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ARTICLES (PEER REVIEWED)

Interpreting History Through Fiction: Three Writers Discuss their Methods

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Introduction

In November 2021, Professor Emerita Barbara Brookes (University of Otago) chaired us – Thom Conroy, Joanna Grochowicz and Cristina Sanders – for a session of the New Zealand Historical Association Conference entitled ‘Learning History Through Fiction’. The online session was organised as a conversation in which Professor Brookes posed questions to us while we also quizzed one another. An extended Q&A followed, during which we had the opportunity to engage with a range of queries from conference participants. We panelists subsequently transformed the session into the article that follows.

As we found that the conversation format challenged our thinking in productive ways, we opted to retain it in the article. While we continued to consider history and fiction and the possibility of learning history from a creative text, as we planned our conversation over a series of Zoom meetings and emails, it became apparent that we were itching to expand the parameters of the discussion. In the article that follows, then, we range over a series of questions related to the intersection of history and fiction, including navigating the fact/fiction balance in creative historical writing, exploring concerns about the potential for harm in historical fiction, interrogating our motives for adopting a creative approach to history, and examining Hilary Mantel’s readerly ‘contract’ in historical fiction.¹

We did not strive for consensus in our conversation, nor did we try to answer every question we put to one another. In what follows, we have retained contradictions and disagreements to give a sense of the fluidity of the original discussion, and, more importantly, to hardwire our collective feeling of open-endedness into the conversation. The questions that shape our dialogue below remain poignant and active enquiries for each of us, and our answers, likewise, remain as provisional and contingent as the genre in which we write.

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The Conversation

If we agree that 'historical fiction' means a narrative set in the past that is a blend of factual research and fictional creativity, how do you find your fact/fiction balance?

Joanna Grochowicz (JG): As a writer of narrative non-fiction, my desire is to employ the narrative form to portray historical figures and events. I draw heavily on archival material – diaries, letters, drawings and photos, official journals, first-hand accounts, and speeches, as well as secondary sources such as published histories, the work of polar scholars and researchers. Dates, events, 'characters', and locations, the immutable facts as recorded in official narratives can 'take care of themselves'; where my work departs markedly from non-fiction (and perhaps this is where I am likely to attract the greatest scrutiny) is in my reimagining of dialogue. This is where writers and historians often part ways because a certain amount of invention must take place. However, given the sources I draw on, I feel confident that my version of particular episodes and historical characters is as close to the 'truth' as is possible. I'm not so much a filler-in of blanks as an arranger of known facts. If there is no evidence to support a detail, I will not include that detail in my work.

By and large private diaries provide a level of candour and honesty. Thoughts are expressed in a more direct, uncensored fashion than they would be in an official expedition narrative or correspondence, and reflections contained within their pages can offer a solid basis for an imagined inner monologue. Sometimes it is possible to find two people writing about the same episode from different points of view. When materials allow me to 'triangulate' – that is, pinpoint a discussion more accurately from multiple known points – then I feel as if I've hit the jackpot. For me, this is as close to achieving verisimilitude as I can come as an author. This makes for a very labour-intensive research phase. I feel the need for my work to carry historical validity, partly to adhere to my own code of conduct, partly to ensure my readers' historical understanding is not contaminated, and partly because I feel a responsibility towards the individuals depicted in my work (and their descendants) to avoid misrepresentations.

Cristina Sanders (CS): In his 1982 review in the *New York Times*, Paul Zweig comments that Thomas Keneally's brilliant *Schindler's List* 'reads like a novel... its scenes are so vivid they appear to result from a kind of ventriloquism'.² This is a lovely description of hitting the right balance between fact and fiction. Keneally himself, in an interview with reviewer Sue Lawson, admits that in his 2020 novel *The Dickens Boy* he messes about with the details of his real characters, adding scenes to fit the plot. When challenged by a critic that he stretched facts, he replied, 'Well that is the truth... where the facts are missing, I wasn't slow to supply them'.³

These gaps between the facts are a novelist's job to fill. Sometimes, though, it is the accepted facts themselves that I find problematic. Unlike Joanna, who has good reason to believe the veracity of records left by her famous characters, I have Jerningham Wakefield as the hero of my novel *Jerningham*.⁴ His glorious journals about the first colonial settlement of Wellington are my source material, but they do need sifting for truth. He was a highly opinionated man characterised by self-aggrandisement. And if he didn't let the truth ruin the telling of his story, why should I?

In *Mrs Jewell and the Wreck of the General Grant* I tell the story of a woman castaway on a sub-Antarctic island for eighteen months with fourteen men.⁵ The testimonies of the survivors mention her only once, merely stating she was 'the wife of Joseph Jewell'. What would she say if given a voice? There are many missing facts in her story but, in the spirit of Thomas Keneally, I haven't been slow to fill in the gaps.

Women also are the heroes in my story *Displaced*, all invented characters as their real-life equivalents are historically silent.⁶ Because much of history is recorded by the powerful, it is unusual to find complete records of those with less agency: minorities, women, children. Those stories, missing from our histories, can

be recreated from an interpretation of surrounding evidence, building a forensic recreation of a life and – because it is fiction and you can – skipping the boring bits.

Thom Conroy (TC): I think each creative project establishes its own terms, and these terms are connected to the subject matter, the conversation around the themes that you tackle, the form of the creative work, and your own goals. My historical novel *The Naturalist*, for example, recounts the life of the historical figure Dr Ernst Dieffenbach.⁷ Dieffenbach was born at Giessen in the Grand Duchy of Hesse in 1811. Exiled as a university student for participating in a revolutionary group espousing democracy, he earned a medical degree in Zurich, and eventually ended up in London where he signed on as a member of the New Zealand Company's colonial expedition in 1839.

During the eighteen months he spent in Aotearoa New Zealand, Dieffenbach became fluent in te reo Māori, made the first European ascent of a coastal mountain called Taranaki, explored much of the North Island of New Zealand, and joined a delegation acquiring signatures for the Treaty of Waitangi, the founding document of bicultural Aotearoa New Zealand. Upon his return to London, Dieffenbach published *Travels in New Zealand*, a two-volume book composed of a travel narrative of his time in Aotearoa New Zealand, a Māori ethnography, and the first non-missionary Māori grammar and dictionary.⁸

Unfortunately, Dieffenbach's forward-thinking views on the absolute equality of Māori and European marginalised his influence and consigned him to a footnote in New Zealand history. My original aim in turning to Dieffenbach, as the subject of an historical novel, was to elevate him out of the footnote and into the body text. I also aspired to add the example of Dieffenbach to conversations around New Zealand history and national identity.

For a book like *The Naturalist*, I took a strict line on historical accuracy. Dieffenbach's own *Travels in New Zealand* provided me with a chronology and a set cast of characters for the novel. Since I judged that the conversation on national identity in New Zealand was both significant and increasingly robust, I wanted to get every detail about Dieffenbach's time in Aotearoa New Zealand correct. Luckily for me, Dieffenbach's *Travels* did not wax poetic about the author's personal life. In fact, at one point he says directly that he had 'a great disinclination to describe personal incidents'.⁹ This disinclination, in turn, provided me with an *in* as a novelist. While I was determined to get all the historical details correct, I was equally determined to rely on my own imagination to manufacture the personal aspects of his story that were missing.

CS: Thom, I applaud your elevation of this modest and intelligent man into our modern debates about identity in Aotearoa New Zealand. Dieffenbach's *Travels* give a frame of reference to the era that was missed by those with a more commercial agenda. Dieffenbach's *Travels in New Zealand* in 1843 and Jerningham's *Adventures in New Zealand* in 1845 cover some of the same years in New Zealand, yet are very different works: the former careful, measured and, as you point out, light on personal incident, whereas Jerningham put his heroic deeds front and centre.

We each have rendered these men into works of fiction using their own journals tempered by many other sources that support or contradict their stories. You may have coloured in Dieffenbach's personal life while I toned Jerningham's down, but we have both come to a similar place on the continuum that is historical fiction.

JG: I'm intrigued that neither of you would consider using the term 'narrative non-fiction' nor 'creative non-fiction' when referring to *The Naturalist* or *Jerningham*, as to my mind we are all doing the same thing – writing about the lives of historical figures and drawing on documentary evidence and non-fiction sources. And yet you both insist on the term 'historical fiction'. Where does one draw the line? Is it a question of proportionality or degrees of truth or invention?

Thom, you say ‘I wanted to get every detail about Dieffenbach’s time in Aotearoa New Zealand correct’. That assertion aligns perfectly with my approach of adhering to historical accuracy. You even go so far as to source the cast of characters from Dieffenbach’s travel narrative, although there is naturally a requirement to round them out with invented characteristics and physical attributes. Where we differ is in your decision to embrace Dieffenbach’s reluctance to include personal material as an opportunity to recreate this side of him. Is this what nudges the work into the realm of ‘historical fiction’ for you? Did you ever experience a sense of unease when indulging in something Dieffenbach was so reluctant to do himself?

TC: This question of experiencing ‘a sense of unease when indulging in something Dieffenbach was so reluctant to do himself’ strikes me as addressing one of the key issues some readers have around historical fiction: *how should authors manage the fabricated aspects of the narrative?* Personally, I had no qualms in manufacturing the personal bits in *The Naturalist*, as I come to writing from a background in writing and teaching fiction, and inventing psychologies is second nature.

For me – and I know you may disagree, Joanna – an invented story cannot be distinguished in any absolute sense from a narrative scrupulously pieced together from facts. Both are premised on our pleasure in narrative experience; and narrative, in and of itself, distorts. Narrative is crucial to how we experience reality, but this experience is always ‘untrue’ on some level. Which is not to say that we don’t have an obligation to be forthright with readers, but I think this obligation is a duty predicated on overlooking the inevitable distortion that narrative lends to language as well as lived experience.

Are you worried that some readers may accept your fiction as fact, and does this mistake have the potential for harm?

CS: History, back in the days before it became ‘history’, was ‘experience’ for someone with a bias or dodgy eyesight, possibly stressed or sleep-deprived, or simply not in full control of their limited faculties. Their experience is then misinterpreted, reimagined, discussed, altered and retold by others until a historian gets their hands on the source material and manipulates the story to fit the parameters of an historical publication. Finally, a film is made featuring Mel Gibson.

The blurring of fact and fiction has the potential for enormous damage, but I think a fiction writer has two ‘outs’ for this transgression. Firstly, the packaging of the work must be clearly identifiable as fiction. Secondly, if the writer feels there is potential damage through such confusion, they must identify what they have fictionalised (and why) in an author’s note.

JG: Writing about a period in history that is well-documented, and individuals who have been thoroughly examined by scholars, I’m operating within well-defined boundaries. There is always the temptation to massage the truth, dishonour the material, to ‘improve’ the truth in the interests of making the narrative more exciting or enjoyable. However, I do not want to leave myself open to criticism of fictionalising real people. I must make triple sure that I have evidence to support any claim I make within the narrative.

With my latest book, *Shackleton’s Endurance*, I asked two subject experts to read over my manuscript and identify areas where disputes might arise.¹⁰ I want my readers to trust me implicitly. I never felt that I had the freedom or the right to invent. However, this conviction is being sorely tested in the case of my current project, *The Barren Grounds*, an adult novel which examines the lives of Sir John and Lady Franklin. Whereas my three previous novels recount events which take place over the course of 18 months, *The Barren Grounds* covers a period of 50 years. This extended timescale is certainly challenging my convictions!

Of course, even writers who wish to adhere strictly to historical fact cannot deal in absolutes. There are many incidental elements that must be recreated; interiors are a classic example. While it may be possible to visit locations where a particular episode took place or to observe a particular building and describe built

environments, chances are that the rooms will have changed greatly since Victorian times and must be restaged in the writer's imagination. Sometimes photographs from the period can be used and research can help establish what is close enough to the truth with auxiliary details such as furnishings, clothing, food and drink.

It is not my job to invent or replace history. Perhaps what I do is 'colour in'. I think my novels have been well-received because they contribute details that have been passed over in more conventional historical accounts – the more human aspects of a story that convey the lived experience. Personal feelings, reflections, fears, doubts and motivations are perhaps more at home in a narrative setting than they are in a non-fiction text.

TC: Joanna, you say you don't feel as if you have 'the freedom or the right to invent'. But you also acknowledge that there are elements to the story that must be recreated: 'interiors are a classic example.' I must ask why you allow yourself the freedom to recreate interiors only? I understand that these interiors are rarely put down in the historical record, and so there is a practical necessity to invent them.

But why do you feel at liberty to give yourself this one freedom, and this freedom alone? Arguably, misrepresenting the personal feelings, reflections, fears, doubts and motivations of a historical figure is a greater ethical misstep than misrepresenting a place name or a detail. For me, getting a historical detail wrong – the kind of carriage used, for instance – is a low stakes error. A careful reader will notice the error, and I can correct it in a second edition, or let it stand as a testament to my poor research skills.

Getting the interiority of a historical figure wrong, however, strikes me as high stakes. With the stroke of your pen, a reader might feel repelled when they ought to feel attracted. A reader might be drawn to the charm you put into the mouth of a character or misread the easy quip of a character as a damning commentary and, as a result, end up misinterpreting a crucial scene. It's conceivable that an imagined scene of interiority could sway a reader's judgement in a serious way.

JG: I agree, Thom. Misrepresenting the thoughts and feelings of historical figures is high stakes while getting incidentals wrong by comparison is of relatively little consequence. But I do believe there is real worth in persevering to get both right. I have sidestepped any discomfort I might feel in trying to recreate the interior life of my historical figures in my previous novels. The wealth of personal 'testimony' contained within archival material has allowed me to present with confidence an individual's thoughts or feelings when necessary to advancing the narrative. I also realise what a luxury it is to tell a story from multiple points of view and not be constrained from a single individual's standpoint.

What lurks behind your compulsion as writers of historical fiction? Why are you drawn to fill in gaps in our knowledge of history?

CS: I don't think I'm the only writer who follows historic characters home in my imagination, wondering if they play with their children and pat the dog, or take off the wig and collapse into a well-stuffed armchair with a bottle of port. I feel a fervent need to uncover motive and character to help explain history. I remember an 'Aha!' moment when reading the private letters of Lady Eliza Grey, wife of New Zealand's third governor. She is not always kind about George, and their stormy marriage obviously contributed to the man's complexities. If he'd married someone else, perhaps New Zealand's early colonial history might have had a different tenor. History becomes more complex and interesting when you imagine the personal relationships behind real characters.

JG: For me, voyeurism motivates! It is fascinating to ‘experience’ the private lives of historical figures. However, presenting the inner world of historical figures in literature is nothing more than a thought experiment, wishful thinking on the part of an author. Yet most readers are more than prepared to suspend their disbelief for the reward of voyeuristic entertainment.

While writing my first book, *Into the White*, I had an odd experience.¹¹ I truly hoped that Robert Falcon Scott, Edward Wilson, and Birdie Bowers would survive the return journey from the South Pole. It seemed that their fate was not yet sealed and that there still existed the possibility that they could get back to Cape Evans alive. I think my optimistic mindset comes through in the narrative, because I have heard from many readers over the years that they hold out great hopes that tragedy can be avoided – right up to the final pages.

TC: Joanna, I can relate to your ‘odd experience’ of hoping for a different outcome for Robert Falcon Scott, Edward Wilson and Birdie Bowers. This feeling of hoping against history is amazing to me – a liberating experience of possibility in a situation where we know perfectly well that there is no possibility! When writing *The Naturalist*, I felt a sense of authorial panic about trapping my characters – most of whom were authentic historical figures – in the frozen lake of the past. It seemed a mean-spirited way to treat them, as if my narrative shut down what author Grace Paley calls ‘the open destiny of life’.

*Hilary Mantel in her Reith Lectures suggests ‘a reader knows the nature of the contract. When you choose a novel to tell you about the past, you are putting in brackets the historical accounts – which may or may not agree with each other – and actively requesting a subjective interpretation.’ To what extent are we entering into such a contract with readers and how permissible is it to ‘play fast and loose with the truth’?*¹²

JG: I think any author of historical fiction who would play fast and loose with the truth because there is an expectation that the reader will fill in the missing research is either doing something very clever or very stupid. To wilfully blur fact and fiction to highlight the shifting sands of memory might offer an interesting comment on the human condition or add to our understanding of history and how we fit into it. I acknowledge that this may result in a brilliant novel.

On the other hand, if an author takes shortcuts with research to produce work quickly or because they see historical accuracy as being extraneous to the plot, then I believe that is both irresponsible and an unfair burden to place on the book’s editor.

CS: Personally, I am happy to be accused of ‘playing fast and loose with the truth’ in my novels, but I don’t ever want it assumed that this is indicative of a lack of comprehensive research, or some sort of lazy manipulation on my part to hit readers’ buttons. I like to investigate other ways of looking at our accepted accounts of history, to see how events might have looked from another viewpoint. Absolutely it is a subjective interpretation. I try to come at a different truth through fiction.

TC: I’m not sure that playing fast and loose with the truth in a work of historical fiction is always unethical. Mantel talks about the nature of the contract, but I would argue that the contract is fluid. A work of historical fiction such as Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River*, for instance, took what many readers assumed were historical incidents and shaped them with a level of detail and veracity that historians like Inga Clendinnen argued was an attempt to ‘frame fiction as history’.¹³

This charge as it relates to *The Secret River* is worth considering in more detail. In one scene in the novel, the protagonist, William Thornhill, slaps a Dharug man’s shoulder for attempting to steal a spade. It turns out the scene was based on a historical report from Arthur Phillip, the first Governor of New South Wales.

In Phillip's dispatch, the incident occurred years earlier and twenty-five miles further downstream. It also occurred between the governor and a man he had met years earlier who 'greeted him with a dance and a song of joy'.¹⁴ At the time of *The Secret River's* publication, historian Inga Clendinnen found Grenville's transformation of the incident unacceptable. Of Grenville's changes to the historical material, Clendinnen wrote, 'The book's shape is made completely different by that kind of casual transposition. It makes the novel not only not history but, in my admittedly very austere view, anti-history'.¹⁵ That is, for Clendinnen, Grenville's 'shortcut' was evidence of the fact that she saw historical accuracy as extraneous – or at least secondary – to plot.

To brand a historical novel 'anti-history' because it borrows a detail from the historical record and reimagines it in a creative work seems almost to disregard the main purpose of historical fiction, which is to enable us to relive the past in a visceral, emotionally grounded way. Reading *The Secret River* was what sparked my interest in Australian history, and details such as William Thornhill slapping the Dharug man's shoulder awakened my sense of the lived experience of this past. To my mind, this 'playing fast and loose with the truth' was a responsible authorial choice. While the historian's critical distance and scrupulous accuracy may have been put at risk, Grenville's decision to put the plot of her novel first allowed her to open up a new history for me. She connected me with the day-to-day experience of racism in colonial society in a way that Governor's Phillips dispatch could never have accomplished.

CS: Like Thom, above, I was drawn into Australian history by *The Secret River*. My assumption was that the 'set piece' incidents described (many with shocking implications), were based on a true history, with details changed as necessary to accommodate the narrative. That's the 'contract' of fiction.

Unfortunately, I believe Grenville broke her readerly contract with me in a later novel, *A Room Made of Leaves*.¹⁶ Here, Grenville purports to have discovered letters and documents from the wife of a lieutenant in colonial Australia that reveal a truth missing from the official history. I was sceptical of the confessional tone of the letters and realised pretty early that much of the writing was, in fact, of Grenville's own invention, but this ruse made me question my trust in her as a historical novelist. An author must have a clear motive to invent source material; this was just a trick.

In his 1978 Tropics of Discourse, historian Hayden White famously argued that history cannot escape literature: 'In point of fact, history – the real world as it evolves in time – is made sense of in the same way that the poet or novelist tries to make sense of it, i.e., by endowing what originally appears to be problematical and mysterious with the aspect of a recognizable, because it is a familiar, form. It does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined; the manner of making sense of it is the same'.¹⁷ What are the implications of White's position for those who write both 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' narratives on historical subjects?

JG: History is storytelling, and so neither historians nor novelists can escape the narrative form when endeavouring to engage their readers. The degrees of freedom within the narrative form vary widely when it comes to presenting material in a particular way. Supposition and speculation are as at home in straight historical texts as they are in fiction. The difference is in how this material is framed or prefaced.

Historians might introduce an idea or advance an argument with the addition of a disclaimer or a qualifying statement, such as 'it is widely assumed that...'; 'some argue that...'; or 'there is evidence to support the view...'. It's an elegant way of covering risky ground, and historians are undoubtedly constrained by the risks of misrepresenting the past.

TC: I think the safest response to this question – and to the blunter rendition of it: ‘is history fiction?’ – is usually a qualified ‘no’. As Joanna says, it’s ‘an elegant way of covering risky ground’. In my view, however, these statements don’t necessarily cover the ground we might believe they do.

In response to ‘it is widely assumed,’ for instance, we might ask, ‘by whom?’ This answer takes us on the journey of unmasking some of the biases, gaps and omissions that are native not only to the discipline of history, but also to language and culture. Historians may be constrained by self-awareness, but they may not be nearly constrained enough! That is, the self-awareness may not lead them to back away from the authority that the word ‘history’ implies.

CS: In the small but fanatical world of shipwreck and treasure hunters, into which I have recently plunged with my novel about the wreck of the *General Grant*, this idea of using narrative to construct both actual, as well as imagined, reality is problematic. With the lack of physical evidence of a wreck – iron anchors, chains, or golden sovereigns glittering in the water below the sea cliffs – nearly all we have of this fabulous legend are the testimonies of the survivors. For over 150 years, these testimonies, from traumatised and likely unreliable castaways, have been repeated and published. The wreck site is even marked on the official chart according to the contradictory reports, but I have spoken to divers who can confirm that the ship is not there.

While wreck hunters of today plead for factual information, the reporters of the nineteenth century promoted the human-interest angle. Some reported the ship tacked north, and some recorded her with squared sails and sailing southeast. One version published in *Harper’s Magazine* had the captain ‘on the mizzen-topmast crosstrees waving his handkerchief’ as the ship went down in a cave.¹⁸ These stories have merged to become accepted record, the drive to create a compelling narrative solidified into an inaccurate ‘history’.

Thom mentions above ‘the authority that the word “history” implies’. I’m wary of any source that claims to be an authority on history; there is no arbitrator to determine such a thing.

Can readers learn history from fictional characters in works of historical fiction and narrative non-fiction?

JG: Yes, readers learn from fictional characters. In reading historical fiction, we seek to understand history in a personal sense, which allows for a more nuanced, non-judgemental appreciation of events.

Perhaps this is the ‘safest’ way to write about history; the label ‘fiction’ prevents the reader from being misled. However, there is still vast scope for inaccuracies and misrepresentations if we consider a fictional story must still take place within a factual context. There is still scope for an author to rewrite history – either intentionally or simply by failing to be sufficiently rigorous in their research.

I think historical novels with fictional characters can raise interesting historical questions because they can explore dangerous territory, those grey zones where some historians may not dare to tread. Moral ambiguity, unpopular or widely discredited political views can be more easily examined when they form part of a fictional character’s viewpoint.

CS: An invented character living inside a history of real people gives an opportunity to explore issues or perspectives that might not be possible if a writer is rigorously wedded to recorded details. In *Jerningham*, for example, I wanted to investigate the recklessness of colonial Wellington. This task I decided was best served by an invented character whom I could manipulate to be the eyes and ears at the action points of the story, and who could also engage with and illustrate all the main characters.

John Boyne's novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is used to teach about the Holocaust in schools.¹⁹ For a teacher, having a child protagonist in the invented Bruno is a way into a difficult subject. Philippa Gregory invents Hannah Green in *The Queen's Fool* to explore the intrigues of the Tudor court.²⁰ These stories are not meant to be definitive histories, but to spark an interest in a subject or era that can be extended with other sources. 'Is it true?' is a starter a good teacher can take almost anywhere.

TC: I want to learn about the past through the dual act of imagining the fears, desires, doubts, motives and joys of people in the past and then permitting myself to experience real feelings of empathy for invented characters. I guess that for me history is really about the present, and I readily acknowledge that the people and events of the past are less important to me than my understanding of the current moment.

While imagined, the act of historical empathy is, in many ways, the main lesson I take from history. I think this lesson applies across divides that come between us today. If we can convince ourselves that we're reliving the sensations and emotions that make us human across centuries, I think we can apply this experience of invented empathy to the way we interact with those who happen to share the Earth with us now. So, to my mind, learning history is probably more about learning to cultivate a kind of creative empathy.

CS: I like Thom's point here about feeling empathy for historic characters. Empathy is not just about an author making a character likeable. It's inviting a reader to live in the mindset of a character in the context of their times and realise that a person's decision-making process is based on their specific frame of reference – wildly different to ours.

In her article on the idea of presentism (the view that only present ideas exist) in *Perspectives on History*, Lynn Hunt says:

Presentism, at its worst, encourages a kind of moral complacency and self-congratulation. Interpreting the past in terms of present concerns usually leads us to find ourselves morally superior; the Greeks had slavery, even David Hume was a racist, and European women endorsed imperial ventures. Our forebears constantly fail to measure up to our present-day standards... [and] we must question the stance of temporal superiority that is implicit in the Western (and now probably worldwide) historical discipline'.²¹

An empathetic understanding of how our place in a continual history determines our thoughts and actions must, at the very least, humble us. At best, it develops our minds so that they can remain open for the challenges that the present always brings to our most steadfast beliefs.

Epilogue

What this discussion has revealed is the highly charged field in which our intentions, perceptions and principles come into play when we write creative narratives based on or associated with historical incidents. Broadly speaking, our approaches to history as creative authors may be arranged across a spectrum of motives and guiding principles that draw attention to nuances of response to both narrative and history. Recent relevant publications on the intersection of history and fiction in general include: Camilla Nelson and Christine de Matos's 'Fictional Histories and Historical Fictions'; Alfred J. Rieber's 'A Tale of Three Genres'; Ann Curthoys' 'Harry Potter and Historical Consciousness'; John Demos's 'Notes From, and About, the History/Fiction Borderland'; and Ann Curthoys and John Docker's *Is History Fiction?*²²

For Joanna, verisimilitude is the aim of her work, and strict historical accuracy is the guiding principle. Her devotion to the detachment often associated with the historian is unmistakable. 'If there is no evidence to support a detail', she explains, 'I will not include that detail in my work'. While Joanna acknowledges

that ‘a certain amount of invention must take place’, she makes it clear that in her nonfiction narratives the prevailing aim is get as close as possible to the truth of historical incidents and characters. In describing herself ‘not so much a filler-in of blanks as an arranger of known facts’, Joanna locates her approach to story as not dissimilar from the traditional historical approach, which relies on critical distance and thorough research to provide us with the most authentic sense of history narrative can offer. Over the course of this discussion, however, Joanna expresses concerns that her most recent project, *The Barren Grounds*, may be putting some pressure on her principle of ‘never [feeling] that [she] had the freedom or the right to invent’. Sources that have been important to her own research on the intersection of fiction and history include Max Jones’s, ‘What Should Historians Do with Heroes?’ and Geoffrey Cubitt’s, ‘Heroic Reputations and Exemplary Lives’.²³

Thom’s intentions in using history to write creative narrative are tied to the particular aims of the project in question. In the case of *The Naturalist*, for instance, his purpose was to elevate the historical figure of Ernst Dieffenbach out of a footnote and enrich the historical record of bicultural dialogue in Aotearoa New Zealand. His primary allegiance, however, seems to be to story itself, to the ‘lived and visceral experience’ that arises from an act of ‘creative empathy’ that historians such as Clendinnen have called into question. In our discussion, Thom revealed that, in contrast to Joanna, one of his main concerns is not around historical authenticity, but around writing fiction in which the characters based on historical figures can become liberated from ‘the frozen lake of the past’. Sources related to his own conceptions of the intersection of history and fiction include his article ‘Adaption as Salvage: Transcoding History into Fiction in *The Naturalist*’; Hanna Meretoja’s ‘Fiction, History and the Possible’; Kalle Pihlainen’s ‘Rereading Narrative Constructivism’; Hamish Dalley’s ‘Postcolonialism and the Historical Novel’; and Kalle Pihlainen’s ‘The Confines of the Form: Historical Writing and the Desire that it be What it Is Not’.²⁴

For Cristina, the aim of creative historical accounts is closer to an interrogation of accepted historical incidents for the purpose of reclaiming lost or marginal voices. Arguing that ‘it is the accepted facts themselves that I find problematic’, she explains her reluctance to accept incidents in the historical record at face value. In the case of Jerningham Wakefield, the main character of her novel *Jerningham*, Cristina relies on the man’s historical journals as a primary source with full knowledge of fact that the material is marred by self-aggrandisement. She is also suspicious of the gaps in our histories: ‘Because much of history is recorded by the powerful, it is unusual to find complete records of those with less agency: minorities, women, children.’ It was this motive, for instance, that sparked Cristina’s interest in the historical incident behind her latest novel, *Mrs Jewell and the Wreck of the General Grant*. In this book, she tells the story of a woman who was a castaway on a sub-Antarctic island for eighteen months with fourteen men. The historical record offers little detail of Mrs Jewell’s experience, but Cristina’s fictional recreation of the historical figure offers us a chance to reclaim a voice that would otherwise be lost. Her interest in fiction to reclaim women’s voices is well discussed by Jenna Barlow, in ‘Women’s Historical Fiction After Feminism’.²⁵ Hannah Furness, in ‘Hilary Mantel: Women Writers Must Stop Falsely Empowering Female Characters in History’ is also provocative on this topic, referencing the second of Mantel’s Reith Lectures in which Mantel argued that women writers must stop rewriting history to make their female characters falsely empowered and asked, ‘If we write about the victims of history, are we reinforcing their status by detailing it? Or shall we rework history so victims are the winners?’²⁶ Greer Macallister extends the debate in ‘How can Historical Fiction be Feminist?’, arguing that Mantel offered a false choice on presenting women in history and proposing instead that one can be both historically faithful and feminist.²⁷

In our attempts to interpret history through fiction, we have discovered and discussed our different tolerance levels for imagination in narrative, and have argued around the principles that dictate the degrees of freedom we ought to allow ourselves in our work. In this article, we have not worked toward consensus, but rather agreed to meet in the grey zone where historical fact meets fiction. In the end we will continue, each in our own way, to encourage people to reimagine and question the past, read widely and remain open

to reinterpretations of what might have been. We each acknowledge that history is a complex discipline with room for conflicting perspectives, and we believe that there are as many ways to tell a historical story as there are reasons to do so. Our discussion, like history, is not yet over.

Endnotes

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