind of fiction not written in an experimental mode. In common usage, realism refers to a broad range: from works of a life-like or documentary character, to works that concern themselves with social causes, especially novels that deal with marginalised socio-economic groups. As temporal realism the label refers to the story time of traditional narrative, and as a stylistic term it is widely used to refer to a traditional style of narrative writing (anything, for instance, that uses dialogue and scenes). But the list goes on - 'dirty realism' is a form of realism with sex, 'magical realism' is a form of realism in which unrealistic things happen, 'hysterical realism' is also a form of unrealistic realism … Such a generalised application not only masks the diversity of the novel genre but carries an additional critical burden in the idea of mimesis is the path via which the text is inevitably approached - mimesis, in other words, becomes the measure of the text.

Realism is a slippery term because it presents itself as transparent, as if the realist novel could provide a window to the world, when (like all forms of writing) novelistic reality is patterned in a way that the real world is not. As Lennard Davis argues in his influential work, *Resisting Novels*: 'Of course readers know that characters in novels are not really people, yet it is difficult if not impossible to follow any novel if one constantly bears in mind that a character is a totally fabricated construct (Davis 1987: 102). He writes, 'Even the most hardened deconstructionist who knows that all things in novels are only signs and tactics must - to get through a novel - allow some particular clusters of signs the kind of priority they need' (Davis 1987: 103). Davis expands his argument beyond the realm of realism, to the novel genre generally, stating that 'novels that try and point out the made up quality of their central character are, at best, intellectually interesting but somehow not really novelistic and, at worst, tedious and unreadable' (Davis 1987: 102).

I do not agree with Davis's admittedly magnificent analysis; rather I think it serves to highlight the process of cultural doublethink which literary theory commonly ascribes to the reader (and writer), whereby the reader (and writer) come to simultaneously believe that characters are fictive, even ideological constructs, but also, as Henry Fielding once wrote: 'knowledge of men is only to be learnt from books' (qtd. in Davis 1987: 102). This is why the concept of realism inevitably leads to accusations of duplicity. And in the case of the historical novel, this idea about the duplicitous nature of novelistic reality conveniently dovetails with the empirical prejudices of history.

Hence, the heated attack by historians Mark McKenna and Inga Clendinnen on Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005), a novel about European encounters

with Australian aborigines on the frontier. In her *Quarterly Essay* piece, 'The History Question: Who Owns the Past?', Clendinnen argued that Grenville's novel constituted both an abuse of the historical record that made her 'flinch', and the most recent example of the many ways in which novelists 'have been doing their best to bump historians off the track' (Clendinnen 2006: 16). Clendinnen, however, speaks well of historical novels by writers such as John Banville and Peter Carey, and does not adequately explain why Banville's reimagining of the life of Anthony Blunt - 'undulating somewhere in the vicinity of the ascertainable facts, but going far beyond them' (Clendinnen 2006: 20) - is okay, while Grenville's reimagining of the life of Solomon Wiseman is not. Or, indeed, why Peter Carey's 'transformation of the past' in his book about Ned Kelly is okay, relying on Carey's confession 'I made it up', rather than any kind of analytical engagement with the actual text (Clendinnen 2006: 32). What Clendinnen seems to suggest is that Carey's work is acceptable because he is not interested in 'reformation of the present' (by which I assume she means politics) or 'replication of the past' (by which I assume she means history) (Clendinnen 2006: 32); but for the historian Mark McKenna, it is precisely a notion of history and politics that is at stake.

In his public lecture 'Writing the Past: History, Literature and the Public Sphere in Australia', McKenna argues that Grenville's book is merely the most recent in a series of examples of 'novelists parading as historic authorities' (McKenna 2005: 9) in a way that has 'eroded the traditional authority of professional historians' (McKenna 2005: 3). He argues that 'novelists commonly assume their art to be superior to that of history' (McKenna 2005: 3), and that novelists are guilty of 'elevat[ing] fiction to a position of interpretative power over history' (McKenna 2005: 6). McKenna characterises the debate as a 'jostling [between novelists and historians] for the right to tell the national story' (McKenna 2005: 4). For McKenna, it is important that history should win this debate because '[u]nlike fiction, history is more threatening politically because it can't be pushed behind the curtain of invention or make believe'. He argues that the elevation of fiction suits the 'conservative commentariat' because its myths are politically 'mute' compared to the 'real thing' (i.e. history) (McKenna 2005: 7).

It would be too simple to argue contra McKenna that historians have mistaken the fictional nature of the historical novel - the 'Dan Brown defence' as McKenna dubs it (McKenna 2005: 5). Rather, I think one of the interesting things about the history versus fiction debate is the way in which novelists appear to crave the recognition of history, an appearance that partly derives from the way in which the realist label seems to have shaped the way in which writers think - or at least talk - about their work. Hence, novelists constantly resort to concepts such as 'novelistic truth' (as if, in the wake of poststructuralism, we are confronted with a new kind of transcendental truth), or the dubious tool of 'imaginative empathy' (in which a kind of self projection is mistaken for the real). Grenville, for instance, deploys both ideas in her much-criticised interview with ABC Radio's Ramona Koval. She argues that 'the way of empathizing and imaginative understanding' means the writer can 'actually get inside the experience' and 'actually experienc[e] what [the past] was like' (Koval 2005). In this kind of discourse the status of the fictional work depends wholly on its reality/veracity, rather than, for instance, its aesthetics, or more significantly, its politics, its vision or its affect.

Another interesting feature of the debate between Australian historians and novelists is the way in which novelists are quick to flee the historical terrain and surrender to the authority of history - in a way that highlights the pressing need for writers working within the academy to negotiate a critical and theoretical stance in relation to other disciplines in the humanities. For

instance, Clendinnen approvingly notes how Peter Carey, under attack from Kelly historians, would 'slide further and further down into his chair' (Clendinnen 2006: 32). Or, Grenville who, in a response to McKenna's frankly patronizing, 'If ever there was a case of a novelist wanting her work to be taken seriously as history, it is Grenville', wrote:

> Here it is in plain words: I don't think *The Secret River* is history. … Nor did I ever *say* that I thought my novel was history. In fact, on countless occasions I was at pains to make it clear that I knew it wasn't. (Grenville 2006)

Of course, Grenville is right to protest that her novel isn't history (history is a discourse with its own rules and regularities), but what her answer perhaps elides is the hermeneutic power of the fictional work, the way in which stories explain events in the world by endowing them with a special kind of coherence (working via a cognitive mode, as Hayden White once argued, rather than merely a form of discourse [White 1996: 68]). In a world dominated by the mass cultural narratives of film, advertising and the nightly TV news, narrative does not reflect so much as it actually *produces* reality, moving beyond the realm of the purely imaginary to become part of material culture, with material effects (which can be large or small, progressive or regressive, good or bad) (Nelson 2006: 12). In this sense, McKenna and Clendinnen may well be right to see fiction as an attempt to bump history 'off its track' (Clendinnen 2006: 4). As the American novelist Don DeLillo robustly argued with respect to his twentieth-century epic, *Underworld* (1997a), a kind of subterranean history of the atomic age:

> It is almost inevitable that the fiction writer, dealing with reality, will violate any number of codes and contracts. He will engineer a swerve from the usual arrangements that bind a figure in history to what has been reported, rumoured, confirmed or solemnly chanted. It is fiction's role to imagine deeply, to follow obscure urges into unreliable regions of experience. … The novel is the dream release, the suspension of reality that history needs to escape its own brutal confinements …
> At its root level, fiction is a kind of religious fanaticism, with elements of obsession, superstition and awe.
> Such qualities will sooner or later state their adversarial relationship with history (DeLillo 1997b).

Contrary to McKenna's argument that the power of history is dependent on its veracity, on its status as the 'real thing' (McKenna 2005: 7), DeLillo contends that in a world composed of narratives the more fictional discourse will win.

For myself, I am not sure that the debate should be about winning or losing; I prefer mutual dialogue to mutual brickbats. I have recently completed a novel set in the 1960s, and am more than happy to confess that my novel is 'bogus', but would like to suggest that the 'bogus' or counterfeit might present us with a way of intervening in the discourses of reality - of questioning the discourses (like history) through which reality constructs itself.

I think this is ultimately what Grenville's novel does. It steps into a politically loaded area of history and poses a question that has been taken as an affront.

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TEXT
Vol 11 No 2 October 2007
http://www.textjournal.com.au
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