



A. S. BYATT

ON HISTORIES AND STORIES



Selected Essays



# On Histories and Stories

*Selected Essays*

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For Ron and Keith Schuchard

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# Introduction

These essays are about the complicated relations between reading, writing, and the professional and institutional study of literature. They are a writer's essays. I am a writer, and have always seen myself primarily as a writer, though I taught English and American Literature full-time in University College London, between 1972 and 1984, and have taught literature at various times to adult classes and to art students. I have never taught 'creative writing'. I think I see teaching good reading as the best way of encouraging, and making possible, good writing.

I was honoured and happy when Professor Schuchard at Emory University invited me to give the Richard Ellmann memorial lectures. Richard Ellmann was a great and generous critic, and Professor Schuchard made it clear in his invitation that the lectures were designed to keep alive a tradition of good criticism in language available to the common reader as well as to the professional academic. Professor Peter Brooks at Yale invited me at the same time to give the Finzi-Contini lecture there. The Finzi-Contini lecture is designed to explore the relations between English-language literatures and European literatures. This invitation too excited me, since I see myself increasingly as a European writer, and have become more and more interested in contemporary European writing. I saw the three Emory lectures and the Yale lecture as an opportunity to think on a broad front about what was going on in contemporary writing, British and European.

The formal study of writing by living authors is a very recent

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phenomenon, which has exploded during my writing life. The study of English literature itself is less than a century old. My mother studied English in its early days at Cambridge under I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis, who was certainly the most powerful force in the Cambridge English of my own time. In those days, although in Cambridge we read T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence, the Oxford English course stopped at 1830, under the philological influence of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. Now not only university students but schoolchildren are taught and examined on the work of living writers. Many other writers, like myself, feel very ambivalent about this. To be part of a syllabus, to be required reading, to be carefully read and discussed ensures that one's books remain in print, and have a life of their own. But the study of living writers has coincided with intense politicised fervours of various kinds in the academic community. Novels are taught if they appear to have something to contribute to the debate about 'women's writing' or 'feminism' or 'post-colonial studies' or 'postmodernism'. All this is lively and stimulating and interesting. But, as George Steiner wisely pointed out, making syllabuses, which is a political activity, is different from making a canon. A canon (which is not immutable) is (I think) what other writers have wanted to keep alive, to go on reading, over time. There is always a fear that good books may slip through the net of syllabuses, or disappear when political priorities change. Or never get noticed at all.

When I left university there were, I think, two books on contemporary British fiction, both of which concentrated on novels which reported on the class struggle, social change, and the provinces. (William Cooper, John Wain, C.P. Snow, Alan Sillitoe, David Storey.) Those of us who taught evening classes started out at least with those books. I remember meeting an older lecturer in the City Literary Institute and asking him what he was teaching. He said he was teaching Sybille Bedford's *A Legacy*. I had never heard of it. He said I wouldn't have. It didn't fit any syllabus. It was simply a masterpiece, idiosyncratic – and as it happens, historical and European. I read it and saw he was right. Equally, I was then teaching David Storey's *Radcliffe*, which superficially fitted the paradigm of class struggle in the provinces. That too is a masterpiece, a fierce, terrible, violent European masterpiece, whose debts to *Madame Bovary* and *The Idiot* are



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more startling and extraordinary than its debts to Emily Brontë. I don't meet many people now who have read it. Its paradigm has been replaced by others, and by a new wave of assertions that English literature never reports on the provinces, is purely metropolitan. (This is a phenomenon I don't understand – the 1950s novelists did nothing that had not already and more profoundly been done by D.H. Lawrence and Arnold Bennett. Who in turn learned from George Eliot, the Brontës and Elizabeth Gaskell.)

I think those of us who write about modern writing have a duty to keep the discussion open and fluent and very broad-based. We need to create new paradigms, which will bring new books, new styles, new preoccupations to the attention of readers. We don't know what novels of this year, or last, or of ten years ago, will be being read in fifty years – if any of them will. We need to keep thinking of new – even deliberately provisional – ways to read and to compare what we have read.

My Richard Ellmann lectures are about British – largely English – novels about history. Wherever I go in Europe, as well as in Britain, there are seminars on post-colonial writing where Salman Rushdie's wit about the Empire Writing Back is quoted, and his assertion that British writing before the Empire Wrote Back was moribund and that contemporary British writing is desperately in need of enlivening, is accepted without question. The Irish have their own debate about whether Irish writing can be assimilated to post-colonial writing. They are better Europeans than the English, and they argue beautifully and passionately. They, too, are happy to suppose that English writing can be dismissed. I think that a body of writing that included Burgess, Golding, Murdoch, and Lessing, to start with, carries weight. My paradigm is designed to complicate the discussion a little. Writers are writing historical novels, but much of the discussion of *why* they are doing this has been confined within the discussions of Empire or Women, or to the debate between 'escapism' and 'relevance'. It's not so simple, as I hope I've shown. And I hope I've also managed to make a new map – not a completely new map, of course – of recent British writing, with perhaps Anthony Burgess and Penelope Fitzgerald, William Golding, Muriel Spark and Lawrence Norfolk at the centre

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instead of some of the others. I've written about Martin Amis and Julian Barnes, but I've also talked about John Fuller and Robert Irwin, writers hard to fit into existing paradigms, but wonderful to read.

There is a long list of writers I greatly admire and should ideally have written about as well – from J.G. Ballard whose grand *The Empire of the Sun* is an essential part of the fictive reconstruction of the lived history of the second world war, to Tibor Fischer's reconstruction of the Communist Hungary of his parents' generation in *Under The Frog* which makes an interesting comparison with the wartime stories of the Barnes-Swift generation. I might have needed a whole chapter on the profound and complex fables of Kazuo Ishiguro about the confusions and reconstructions of the post-war world, starting in Japan, and moving, book by book from Britain and Germany in *The Remains of the Day* to central Europe in *The Unconsoled* and Shanghai and the Far East in *When We were Orphans*. Fischer and Ishiguro can look at British life from inside and outside, and are different from both the post-colonial and the purely 'British' writers.

Penelope Fitzgerald's novels have turned out to be central to all my themes. The story of her reputation is particularly illuminating. For a long time it was kept alive by the passionate admiration of other writers. In academic summaries of the state of modern British fiction she appeared uneasily in lists of secondary women. The French know everything about Barbara Pym, whose English quaintness responds to their stereotypes of Englishness, but Fitzgerald's far more ambitious, far wiser, far more complex novels are ignored in their discussions of cross-Channel writing.

'Old Tales, New Forms' springs from a writerly preoccupation I turned into a scholarly one. I found myself wanting to write tales and stories, having described myself in my early days as a 'self-conscious realist', and slowly came to see that the alternative tradition of the literary tale, or fairy tale, and the related anecdote was one of the things that made it possible to talk meaningfully about European literature, as opposed to national literatures. It is a historical pre-occupation – Homer and Ovid and Norse myth are still living forces in much of Europe – and it is very modern, as works like Magris's magnificent *Danube* weave together history, geography, folklore, natural history, anecdote and myth. I rediscovered the European

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literary tale, going back to Goethe, Hoffman and Hans Andersen, and the new versions, at once archaic and postmodern, of Karen Blixen and Italo Calvino. My essay on the *Thousand and One Nights* for the *New York Times*'s millennial issue fitted nicely into this research – and this delicious reading – and I have included it, with its extra-European elements. I have also included a personal essay I was asked to write by Kate Bernheimer for *Mirror Mirror on the Wall* (Anchor Books, 1998) in which women writers explored their favourite fairy tales. I chose the imagery of fire, ice and mirrors, and that seems to sit happily next to Scheherazade.

'True Stories and the Facts in Fiction' was originally given as a paper at All Souls College in Oxford, as part of a series arranged by the historian Scott Mandelbrote on the writing of history. I was preoccupied with the writing of the two novellas in *Angels and Insects*, which I had just finished. These tales grew out of the literature I had been teaching at University College, and involved a great deal of historical research. I was also preoccupied with the encroachments being made by literary criticism into the forms of creative writing – such as fantasy dialogues in biographies, or complicated puns as a required part of a critical style. At the same time I thought I discerned an impossible desire for scholarly exactness in good fiction writers – like dancers changing places in an eighteenth-century dance. My essay is a personal essay about exactness and invention, the borderlines between fiction and history, and the relations of both to criticism.

I should finally like to say something about the style of these essays. I quote extensively and at length. I tell the stories of books, I describe plots. When I first studied English, extensive quotation was a necessary part of the work of the critic. I.A. Richards showed his students that they were not really reading the words as they were written. He diagnosed and exposed stock responses. And whatever Leavis's faults of dogmatic dismissal, irascibility or prescriptiveness, he was a quoter of genius, and I increasingly look on my early reading of – and reading around, and following up of – those quotations as the guarantee, the proof, that we were all indeed engaged in the common pursuit of true judgment. The criticism we studied in those early days was still predominantly the criticism of practising *writers*, demonstrating their



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delight in their craft, and in the craft of their predecessors. The paper I studied for at Cambridge on the history and theory of criticism allowed me to concentrate on writers thinking about the forms they used, and the nature of good writing – Henry James, Coleridge, T.S. Eliot, Arnold and his touchstones. It was a form of civilised discourse and communication between readers and writers.

Two things have happened since then. One is that so much study has been done that readers of criticism tend to see quotation as merely the good student proving that he or she has read the text in question. The other is literary theory. Most critical texts nowadays are full of quotations, but not from poems or novels. They are from critical authorities, theorists, Freud, Marx, Derrida, Foucault. All this is exciting, too. But it has led critics and theorists to make writers fit into the boxes and nets of theoretical quotations which, a writer must feel, excite most of them at present much more than literature does. Frank Kermode is not alone in deprecating the disappearance of a taste for poetry. Many writers, and some critics, feel that powerful figures in the modern critical movements feel almost a gladiatorial antagonism to the author and the authority the author claims. I think this has led to a new energy and playfulness in writers. My generation were oppressed, as well as encouraged, in their early days by the moral expectations and moral authority of Leavis or Trilling. I think many younger ones feel no relation at all to the world of academic criticism, which has moved far away from their concerns. This distance can be experienced as a space of freedom. And, more than that, an opportunity to re-establish relations with readers at large, who are spending more and more time discussing books – all sorts of books – in the vulgar tongues and frank language of every day, in book clubs. Or writing messages to the Internet and reviews on Internet bookshop pages.

I have always known that a wise writer should understand that all readers skip, and will skip. I think, unfortunately, most readers skip most quotations these days, thinking wrongly that they know them, or ought to, already. It isn't so. Good writing is always new. My quotations are like the slides in an art historical lecture – they are the Thing Itself, which is in danger of being crushed under a weight of commentary. Criticism has become a power game – I like the old forms, where the writers criticised had space to be read, not paraphrased.

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It was therefore unfortunate to discover, at a late stage, that Graham Swift refuses absolutely to grant permission for quotation. This is of course his right. It has led to the loss of some elegant and subtle sentences, and some truncation and summarising, which I regret.

I am grateful to Peg Fulton, at the Harvard University Press, and to Jenny Uglow at Chatto & Windus, for the opportunity to bring together the Ellmann Lectures, the Finzi-Contini lecture, and my more personal pieces. I am also grateful for their advice and help. Gill Marsden has performed her usual magic of precision, patience, order and questioning what needed to be questioned, with a more than usually difficult agglomeration of texts and disks. The book is dedicated to Professor Schuchard, who made my visit to Emory both instructive and delightful – and bakes a pig like no one I have ever met. Also to his wife, Keith, whose Swedenborgian scholarship amazed me and whose hospitality was thoughtful and unfailing.





# Fathers

During my working life as a writer, the historical novel has been frowned on, and disapproved of, both by academic critics and by reviewers. In the 1950s the word 'escapism' was enough to dismiss it, and the idea conjured up cloaks, daggers, crinolined ladies, ripped bodices, sailing ships in bloody battles. It can also be dismissed as 'pastoral'. My sister, Margaret Drabble, in an address to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, spoke out against the 'nostalgia/heritage/fancy dress/costume drama industry'. She believes passionately that it is the novelist's duty to write about the present, to confront an age which is 'ugly, incomprehensible, and subject to rapid mutations'. This is largely the position of reviewers of shortlists for literary prizes, who ask disapprovingly, 'Where are the serious depictions of the contemporary life?' These essays are not an answer to those reasonable questions, though I think it can be argued that the 'historical' novel has proved more durable, in my lifetime, than many urgent fictive confrontations of immediate contemporary reality. I think it is worth looking at the sudden flowering of the historical novel in Britain, the variety of its forms and subjects, the literary energy and real inventiveness that has gone into it. I want to ask, why has history become imaginable and important again? Why are these books not costume drama or nostalgia?

The renaissance of the historical novel has coincided with a complex selfconsciousness about the writing of history itself. Hayden White<sup>1</sup> begins his book about history and narrative with a quotation from Roland Barthes, who said that 'narrative is simply there, like

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life itself . . . international, transhistorical, transcultural'. White is interested in the refusal of narrative by contemporary historians, who are sensitive to the selective, ideological shapes produced by the narrator, the narrator's designs and beliefs. Historians like Simon Schama have recently made very deliberate attempts to restore narration, and a visible narrator, to history. Schama's *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* appeared after his best-selling histories of the Dutch Golden Age and the French Revolution. It was characterised as a 'novel' and was in fact a patchwork of interrelated histories – the death of James Wolfe at the battle of Quebec in 1759, and the 1849 murder in Boston of George Parkman, the historian, whose nephew was to write Wolfe's biography. In this factual fiction, which made many readers very uneasy and unsettled, Schama mixed his own inventions and speculations into the historical facts. Other writers, particularly biographers, have taken up such hybrid and selfconscious narrative devices. Peter Ackroyd, in his biography of Dickens, and D.J. Taylor in his biography of Thackeray, have inserted imaginary dialogues between subject and biographer. Richard Holmes invents a new form for each of his life-stories, beginning with the wonderful *Footsteps*, which connects Mary Wollstonecraft, Stevenson, the Shelleys and de Nerval, with tantalising and oblique revelations of Holmes's own autobiographical reasons for choosing these particular subjects to follow and imagine. My own short novel, *The Biographer's Tale*, is about these riddling links between autobiography, biography, fact and fiction (and lies). It follows a poststructuralist critic who decides to give up, and write a coherent life-story of one man, a great biographer. But all he finds are fragments of other random lives – Linnaeus, Galton, Ibsen – overlapping human stories which make up the only available tale of the biographer. It is a tale of the lives of the dead which make up the imagined worlds of the living. It is a study of the aesthetics of inventing, or re-inventing, or combining real and imaginary human beings.

Beyond the serious aesthetic and philosophical study of the forms of history in the last decade, lay a series of cultural prohibitions derived from intellectual beliefs about life as a cultural product. We cannot know the past, we are told – what we think we know is only our own projection of our own needs and preoccupations onto what we read and

reconstruct. Ideology blinds. All interpretations are provisional, therefore any interpretation is as good as any other – truth is a meaningless concept, and all narratives select and distort. Hayden White is wise about the narrative energy Fredric Jameson's Marxist analysis of history derives from the narrative nature of the Marxist account of reality itself. 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle . . .' Jameson says. Marxism is a master narrative whose amplitude allows us to 'unite all the individual stories of societies, groups and cultures into a single great story', White comments. He quotes Jameson on modern life as 'a single great collective story . . . the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity . . . vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot . . .'<sup>2</sup>

I think the fact that we have in some sense been forbidden to think about history is one reason why so many novelists have taken to it. The sense of a new possibility of narrative energy, as I said, is another. Recent historical novels cover almost every time, from the Neanderthal to the Second World War, from mediaeval monks to nineteenth-century scientists, from Restoration beaux to French revolutionaries. It could be argued that the novelists are trying to find historical paradigms for contemporary situations – Rose Tremain has said that she sees the England of the restoration of Charles II as an analogy for Thatcher's Britain, and novels about the French Revolution may have something to say about the revolutionary atmosphere of the 1960s. It may be argued that we cannot understand the present if we do not understand the past that preceded and produced it. This is certainly true of the war novels I shall discuss in this essay. 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.

One very powerful impulse towards the writing of historical novels has been the political desire to write the histories of the marginalised, the forgotten, the unrecorded. In Britain this has included the histories of blacks and women, and the whole flourishing and brilliant culture of the post-colonial novel, from Rushdie's India and Pakistan, through Caryl Phillips's novel of slavery, *Cambridge*, and Timothy Mo's