

The past in print, sound and vision

Reviews

SIGNPOSTS Historical Novels

History Today has not by tradition reviewed historical novels, but it's a position that has seemed increasingly purblind as more such novels are published. Several respected historians are turning to fictionalise their subjects and major novelists are delving into the past to great effect. In future occasional reviews of historical novels will appear and this month a series of articles and reviews discuss the genre: why it has come to recent prominence, what insights it might bring, what historical fiction might add to the record, or whether it constitutes a different beast altogether to be evaluated and appreciated by very different rules.

It is a protean field: novels bring to life the past from prehistoric times to decades that nudge our present one. Apart from the novels discussed below, this autumn sees a departure by Lindsey Davis from her successful Falco series set in the Ancient World (a *Companion* is promised in 2010) into the English Civil War, with *Rebels and Traitors* (Century, £18.99); Fiona Mountain's latest novel, *Lady of the Butterflies* (Preface, £12.99), is based on the life of Lady Eleanor Granville, a pioneering 17th-century lepidopterist; Mary Hoffman's *Troubadour* (Bloomsbury, £10.99) is a 'story of poetry and persecution', published 800 years after the crusade against the Cathars; Kate Mosse, fresh from the triumphs of *Labyrinth* and *Sepulchre*, moves into the 20th century with a mystical story set in the aftermath of the First World War, *The Winter Ghosts* (Orion, £14.99); while Philippa Gregory releases another,

no doubt bestselling Tudor tumult, *White Queen* (Simon & Schuster, £18.99), the story of Elizabeth Woodville. There will be more, many more ...

'We need a new kind of historical novel because there's a new kind of history,' urged a successful practitioner of the former art, Sarah Dunant, speaking at an event organised by the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, University of London, in June. Dunant, whose latest novel, *Sacred Hearts*, the final volume of a trilogy set in Italy 'within 100 years of the Renaissance', was in conversation with Hilary Mantel, whose acclaimed exploration of the life of Thomas Cromwell, *Wolf Hall*, was also published this summer, and with John Sutherland, Emeritus Lord Northcliffe Professor of English at University College London, critic, biographer, autobiographer and author of such literary teases as *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?* and *Can*



'A Lady Coming from the Circulating Library', illustration, 1781.

Jane Eyre Be Happy? Birkbeck's Professor Joanna Bourke, one of Britain's most imaginative and innovative historians, held the ring.

Dunant's challenging words would seem to have already found a response. In 2009 alone, other major novelists such as Sarah Waters (*A Little Stranger*), Adam Thorpe (*Hodd*) and Giles Foden (*Turbulence*) have mined the past for their plots and their characters. The historian Saul

David has projected his interests in imperial conflicts into the sphere of fiction in *Zulu Hart* and Stella Tillyard, whose *Aristocrats* set a benchmark for the empathetic history of women's lives, is now finishing her first novel set in the Napoleonic Wars.

Empathy and evidence

But what is it that is 'new' about history that such novels reflect? 'I hate the term historical novelist,'

FOR WEEKLY UPDATES ON THE LATEST BOOKS, VISIT: WWW.HISTORYTODAY.COM/BOOKS

Sacred Hearts

Sarah Dunant

Virago 471pp £14.99

ISBN 978 1 84408 596 5

Hodd

Adam Thorpe

Jonathan Cape 309pp £17.99

ISBN 978 022 407 943 3

The Little Stranger

Sarah Waters

Virago 501pp £16.99

ISBN 978 184408 601 6

Mantel protested. 'It makes it sound as if we all write the same sort of book. I would prefer it to be thought of as contemporary fiction about past events. It was history that brought me to history, not novels, and I try to write a kind of fiction that balances empathy with evidence.'

Dunant, however, admitted that it was reading historical novels when she was young that kindled a love of history: 'I grew up in the suffocatingly dull 1950s,' she recalled, 'and the question was always how to escape it. As a fast-track the past was compelling. It was everything the present was not. Vibrant, flamboyant, immoral, careless, war-torn and so interesting. Or, in other words, romantic.'

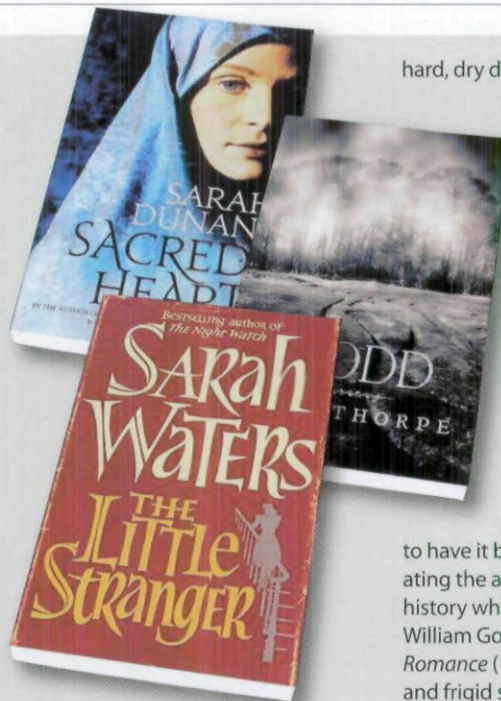
Yet having come to study history through the romantic pages of writers such as Anya Seaton, Margaret Irwin, Jean Plaidy and Mary Renault, Dunant found that at Cambridge she had that romance beaten out of her and it took another lifetime, a new writerly career, before she felt she had the novelistic skills to grapple with the complexities of history – and then found that in all those years away from libraries and archives, the past had changed, or rather the study of it had.

Confidence in a grand narrative of history peopled by monarchs and statesmen preoccupied with politics and economics has been challenged in the last 15 or 20 years', Bourke claimed, and all the speakers agreed. What had seeped in was the history of 'emotion, intimacy, the everyday', the very stuff of novels. And it was this *histoire des mentalités*, this people's history, this history from below, that had

Sir Leslie Stephen (author, critic and the father of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell) once famously dismissed the historical novel as 'Pure cram or pure fiction'. The worst historical novels are weighed down by facts and stifled by the need to ensure that the characters conform to the dictates of Malthus, Marx or (post)-Modernism.

In contrast, the best historical fiction is a delight to historians. These three novels are excellent examples. In *Sacred Hearts*, Sarah Dunant encourages readers to meditate on the power of religion and friendship. Set in 1570, at the Santa Caterina monastery in Ferrara, the novel captivates with the story of 16-year-old Serafina, a reluctant Bride of Christ. Adam Thorpe's *Hodd* demolishes the romantic legend of Robin Hood, transforming him into a drunk and psychopathic mystic. The novel is presented as a translation of a medieval manuscript, found in the ruins of a bombed church during the First World War. Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger* is an eerie ghost story set in postwar Warwickshire. A doctor of humble background is drawn into the world of a local county family. Their lives slowly unravel.

Although all three authors conducted a vast amount of research, calling them 'historical novelists' is clumsy. Isn't all fiction – all writing, indeed – 'historical' in some sense? Or perhaps no novels are historical. Writers can never entirely escape from their own location



in time and place.

There are many ways of 'doing' historical fiction. Thorpe is writing about a real historical figure. Similarly, in Pat Barker's novel *Regeneration*, key characters are the neurologist William Rivers and the poet Siegfried Sassoon and Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, is a revisionist account of Thomas Cromwell. In contrast, the protagonists in the novels of Dunant and Waters emerge newly born from their imaginations. Some historical novels are keener to ape their historical cousins than others: Dunant's concludes with a bibliography. Less successfully, Thorpe's has 408 footnotes in which the narrator laboriously provides translation and commentary.

What is certain, however, is that good historical fiction recreates a *feeling*. It must bridge the distance between the past and the present, without flattening out radical differences between the now and then. In his preface to *Ivanhoe* (1820), Sir Walter Scott (whose *Waverly* novels are often regarded as establishing the modern genre of historical fiction) set out the main rules. The historical novelist must 'introduce nothing inconsistent with the manners of the age', he insisted: 'His knights, squires, grooms, and yeomen, may be more fully drawn than in the

hard, dry delineations of an ancient illuminated manuscript, but the character and costume of the age must remain inviolate.' Above all, readers must be deterred from playing the game of 'spot the anachronism'.

Yet the relationship between history and historical fiction is a jealous one. Historical fiction tries

to have it both ways: appropriating the authoritative voice of history while eschewing what William Godwin in *Of History and Romance* (1797) called its 'dry and frigid science'. Historians rightly complain that readers of historical novels may fail to distinguish between fact and fiction. Reading historical fiction may allow people to enter imaginatively into the past, but there are worries that this may engender a false sense of identification with radically different peoples.

Nevertheless, ever since classical Greece, there has been a lively conversation between fiction and history. Fiction is a stimulant for the historical imagination. Barker's *Regeneration* drew attention to shell shock among the 'other rank'. Dunant's *Sacred Hearts* enables readers to ask questions about agency and power at a time when the price of marriage dowries had become prohibitive for half of all daughters. Time and again, novelists have drawn attention to the forgotten peoples of the past.

Of course, the historian and the historical novelist are engaged in different enterprises. Historians have set much stricter limits to processes of selecting, narrating, and interpreting. Novelists have much to tell historians about the emotions. Both genres may agree, though, with Margaret Atwood's observation that 'by taking a long hard look backwards, we place ourselves ... The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it.'

JOANNA BOURKE

admitted not only a new constituency of the previously unrecorded or unheard – women and the poor in particular – but also gave weight to the power of irrationality, to the role of accident and contingency, the natural turf of the novelist and the poet.

'All novelists who write historical fiction are preoccupied with what has been lost, what has slipped away, or was never inscribed in the record,' said Mantel. 'Our concern is to explore inner as well as outer experiences, to restore the balance in the representation of what it is like to be human. We want to give a voice to the voiceless, to represent misrepresentation, to encourage people

'Fiction can't recover the past for us, but what it can do is of great importance – it defines our relationship to the past'

to look again and to think again.' In the case of Mantel's latest book it was to look at the Tudor era, which is 'our national soap opera'. She added: 'When I was researching *Wolf Hall* I could find dozens of books with the name Thomas Cromwell on the jacket, but nowhere did I find the man inside them ... it was not possible, given the evidence, for historians to reconstruct his private life, but as a novelist I can use informed speculation to fill in the gaps. And, of course, the arc of history is also irresistible. How did Cromwell rise from being the son of a blacksmith and, in his own words, a ruffian when young, to become effectively minister of everything? That is what I wanted to explore.'

A matter of trust

Mantel added: 'I see myself as a dramatist. I have no particular impulse to teach about the past, but to present it. My greatest pleasure is to take a scene that I know occurred, that is fully documented in terms of place, date, who was there, who said what and to whom, and then to twist the viewpoint, write it from another perspective entirely. I want the reader to come away from my book with a sense of being in the room. I want to be able to say,

"Trust me, come with me and I will nail you to the moment".'

Trust is vitally important to Dunant too. Yet while Mantel spins her story around real historical characters, Dunant's are made up – the nuns of the convent of Santa Caterina, Ferrara in the 16th-century – a time when as many as 50 per cent of all high-born women were married to Christ and banished to a nunnery – are entirely her creation. Does this mean she enjoys licence to invent whatever suits her? 'Absolutely not,' she insists. 'My characters are composites based on what I have read and discovered. Before I start writing I do an immense amount of research. I

immerse myself in the scholarship of the period and what I get from those quiet libraries are the fruits of two generations of history from below, in this case many of them motivated by feminism, though men's work is there too, of historians doing deep mining. I simply could not have written my books 20 years ago – the information just wasn't available. But now historians have panned for gold, sifting through court, parish and convent records to find details, moments, small stories from which I have been able to build a composite picture of women who might have existed.

'The more I read the more the Renaissance came alive. When I write, I am a pointillist joining up the dots of what I have discovered, not a reproducer of those sources, and when you step back and view them from the distance of a story it makes for a picture of greater depth and perspective. I want to sink the reader deep into the period, to say, "Have the confidence to follow me because I know what is true and I will show you something as close to life as it might have been lived then, as rich and complex, and contradictory as we now know it to be".'

'The framing of reality doesn't wipe out evidence,' Mantel agreed.

Zulu Hart

Saul David

Hodder & Stoughton 376pp £12.99

ISBN 978 0340953624

Having admired Professor David's fine writing on the military history of Victorian imperialism, not to mention his lucid and lively media appearances for some time, I picked up this book, his first venture into fiction, with pleasurable anticipation. All the signs were good: the novel is set in the precise historical territory on which he has made such a brilliant impression, namely the Zulu War of 1879; the bright idea of the hero coming from a half-Zulu, half-Irish background promised many subtleties of identity and interpretation, especially within the imperial context; the events of the 1879 Zulu War could hardly be more dramatic and gripping; the price is right and the book handsome. I even had a parallel professional involvement, in that in the late 1970s, having published a number of reasonably well thought of books of history, I took a risk of sorts and published two historical novels.

How has a similar risk worked out for Saul David? There is no doubting the authenticity of the detail, nor the often powerful interactions between the key players, nor the vim and vigour that he brings to the description of the military manoeuvres and the battles themselves. The dilemmas of Zulu Hart himself are mostly nicely judged and sensitively rendered.

There is, however, a 'but' – several of them in fact. To begin with I do not think that David allows his readers enough freedom to soak up meaning and innuendo through the dialogue of the characters that people the book; far too often he cannot resist capping some statement or conversation with an emphasis or interpretation of his own. There are also far too many clichés for comfort: there are 'hearty chuckles', hearts 'race', people 'look on aghast', eyebrows are 'raised', eyes 'flash', situations 'hang by a thread', and so on.

The big question surely is: does David the novelist enable us to understand more about a particular series of historical events than might David the historian? This query is especially relevant when there is a school of thought that suggests that history is arguably a higher form of fiction. The answer to the big question above? Not in my view. Still, I shall be interested to read the sequel.

DENIS JUDD

'It proposes a version, but a version that comes with a guarantee: "This *could* be true" ... We all, novelists as well as historians, have been touched by the postmodern turn. We are more sceptical now, we all interrogate our sources and say, "Why did he or she say what they did? What do they want me to believe? And why?"'

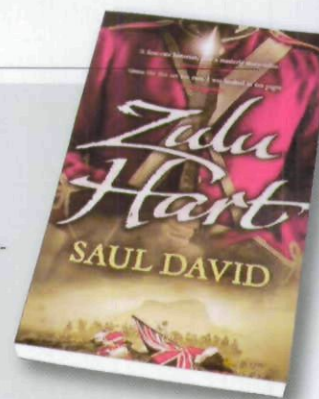
'The novel is the highest form of individuality available to us,' insisted John Sutherland, 'and historical fiction expresses ourselves rather than simply holding a mirror up to the past. Fiction can't recover the past for us, but what it can do is of great importance – it defines our relationship with the past.'

Dunant and Mantel both agreed that the past cannot be recoverable in any literal sense,

'but it is recoverable in the metaphorical sense,' says Mantel. 'All we write about is there. But it is documented in books written for historians or students of history, not for the general readers.'

'What I do,' concluded Dunant, 'is to sink my reader into feeling and sensation, but to slide real history in with it so you never know you're reading it – and sell books in numbers and to people that most historians can only dream of. And that is why it is so vital to me to get it right and to pay my dues to the historians who have done the groundwork for me by offering an extensive bibliography at the back. Then those with an appetite for more, have somewhere else to go.' Back to the history books.

JULIET GARDINER



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