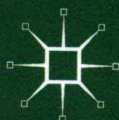


The Female Figure  
in Contemporary  
Historical Fiction



Edited by Katherine Cooper & Emma Short



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Katherine Cooper

and

Emma Short



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*For our parents*

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# Notes on Contributors

**Kym Brindle** was awarded her Arts and Humanities Research Council funded Ph.D. from Lancaster University. Her thesis explored epistolary strategies in neo-Victorian fiction. She teaches a range of courses as an Associate Lecturer at Edge Hill University and Lancaster University. Her article, 'Diary as Queer Malady: Deflecting the Gaze in Sarah Waters's *Affinity*', was published in the Winter 2009/2010 edition of the journal *Neo-Victorian Studies*, and her essay 'Dead Words and Fatal Secrets: Rediscovering The Sensational Document in Neo-Victorian Gothic' will appear in 2012 in the third volume of the Rodopi neo-Victorian series, *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence, and Degeneration in the Re-imagined Nineteenth Century*. She is presently working on a monograph entitled *Epistolary Encounters in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Diaries and Letters*, which will be published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2013.

**Amy Burge** is currently completing her AHRC-funded Ph.D. at the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of York. Entitled *Desiring the East: Middle English and Modern Popular Romance*, Amy's thesis focuses on the articulation of desire between 'east' and 'west' against a background of heightened tension and conflict between the western world and the Middle East. The thesis considers several Middle English romances from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (including *Bevis of Hampton*, *Floris and Blancheflur* and *The King of Tars*), and a number of twenty-first-century Mills & Boon 'Modern Romance' novels featuring sheikh heroes.

**Katherine Cooper** is a third-year AHRC-funded Ph.D. candidate and part-time tutor at Newcastle University. Her thesis evaluates presentations of nation in Margaret Storm Jameson's fiction of World War II. Her research interests include feminism and gender studies, nation and national identity in women's writing, women writing war and the figure of the refugee in literature.

**Julie Crane** is a Teaching Fellow in the department of English Studies at Durham University. She has interests over a wide range of literary periods and genres, and has written articles on Defoe, Johnson and Thomas Chatterton. She is interested in the fiction and forgery of the eighteenth century, and in the development of the novel, especially in how unexpected presences and voices come to shape that development. She is also interested in the historical novel, its status and its flexibility.

**Anna Gething** completed her Ph.D. at the University of Exeter in 2007 on abjection and aesthetics in contemporary women's fiction. She has since taught at the University of Reading and Bath Spa University. Research interests include contemporary women's writing, feminist and gender studies, postcolonial writing, and the senses in literature. Recent publications include contributions to *Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture* (Taylor & Francis, 2009), *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), *Rites of Passage in Postcolonial Women's Writing* (Rodopi, 2010), *Senses and Society* (Berg, 2010) and *Women on Screen: Feminism and Femininity in Visual Culture* (Palgrave, 2011).

**Siân Harris** is a Teaching Fellow in Writing and Research at the University of Exeter. She received her Ph.D. from Newcastle University in 2009. Her research focused on the female *Künstlerroman* narrative in twentieth-century Canadian fiction, and the concerns about gender, genre and creative identities that provoked her doctoral thesis continue to provide the catalyst for her research career to date. Siân is particularly interested in charting the ways in which writers exploit or engage with cultural preconceptions of authorship, and she has also published on detective fiction, children's literature and popular culture.

**Theresa Jamieson** has recently completed a Ph.D. in English Literature at the University of Hull. She currently teaches at Coventry University. Her principal research interests lie in the field of nineteenth-century literature, neo-Victorian fiction, women's writing and revisionary fiction. Previous essays have appeared in issues of *Neo-Victorian Studies* and *Victorian Network*.

**Nadine Muller** completed her Ph.D. on feminism and twenty-first-century neo-Victorian fiction at the University of Hull and currently teaches at the University of Brunel and the University of Salford. Her research specialisms lie in contemporary feminist theory and practice, neo-Victorianism, twenty-first-century women's fiction and Victorian literature and culture, and she has authored and (co)-edited several publications in these areas. As well as preparing her thesis monograph, Nadine has been working on her post-doctoral project, *The Widow in British Literature*.

**Claire O'Callaghan** is a Ph.D. candidate and part-time tutor in the School of English at the University of Leicester. Claire teaches (and has taught) contemporary poetry, contemporary women's writing and the women's movement, and reading neo-Victorian fiction. Her doctoral thesis focuses on the work of contemporary novelist Sarah Waters,

on whom she has also published. Claire is a member of the Executive Committee of the Feminist and Women's Studies Association.

**Susan Sellers** is Professor of English and Related Literature at the University of St Andrews. She has published extensively on French feminist theory and twentieth-century and contemporary women's writing, including the work of writer and theorist Hélène Cixous, and is co-general editor of the Cambridge University Press edition of Virginia Woolf's work, and volume editor of Woolf's novel *The Waves*. Susan's fiction includes *Vanessa and Virginia* (Two Ravens and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008 and 2009), a novel about the relationship between sisters Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf. The novel has been adapted as a stage play.

**Emma Short** is a Teaching and Research Assistant at Newcastle University. She received her Ph.D. from Newcastle University in 2012. Her thesis explored the hotel in modernist women's writing, and considered it alongside theories of place and the body in order to interrogate the ways in which this space challenges conceptions of home and belonging. Emma is particularly interested in the spaces of women's writing, and her next research project considers the connections between accounts of British women travellers and literary representations of travel in the narratives of modernist women writers. Emma has also published on Katherine Mansfield and Elizabeth Bowen.

**Alice Thompson** read English at Oxford University. She is the author of several novels including: *Justine* (1996), winner of the James Tait Memorial Prize for fiction; *Pandora's Box* (1998); *Pharos* (2002) and *The Falconer* (2008). She was formerly Writer in Residence for Shetland, and in 2000 won a Creative Scotland Award. She teaches creative writing at the Avron Foundation. Her latest novel is *The Existential Detective* (2010), a literary detective story set in Edinburgh's Portobello.

**Diana Wallace** is Professor of English Literature at the University of Glamorgan where her teaching and research focus on women's writing, particularly historical fiction. She is the author of *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900–2000* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), *Sisters and Rivals in British Women's Fiction, 1914–39* (Macmillan, 2000) and co-editor (with Andrew Smith) of *The Female Gothic: New Directions* (2009). Her most recent book, *Female Gothic Histories: Gender, History and the Gothic*, is forthcoming with University of Wales Press.



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# Introduction: Histories and heroines: the female figure in contemporary historical fiction

*Katherine Cooper and Emma Short*

The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars and pestilences in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all — it is very tiresome.

Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1817)

In recent years, the female figure in history has become increasingly visible – previously obscured, she is now palpable, multidimensional, and undeniably present. This figure has flourished in contemporary fiction, the authors of which have worked to establish her as central to historical narratives in a range of both fictional and factual scenarios. This collection explores the female figure in recent historical fiction: the tremendous success of writers such as Philippa Gregory, Kate Mosse and Sarah Waters is testament to the fact that the female figure is now not only desirable but also marketable. The collection interrogates the growth of the contemporary historical fiction genre by examining the implications of these new narratives for contemporary gender politics. Part I, 'Historical Women: Revisioning Real Lives', contains chapters which interrogate recent recastings of real women, such as Anne Boleyn, Clara Schumann and Grace Marks, who have previously been misrepresented in historical discourses. Part II, 'Imagined Histories: Romancing Fictional Heroines', concentrates on the gender politics inherent in representations of fictional women and their sexuality. Finally, Part III, 'Rewriting History: Reasserting the Female', discusses the implications of such representations, reflecting on these repeated rewritings of history in terms of feminism, postmodernism and metafiction, and developing an understanding of the way in which these female figures are received and interpreted within the context of historical fiction. We base our understanding of history as events prior to 1970, the breadth

of the collection reflecting, as we shall presently discuss, the wide range of historical periods which engage the imaginations of contemporary novelists and their readers.

### **The historical female figure**

Historical fiction has been a popular genre throughout the history of the novel, one which has often been associated with a female readership, and with traditionally feminine concerns such as love, romance and domestic intrigue. These assumed links between women, love and romance mean that the genre has rarely been perceived as historically accurate, with its setting in the past considered to be little more than a plot device adding intrigue and novelty. As Diana Wallace writes, the tendency for critics 'has been to associate women's historical novels with romance and thus to stigmatize it as escapist'.<sup>1</sup> The reinvention of historical fiction by Sir Walter Scott in the eighteenth century served to further compound this link between the women's historical novel and romance and/or historical inaccuracy by setting up a clear and heavily gendered distinction within the genre. Scott's novels – the adventure stories of *Rob Roy* (1817) and *Ivanhoe* (1819) – were aimed largely at a male audience, and emphasis was placed on their basis in historical fact. The previous forays of women into the genre – such as that of the author Maria Edgeworth, whose historical novel *Castle Rackrent* was published in 1800, some fourteen years before Scott's first foray into the genre with *Waverley* (1814) – were widely dismissed, as Wallace describes, as romantic escapism. Work on historical fiction subsequently referred to Scott as a benchmark for the genre, and traditional critics have tended to concentrate predominantly on the work of male authors, often appraising historical novels entirely on the basis of their historical accuracy and depiction of the traditionally male spheres of politics and war. These critics were often dismissive of what they termed 'escapism of the popular type',<sup>2</sup> which veered toward romance, fantasy or deviated in any way from professed historical accuracy. As such, there was a marked preference for narratives featuring male agency and female passivity, and in many of these texts men were lauded as great explorers, heroes and adventurers, while female figures, real or imagined, were marginalized, and featured solely as romantic interests. The associations of men with accuracy and historical fact perpetuated the view that women's writing (or writing for women) was somehow automatically historically inaccurate and trivial, and indeed, as Wallace points out in Chapter 12 of this collection, contemporary historians continue to undermine

the value of both women's history and women's histories. As a result, female historical figures were and are understood solely through male-authored narratives. This inherent bias further cultivates the view of history, *history*, as the preserve of the male, and problematizes historical fiction by, for and about women.

While the genre has remained popular with both male and female audiences since the publication of Scott's novels, recent historical fiction has become increasingly dominated by female authors writing for a largely female readership. From Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) to Kate Williams's *The Pleasures of Men* (2012), these historical novels are not only written by women, but female historical figures play central and active roles in their plots. Moreover, a good number of these, such as Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2003), represent a fictionalized account of the life of a real woman (or women), providing a counter-narrative to the male-authored histories which precede them. Gregory in particular joins a growing tradition of female historians and writers who play upon, add to, and knowingly embellish the life of Boleyn and her sister, and who thereby critique claims to authenticity and accuracy made by male historians and writers. Part I of this collection explores the ways in which contemporary historical fiction recovers the lives of these real women. By placing the female historical figure at the centre of their narratives, and by exploring her sexuality and her agency, novels such as Gregory's re-appraise and reassert the role of the woman in history. As Julie Crane suggests in Chapter 4 on Boleyn, women have been portrayed according to male political requirements and interests, and Boleyn has been variously described, Crane notes, as harlot, witch, victim, queen and whore. Similarly, Theresa Jamieson highlights in Chapter 1 the way in which female figures are often erased from history, citing Clara Schumann – a woman whose talent and success as a pianist in her own lifetime eclipsed that of her composer husband, Robert, but who has since enjoyed none of her spouse's continued acclaim – as an example of this. The fictional reimaginings of the lives explored in this collection are, therefore, viewed as a feminist intervention – a way of restoring female figures to their place in history.

Many of these fictional reimaginings seek not only to reinterpret the roles of women like Schumann and Boleyn in wider historical discourse, but they also represent an interjection into previous portrayals. Those female figures who have received significant attention in both factual and fictional historical accounts have frequently been misrepresented, or often simply misunderstood. Women such as Canadian murderess Grace Marks have, for example, received significant amounts of

attention, but their characters have frequently been misread and misrepresented on the basis of their gender. It is a sense of the injustice of this misrepresentation, combined with a personal curiosity, which drives novelists such as Margaret Atwood and Janice Galloway – writing respectively on Marks and Schumann – to intervene and publish fictionalized, alternative accounts of these women. Indeed, as Emma Short points out in Chapter 2 on Jean Rhys, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, female novelists themselves do not escape misrepresentation, and are often victims of a cultural tendency to demarcate female genius as both exceptional and unsustainable. Short's discussion of the way in which the majority of literary representations of these authors focus upon the apparent fragility of their mental health rather than upon their artistic talents calls into question the reliability of traditional accounts of real historical women. As such, this collection explores not only the ways in which historical fiction intervenes in these misrepresentations, casting doubt upon accepted notions of historical accuracy and authenticity, but also the way in which it can, often simultaneously, operate to reinforce popular myths surrounding the female figure in history.

This renewed potential within the genre for feminist reimaginings has inspired a wealth of critical work around women's historical fiction, with implications for a wide range of disciplines and theoretical schools. Other work has explored historical fiction from a range of cultural, epistemological and historical positions. This is significant, coming as it does after a lengthy period during which historical fiction, particularly that by or about women or what might be considered women's issues, has been largely disregarded by critics and readers in favour of more high-brow or 'worthy' accounts such as biography. From Wallace's account of the woman's historical novel throughout the twentieth century (2005) to Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's analysis of the contemporary historical novel as metafiction (2009), the genre has been substantially re-evaluated. Cross-disciplinary critical work has also explored issues of genre, costume,<sup>3</sup> and national identity<sup>4</sup> within historical fiction itself. This wealth of work has helped to (re-) establish female-led historical fiction as a key area of study within cultural studies.<sup>5</sup>

## Heroines of the postmodern

The reimaginings of historical women, and the ways in which they are represented to a contemporary audience, offer a key opportunity to reassess what Deborah Cartmell and I.Q. Hunter refer to in their

discussions of adaptation as 'the general shift nowadays toward cultural and epistemological relativism'.<sup>6</sup> For many, this 'relativism' forms part of an overall trend which both allows for and perpetuates these fictional retellings of the female historical figure. Readers and audiences no longer expect to find a verifiable – or, occasionally, a recognizable – history within these narratives. No longer discouraged by the question of historical accuracy and attention to detail which fascinated more conservative critics and authors, contemporary readers are able to suspend their disbelief, and seem unconcerned as to whether the narratives they consume are factual or fictional. The basis of Atwood's novel *Alias Grace* on the diaries of Marks adds an additional grisly dimension to the enjoyment of the text but, as Kym Brindle points out in Chapter 3, it really enables Atwood herself to undermine the binary of fact and fiction: as Brindle suggests, Atwood's novel actually subverts the existing authorial voices telling Marks's story (even that of Marks herself) in order to collapse the dualism between fact and fiction, history and art. Historical fiction such as Atwood's demonstrates an awareness of the postmodern, a questioning of authority and grand narratives, allowing for the reinsertion of marginalized but genuine figures, such as Boleyn, Marks and Schumann, within historical narratives, and encouraging new approaches both to these figures and to historical and contemporary attitudes to gender.

The association of the postmodern with challenges to accepted ideas of authority, authenticity and truth has been usefully employed as a critical apparatus for examining these revisionary historical fictions. Critics such as Diane Elam have successfully used the postmodern as a way of deciphering the discourses of authenticity and inauthenticity surrounding these texts. As Jeanette King observes, 'Since historians cannot use the actual past as a standard for historical accounts, but have to rely on someone's narrative – oral or documentary – postmodernists argue that history can only ever be contested versions of the past.'<sup>7</sup> Any consideration of the 'real' historical female figure must acknowledge the contested nature of narratives surrounding her, as it is she who has been manipulated by male-authored and/or patriarchal accounts of history. What contemporary historical fiction now demonstrates more clearly than ever is an acute awareness of this fact that history, by its very nature, is always already fictional, and that it is always subject to bias. King adds that this tendency to blend 'historical documentation with its imagined narratives and characters ... relates the new historical fiction to postmodern trends in historiography itself',<sup>8</sup> and that it is precisely this lack of authenticity – the absence of any kind of original



truth or unity – which marks contemporary historical fiction as a genre which is unquestionably postmodern. This undecidability leaves room for the female figure to be reasserted, and, as such, it is the postmodern element in historical fiction that creates a space within its narratives for precisely the sort of revision undertaken by the authors addressed in this collection.

The further we are removed from the original events on which these fictions are based, and the more versions of those events there are from which to choose, the more impossible it becomes to discern which of these versions might be understood as the most accurate, or the most authentic. The rate of production of historical fictions has accelerated dramatically over the past twenty years in order to cater to the demands of the contemporary readership. Further, post-Fordist processes of mass production can be seen to influence not only the profusion of representations of these historical figures across a range of media, but also to explain the desensitizing of the reading public to their authenticity. Readers are happy to suspend their disbelief in order to explore alternative depictions and/or modern adaptations of narratives with which they are already familiar, and are well versed in recognizing and processing different interpretations, as well as reading these interpretations in terms of their symbolic references to both authentic imagery and fictionalized embellishments. Although arguably all historical fiction marks a fictionalized re-telling, it seems that these modern fictions are confident to move much further from the perceived or accepted truths about certain times and personages. Modern readers are wholly unperturbed by narratives such as Gregory's heavily fictionalized re-imagining of the life of Anne Boleyn, in which the author elevates the levels of passion and intrigue in an already familiar history.<sup>9</sup>

Acknowledging that historical fictions are created and marketed to fulfil the needs and desires of an audience need not necessarily render defunct any serious critical work on the genre. Rather, recognition of this fact enables an analysis which aims to interrogate the themes and subject matter of texts within the genre to determine precisely what about them appeals to a contemporary reader, and, more importantly, what this reveals about readers themselves. Historical fiction, argues Wallace in *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900–2000*, often reveals more about the time in which it is written than the time in which it is set, and she suggests that 'our representations of the past tell us a good deal about the most powerful ideologies of the present'.<sup>10</sup> The contributors to this collection, as well as considering the portrayal of the female figure within these texts, also consider