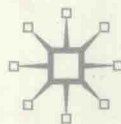


Contemporary Women's Writing



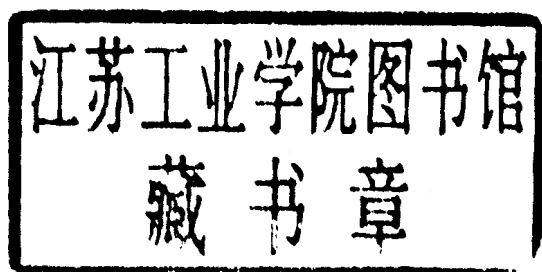
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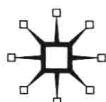
Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women's Writing

Edited by

Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn



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Introduction

Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn

In the last decades of the twentieth century and into the new millennium, historical fiction, particularly that written by women authors, has been transformed from an essentially escapist form of literature with a predominant interest in the romantic into a genre at the cutting edge of postmodern conceptualizations of the past and of contemporary worlds. Writers like Margaret Atwood, A. S. Byatt, Angela Carter, Tracy Chevalier, Eva Figs, Daphne Marlatt, Michèle Roberts, Rose Tremain, Sarah Waters, Jeanette Winterson and others have reinvested history's role in literature and literature's place in history with a new importance. This book examines the dynamic experimentation within historical fiction by contemporary women authors from North America, Australia and the UK. Ranging from the popular to the literary, the fictional to the factual, and covering those narratives that defy categorization, the chapters assembled here represent new and varied approaches to the subject of how contemporary women fiction writers use and reconfigure history in their work.

We have designated the texts under discussion in this volume as 'metafictions' and 'metahistories'. Metafiction, for our purposes, is best defined by the following statement by Patricia Waugh:

Metafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion . . . to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction. The two processes are held together in a formal tension which breaks down the distinctions between 'creation' and 'criticism' and merges them into the concepts of 'interpretation' and 'deconstruction'.¹

2 Introduction

In the case of this book, the 'formal tension' Waugh indicates is provided at an additional level by the other term in our title: the 'metahistorical'. By 'metahistorical' we mean those works of both fiction and nonfiction in which one of the author's primary contentions is the process of historical narrative itself. As Hayden White defines it in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1993), metahistory denotes a recognition of the 'historical work as . . . a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse'.² The ways in which history is written after the events it describes and the manner in which narratives more generally are constructed within a historical moment as literature provide the crucial critical undercurrent beneath the chapters that follow. What most unites the chapters gathered here is the fact that the texts they discuss are, in themselves, part of a process of critique; their authors seek through the very act of writing to deconstruct and reinterpret aspects of the historical process which have previously silenced or been closed to their female subjects.

This does not mean that the chapters in this book are to be read as somehow separate from other trends in contemporary literary studies or that they are divorced from a sense of literary tradition; we are not arguing that the authors selected are creating a new genre or that historical fiction by women did not exist before them. Indeed, quite the opposite is true, and the readings presented here are, like the texts they discuss, in sympathy with an aesthetic reading of the historical narrative process, albeit one that is theoretically, critically and politically (feminist) informed. As A. S. Byatt has commented on her own desire to write historical novels,

It may be argued that we cannot understand the present if we do not understand the past that preceded and produced it . . . But there are other, less solid reasons, amongst them the aesthetic need to write coloured and metaphorical language, to keep past literatures alive and singing, connecting the pleasure of writing to the pleasure of reading.³

For women, the pleasures of writing and reading are arguably intensified when dealing with the historical. Pushed to the margins of the literary and historical canon up until the latter third of the twentieth century, it is in part by reclaiming historical events and personages as subjects and participants in contemporary fictional accounts that women writers can begin to assert a sense of historical location. In this sense, it is by interrogating the male-centred past's treatment of women at the same time

as seeking to undermine the 'fixed' or 'truthful' nature of the historical narrative itself that women can create their 'own' (counter-)histories; it is in such acts that the metafictional and metahistorical combine.

Women writers' impulse to reassess not only their own position in history but also the nature of that history's right to represent the 'truth' has coincided with a wider cultural challenge to what constitutes 'History'. The growth in 'new histories' of women, gender, ethnicity and sexuality since the late 1960s, for example, has prompted a change in educational practice as well as public perception. Recent women writers have engaged with this to the extent that, as Diana Wallace remarks,

the woman's historical novel of the 1990s looks less like a nostalgic retreat into the past than a complex engagement with the ways in which representations of history change over time . . . The novels of the 1990s . . . contest the idea of a single unitary and linear history. They emphasise the subjective, fragmentary nature of historical knowledge through rewritings of canonical texts, through multiple or divided narrators, fragmentary or contradictory narratives, and disruptions of linear chronology.⁴

Thus, women writers in particular have risen to the challenge of a changing, postmodern understanding of the nature of history, the historical process and the (in)validity of any individual account's claims to accuracy or, ultimately, objective truth. This has made the possibilities of resurrecting, altering and (re)imagining women's historical lives greater, and has also provided a seemingly more secure future for the genre itself.

That history has become a more pressing subject in recent literature more generally is indicated by the spate not only of fictional works but of critical theory's engagements with this material. During the last twenty years, significant work has been carried out on the genre of historical fiction, notable examples being the writings of Hayden White,⁵ Linda Hutcheon,⁶ Steven Connor,⁷ Peter Middleton and Tim Woods,⁸ and Jürgen Pieters.⁹ Of these, Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) has been the most influential, and the term 'historiographic metafiction' is used frequently in critical discourse as a short-hand for the kinds of theorized approaches to the historical in literature which have become part of mainstream culture since her book was published. Hutcheon's own definition of the term suggests how it

refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only

history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity.¹⁰

Given that history and fiction are both grounded in narrative, the two remain interdependent on one another. Historical fiction could therefore be viewed as the quintessential mode of postmodernism, in that it continually raises questions and concerns about the very fabric of the past and the present. As Hutcheon writes, '[p]ostmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological.'¹¹ The distinctive feature of such fictions in Hutcheon's view is to be found in their eagerness to explore how narratives and histories work within and around one another.¹² It was Hayden White, almost thirty years ago, who argued that this relationship be explored for what it could teach both historians and creative artists about the role, status and authority of historical narrative. As White wrote,

Historians are concerned with events which can be assigned to specific time-space locations, events which are (or were) in principle observable or perceivable, whereas imaginative writers – poets, novelists, playwrights – are concerned with both these kinds of events and imagined, hypothetical, or invented ones... What should interest us... is the extent to which the discourse of the historian and that of the imaginative writer overlap, resemble, or correspond with each other.¹³

Underlining as they do the 'imagined' nature of history as a discipline and its similarity to creative writing in terms of narrative drive and 'story', White's comments hint at the possibility of a criticism that is aware of the flexible play between these two spheres of discourse. Yet while historical fiction as a genre has continued to explore the tensions between history and story, criticism has been rather slower in attempting to deal with such material, particularly in the context of women's writing.

As Peter Middleton and Tim Woods indicate at the start of their 2000 book on memory and time in contemporary fiction,

contemporary historical literature has become an extremely active sphere of argument about history and the rediscovery of its elided

potentialities, as well as an often highly conflicted struggle over what should be remembered and what forgotten.¹⁴

The 'elided potentialities' here might cover a multitude of absent things, but they undoubtedly should include the potential of so many women and their stories. Some studies of historical fiction or the presence of the past in contemporary culture have made reference to the specificities of women's engagement with the historical, such as David Leon Higdon's *Shadows of the Past in Contemporary British Fiction* (1984),¹⁵ which carries chapters on Jean Rhys and Margaret Drabble, or John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff's edited collection *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (2000),¹⁶ which engages with women's responses to history and use of historical fiction or film in the work of A. S. Byatt and Jane Campion. But neither of these texts focuses on gender as a fundamental issue in the production of such work. Historical fiction written by women, therefore, remains a relatively neglected area of literary study. Aside from Diana Wallace's wide-ranging but Anglo-centric *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900–2000* (2005) and Jeannette King's carefully focused *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (2006),¹⁷ there are no critical works which deal specifically with international contemporary women writers and historical fiction. Yet historical fiction remains a female-author-dominated genre: look for historical narratives in the popular fiction bestseller lists, for example, and it is the names of Philippa Gregory and Sarah Waters which dominate. Part of the reason for this is that women, along with members of minority ethnicities and nonheterosexuals, need a narrative history. As Wallace points out in her book, 'exclusion from recorded history, whether as a subject, reader or writer, is a serious business';¹⁸ the authors whose work is explored here take that challenge seriously.

Our book seeks to fill this important critical lacuna and expand the kinds of authors discussed not only by focusing entirely on women writers, but by broadening the geographical, generic, cultural and canonical scope of the works under consideration. With its emphasis solely on women writers, this book marks out new territory in the field. The distinctive qualities of *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women's Writing* are its focus on British, North American and Australian women writers; its exploration of both fictional and factual re-engagements with history by women; its combination of chapters on established and lesser-known authors; and its varied theoretical and literary critical approaches.

The book is divided into three sections. The first, 'Towards a Reconceptualization of History and Identity', probes the fictional manipulations of 'history' as a paradigm for exploring and exploding national, ethnic, linguistic and gendered identities in the British, Canadian and Australian writers Angela Carter, Stevie Davies, Daphne Marlatt, Helen Darville (alias Demidenko), Eva Figes and Jeanette Winterson. It begins with a chapter by a historian: Katharine Hodgkin's discussion of historical novels in the context of seventeenth-century history is a particularly useful beginning for this book. Hodgkin's aim is to question the relationship between 'history' and 'story' and to discuss how a historian responds to the process of reading historical fiction. Hodgkin rightly asserts that contemporary historical fiction frequently underlines the apparent connections between chronologically separate lives and experiences through the use of 'dual temporalities', a device through which the interrelationship of past and present 'is self-consciously and self-reflexively foregrounded through interlocking stories' (p. 16); such stories establish the relationship between periods most often through women. The examples cited range from Rose Tremain's *Restoration* and Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (both published in 1989) to Stevie Davies's novel *Impassioned Clay* (1999). It is to the last of these that Hodgkin attributes the emergence of her own interest in the fundamental relationship between historical fact and historical fiction, reality and imagination. While critical of aspects of Davies's novel and its apparent gestures towards popular misconceptions of the three types of seventeenth-century woman highlighted in Hodgkin's title (the witch, the Puritan, the prophet), the chapter is nevertheless not so much concerned with dismissing the drive behind historical fiction writing as with raising problems over what such novels 'can or should do' (p. 22).

Sarah Gamble's chapter on Angela Carter's posthumous short-story collection *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (1993) is connected to Hodgkin's approach in that she too is interested in the places where slippages occur in the nature of the writing of historical fiction. As Gamble argues, Carter's narratives do not allow for the possibility for an escape from one's past because it is in one's (hi)stories that the core of identity is formed and found. This, rather than 'politics or culture', is the essential barrier which prevents New World settlers escaping from the individual pasts that tie them to the Old World.

'Falling Off the Edge of the World' by Sherry Booth explores the novel *Ana Historic* (1988) by the Australian-born Canadian author Daphne Marlatt. The novel, Booth argues, raises questions about the nature of

historical truth and fiction as much as about the nature of literary texts themselves. Interestingly, Booth reads Marlatt's exploration of identity and individual history, documentation and (in)authenticity as also partly a challenge to a postmodern world in which the concept of 'History' rests uneasily. Theory and its focus on group mentality rather than individual identity are critiqued both in the novel and in Booth's discussion, an approach which opens up new questions about the study of story in relation to history.

One of the more influential feminist and theoretical approaches to the relationship between women and history is Julia Kristeva's 'Women's Time' (1979). This essay also provides an important way into historical fiction for Julia Tofantšuk's contribution on Eva Figes's fiction. Tofantšuk's argument centres round the idea that Figes's female characters are part of a 'movement . . . from or towards history' (p. 61). Reading Figes's three novels *Days* (1974), *Nelly's Version* (1977) and *The Tree of Knowledge* (1990) as a single text and the female characters as aspects of an individual woman, the chapter argues that the female protagonist is 'frozen in the static no-time that Kristeva describes, but she also inhabits the "real time" of history, or *her* story, the story of betrayal, seduction, and loss, which embraces three generations of women and makes them one' (p. 63). Perceiving women as trapped in an inescapable eternity of 'herstories', Figes plays with the idea of the female as surviving, like Scheherazade, through the telling of tales.

The fact that Figes uses real historical personages in her texts, such as Milton's daughter in *The Tree of Knowledge*, connects her work to other writers who blur the boundaries between the factual individual and their fictionally reclaimed voice. Rachel Morley's chapter, 'From Demidenko to Darville', which concludes this section, shares this theme but is distinctly different from the other contributions to this volume in that the public blurring of fiction and reality, truth and fabrication, lie at its very heart. Exploring the case of Helen Demidenko/Helen Darville/Helen D, an Australian writer who 'faked' her supposed family history as a descendant of a Ukrainian Holocaust survivor, the chapter highlights how aspects of the public furore surrounding Darville's attempt to market her vivid imaginings as oral history reveal important elements of wider social and cultural factors in Australians' sense of a collective and shared past.

Part II, 'Historiographic Re-visionings', engages in more depth than the chapters in Part I with Linda Hutcheon's influential concept of 'historiographic metafiction' in conjunction with Adrienne Rich's notion of feminist cultural 're-vision'.¹⁹ The chapters in this section