

The Historical Novel

Jerome de Groot



The New Critical Idiom

THE HISTORICAL NOVEL

Jerome de Groot



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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Critical Idiom is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary studies.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situating of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

J.D.

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J.d.G.

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1

INTRODUCTION

The question has been asked by one or two critics of standing – What right has the Historical Novel to exist at all?

(Nield 1902)

Whatever the answer to this question, it is clear, surveying the field, that at present the Historical Novel is in robust health, critically, formally and economically. In particular, the last few decades have seen an explosion in the sales and popularity of novels set in the past. Visit a bookshop or book website and the Historical Fiction section, in itself a relatively new marketing innovation, will be groaning under the weight of new work published by authors from across the world, and in numerous styles. The shelves will be shared by writers as diverse as Philippa Gregory, Bernard Cornwell, Sarah Waters, Ken Follett, Robert Harris, Dan Brown and Amy Tan. Such bestsellers share space with perennial favourites Georgette Heyer, George MacDonald Fraser, Jean Plaidy and Margaret Mitchell; with genre-specific work from detective to horror to romance, such as that by Lee Jackson, Simon Scarrow, Candace Robb, Dan Simmons and C. J. Sansom; with translations of work by writers as diverse as Boris

Akunin, Naguib Mahfouz and Orhan Pamuk; and with literary fiction by Philip Roth, Gore Vidal, Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison. The complexity of the bookshop's Historical Fiction section, then, its physical intermingling of genres, types of writer, and publishers, demonstrates the levelling ability of this mode of fiction, somehow linking Tracy Chevalier with George Eliot, Ellis Peters with Pat Barker.

The historical novel is a genre that is increasingly studied on university curricula and discussed at research level; it is also an immensely popular form, with global audience reach. This book attempts to trace the defining characteristics, key manifestations and cultural meanings of this particular type of fiction. Historical writing can take place within numerous fictional locales: romance, detective, thriller, counterfactual, horror, literary, gothic, post-modern, epic, fantasy, mystery, western, children's books. Indeed, the intergeneric hybridity and flexibility of historical fiction have long been one of its defining characteristics. A historical novel might consider the articulation of nationhood via the past, highlight the subjectivism of narratives of History, underline the importance of the realist mode of writing to notions of authenticity, question writing itself, and attack historiographical convention. The form manages to hold within itself conservatism, dissidence, complication and simplicity; it attracts multiple, complex, dynamic audiences; it is a particular and complex genre hiding in plain sight on the shelves of a bookshop. As the examples above demonstrate, historical fiction is written by a variety of authors, within an evolving set of sub-genres, for a multiplicity of audiences. One might suggest an alternative narrative of the rise of the novel focused through historical fiction, for instance, a form concerned with social movement, dissidence, complication and empathy rather than the more individualistic novel form we are familiar with, born of autobiographical, personal, revelatory narratives. Certainly figures that we might see as key exponents of the novel form, such as Gustave Flaubert, or Leo Tolstoy, considered their historical fictions not to be novels at all, but experiments and crucial interventions in important cultural debates.

This present study investigates the genre in a number of ways, considering popular novels (particularly those aimed at and

marketed specifically to men or women), literary fiction and postmodern writing. A final section begins to consider the ways in which the challenge to orthodoxy and potential for dissent innate to historical fiction have been used to challenge mainstream and repressive narratives: by postcolonial authors to 'write back'; by lesbian and gay authors to reclaim marginalised identities; by politicians and public figures to posit or explore new ideological positions. This introduction outlines some of the key problems and oddities associated with the genre so we may begin to locate it as a type of writing, before turning in Chapter 2 to the chronological evolution and development of the form.

History is other, and the present familiar. The historian's job is often to explain the transition between these states. The historical novelist similarly explores the dissonance and displacement between then and now, making the past recognisable but simultaneously authentically unfamiliar. To use Alessandro Manzoni's metaphor, the historical novelist is required to give 'not just the bare bones of history, but something richer, more complete. In a way you want him to put the flesh back on the skeleton that is history' (Manzoni 1984: 67–68). The figures we meet in historical fiction are identifiable to us on the one hand due to the conceit of the novel form, in that they speak the same language, and their concerns are often similar to ours, but their situation and their surroundings are immensely different. How does this affect the writing and reading of fiction? Historical novelists concentrate on the gaps between known factual history and that which is lived to a variety of purposes:

It's precisely the difference of the past that makes it exciting for me. I think we always need to be reminded that the moment that we live in is very temporary. Historical fiction at its best can remind us of that.

(Waters, cited in Allardice 2006)

These thoughts of the novelist Sarah Waters attempt to define and understand the motives for reading and enjoying historical fiction. The genre is a knotty one to pin down, including within its boundaries a multiplicity of different types of fictional formats, but Waters' words give us a set of pointers towards articulating

an understanding of the sort of writing that this present book calls the 'historical novel'. Here Waters asserts the virtue of historical fiction as something which enforces on the reader a sense of historicised 'difference' (and there is a *frisson* in the excitement which this otherness provokes in the author), and as a mode which has an effect on the normative experience of the everyday and the contemporary world. Of course, much historical fiction seeks to close down difference and works conservatively to promote universalising tendencies; however, the subversive potential of the form is innate within it at all points, as the various discussions that follow seek to demonstrate.

Historical fiction, for Waters, 'reminds' readers of their historical particularity and simultaneity. It follows, then, that the historical novel as a form is something which demands an unusual response from its audience: an active response, at the least, and a sense of otherness and difference when reading. The historical novel, then, is similar to other forms of novel-writing in that it shares a concern with realism, development of character, authenticity. Yet fundamentally it entails an engagement on the part of the reader (possibly unconsciously) with a set of tropes, settings and ideas that are particular, alien and strange. The experience of writing, reading and understanding historical fiction is markedly different from that of a novel set in the contemporary world. Knowingly or not, the three participants of the historical novel, writers, readers, students, bring a set of reading skills and premeditated ideas to the experience. An historical novel is always a slightly more inflected form than most other types of fiction, the reader of such a work slightly more self-aware of the artificiality of the writing and the strangeness of engaging with imaginary work which strives to explain something that is other than one's contemporary knowledge and experience: the past. In this a cognate genre is science fiction, which involves a conscious interaction with a clearly unfamiliar set of landscapes, technologies and circumstances. As Darko Suvin argues, SF is 'a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition' (cited and discussed in Roberts 2005: 7). This question of a fundamental 'estrangement' intertwined with a clear rational 'cognition' seems a clear analogue for

the work that historical fiction undertakes, the compound between the two in the present case leading to something like 'faction', a conjunction of the fictional uncanny and the factually authentic.

Jonathan Nield's introduction to his *Guide to the Best Historical Novels and Tales* (1902) attempted to account for various concerns:

More often than not, it is pointed out, the Romancist gives us gives us a mass of inaccuracies, which, while they mislead the ignorant (i.e., the majority?), are an unpardonable offence to the historically-minded reader. Moreover, the writer of such Fiction, though he be a Thackeray or a Scott, cannot surmount barriers which are not merely hard to scale, but absolutely impassable. The spirit of a period is like the selfhood of a human being – something that cannot be handed on; try as we may, it is impossible for us to breathe the atmosphere of a bygone time, since all those thousand-and-one details which went to the building up of both individual and general experience, can never be reproduced. We consider (say) the eighteenth century from the purely Historical standpoint, and, while we do so, are under no delusion as to our limitations; we know that a few of the leading personages and events have been brought before us in a more or less disjointed fashion, and are perfectly aware that there is room for much discrepancy between the pictures so presented to us (be it with immense skill) and the actual facts as they took place in such and such a year. But, goes on the objector, in the case of a Historical Romance we allow ourselves to be hoodwinked, for, under the influence of a pseudo-historic security, we seem to watch the real sequence of events in so far as these affect the characters in whom we are interested.

(Nield 1902)

There is much food for thought here. Nield points out a set of problems associated with literary taste, concern for authenticity, anxiety that the form might mislead its readership. Writing about history involves approaching insurmountable barriers.

The 'spirit of a period' may not be reclaimed, and when approached through the lens of history the knowledge of this is uppermost; however, in reading fiction 'we allow ourselves to be

hoodwinked'. Nield's formulations introduce key ideas about the concern for authenticity. Much criticism of the historical novel concerns its ability to change fact, and indeed those who attack the form are often concerned with its innate ability to encourage an audience into being knowingly misinformed, misled and duped. We will develop the idea of being consciously 'hoodwinked' throughout the following chapters, and indeed this fundamental strangeness is, it is argued, one of the most important attributes of the historical novel.

Nield also demonstrates neatly how throughout the nineteenth century what we might call the Historical Novel was often, problematically and pejoratively, referred to as 'Historical Romance'. This type of fiction was generically flexible and intransigent; its subject matter not worthy of the rationalist and civilising ideas associated with the high realist novel. The term 'Historical Romance' suggests the complexity and manipulability of the genre, its ability to meld high and low types of writing, its popular appeal. Such writing that was immensely important in the rise and development of the 'novel' due to the influence particularly of the work of Sir Walter Scott, but also stood to one side, was a mode apart from the concerns of the more straightforward type of literature as represented by the novel. This will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Nield's approach is influenced by critics who suggest the historical novel might be a force for educational good. He worries that some fictions are 'harmful', reminding the reader that 'History itself possesses interest for us more as the unfolding of certain moral and mental developments than as the mere enumeration of facts' (Nield 1902). He argues that critics were concerned that the type of scepticism common in approaches to the past was somehow something that the novel could not incorporate. The genre's 'pseudo-historic security' becalms the reader and makes them a passive recipient of all kinds of untruths. In contrast, it seems to me that the historical novel, whilst happily hoodwinking its audience, does so with their collusion, and that this complicity is more self-conscious and self-aware than Nield's critics might allow.

A good example of the dissonance innate to the form is the author's note. It might be a rule of thumb to define the historical

novel as something which has an explanatory note from the writer describing their own engagement with the period in question, either through schooling or, more commonly, through their reading and research. This kind of external scholarly apparatus appears in the first commonly defined historical novel, Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814). The novel's extensive notes encompass ballads and poetry (sometimes made up), political occurrences, biography, culture and customs, classical learning, sword making, accounts of actual events. Much of this material is written by Scott but he also cites various authorities and sources to make his points sound. Furthermore in the General Preface to the 1829 edition Scott claims to have talked to many veterans about their experiences:

I had been a good deal in the Highlands at a time when they were much less accessible and much less visited than they have been of late years, and was acquainted with many of the old warriors of 1745, who were, like most veterans, easily induced to fight their battles over again for the benefit of a willing listener like myself.

(Scott 1985: 522)

These techniques demonstrate how from the very beginning the historical novel was keen to emphasise its authority. This is in order to defend the novel from accusations of frivolity and femininity (novels were associated with female readers in the eighteenth century). Scott is at pains to demonstrate that his work is educational, well versed in actual events and eye-witness accounts, a worthwhile exercise. It is also a collage of information and generic form, including ballad, historical information, heraldry, court intrigue, footnotes on culture and history, and quotation in a kind of ragbag of a novel which is itself interested in not being too authoritative. Edward Waverley has an interview with Colonel Gardiner in which his letters and his actions are reviewed, and this section demonstrates that there is another way of interpreting events, a self-reflexive moment in which Scott's narrative actively undermines itself. The extratextual information also has the effect of controlling the reader. On the one hand the reader is put in the position of the tourist (and indeed of the character of Edward

Waverley himself), unknowing and passive, prey to the worldly, clever, ironising narrator. At the same time the reader is presumed to have some historical knowledge and therefore gains a certain power over the narrative to the extent that the novel cannot shock or challenge events. The notes and extraneous meta-narratives of the novel point to the artificiality of the exercise, encouraging the audience of the work to acknowledge the multiplicity of history and the subjective version of it being presented by Scott. The collage effect of authority that Scott creates here is something that points to the generic mixture of the form as well as the indeterminacy of history, and it is something that infuses almost all historical novels. The form is obsessed with pointing out its own partiality, with introducing other voices and undermining its authority.

The habit of authorial paratextual commentary upon the process and development of work has continued to the present day, and most historical fiction will have introductions and disavowals such as the following:

While this novel was based on a large number of factual sources (detailed below), the warning of the Author's Note preceding it should be repeated here: it is a work of fiction and the characters, even when recognizable from an external context, are behaving fictionally ... My general aim has been to avoid giving to any character dialogue or actions which the historical record indicates would have been impossible or unlikely. However, the dialogue, though trying to capture the cadence of their conversation as it is recorded in reality, is frequently invented.

(Lawson 2006: 367)

Certain things are always erased or distorted in a novel and this is no exception. It seems worth saying that this is not a representation of the politics or personalities of the Angry Brigade.

(Kunzru 2007: 268)

This novel is another fiction, based on another fact. That fact was found in the following sources.

(Peace 2006: 349)

Apart from Jean's letter to Arthur, all letters quoted, whether signed or anonymous, are authentic.

(Barnes 2006: 505)

The self-consciousness of the authors here illustrates their awareness of the strange project in which they are involved. Each has a different approach to the way in which their practice as historical novelists intersects with 'reality' and with 'history'; but each is moved to articulate this to the readership of their novels. This articulation highlights the artificiality of the novel, introduces a fundamental **metafictional** element to the form, and demonstrates that as a genre the historical novel provokes a certain anxiety and disquiet on the part of the writer. Mark Lawson repeats the mantra that his work, though well versed in fact, is unreal; Hari Kunzru feels it 'worth saying' that his novelistic imagining of the 1970s is not a 'representation', as if any reader would assume it was anything other than a *fiction*; David Peace's nebulous formulation of 'fiction, based on another fact' reflects the uncertainty of his central character, Brian Clough, as to what is occurring to him at times, or his desire to tell a story according to his own version of events; Barnes's work is 'authentic'. This scrabbling of authors to cover themselves has various motivations, from those echoing Scott and attempting to ensure the reader is aware of their skill and authenticity, whilst also throwing the veracity of the entire narrative into doubt, to more practical legal issues; Peace was taken to court by the Leeds United footballer Johnny Giles, whom he represents in his novel, and forced to pay damages and apologise to him. Historical biography, a form distinct from but related to historical fiction, somehow manages to bridge this gap but towards the more extreme end, as in the case of Peter Ackroyd, the distinctions between genres working with 'fact' and those working with 'fiction' begin to blur (de Groot 2008: 35–9).

This latter incident points us to another of the problematic glitches thrown up by the historical novel as a genre, the concerns raised when a writer approaches a figure who is still alive and fictionalises their story. Is this something which is acceptable? Historical novelists take the bare bones of 'history', some facts,

some atmosphere, some vocabulary, some evidence, and weave a story within the gaps. In the case of persons still living, though, there are issues of good taste and libel, as well as authenticity. Yet, to extrapolate, this is always the case when writing about real people, whether they are Tudor or contemporary, and so the historical novelist has to negotiate their own position as regards their 'duty' to history, veracity, and the various figures involved. This is one of the reasons, surely, why historical novels often tend to eschew dramatising the lives of well known 'real' figures. Again, Sarah Waters has interesting thoughts on the duty of the writer to their subject matter:

I don't think novels should misrepresent history, unless it's for some obvious serious or playful purpose (though this suggests that we can represent history accurately – something I'm not sure we can do; in fact, I've always been fascinated by the ways in which historical fiction continually reinvents the past). I think we have a duty to take history seriously – not simply to use it as a backdrop or for the purposes of nostalgia.

(Waters 2006)

Once more the complexity of the enterprise is foregrounded: Waters brings in issues of authenticity, misrepresentation, reinvention and seriousness, all concepts that would not arise as compellingly in relation to novels set in contemporary society. The historical novel has a quality of revelation in that it can change the past; it also encourages a particular set of responses and approaches.

The historical novel, then, provokes a series of genre-specific questions that this book explores in order to illustrate how complex, dissonant, multiple and dynamic this seemingly clear-cut and innocuous form is. Through a consideration of various types of historical novel, through a chronological account of the form's development, and by looking with a number of theoretical perspectives, we can start to account for the genre and think about how and why it works.