

Editorial: 'Historical Fictions' When the World Changes

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On 22nd February 2020, a date that feels like a long time ago but was actually less than four months before I write this editorial, I presented a paper at our annual Historical Fictions Research Network conference on the subject 'What is historical fiction?' The paper looked primarily at whether or not there is a certain amount of time that has to pass between an event and the creation of a fiction based on it, in order for it to qualify as 'historical fiction', but the question is a broad one.

Fictions are stories – the stories we tell about ourselves, about other people, about the world we live in and the world of the past. Fictions can be liberating and provocative – as Jerome de Groot puts it, fictions 'challenge, pervert, critique, and queer a normative, straightforward, linear, self-proscribing History' (2016, 2). They can also be conservative, reactionary, or backward-thinking.

Historical fictions are all around us. In films, television programmes, and novels, of course, but also in advertisements, paintings, murals, docu-dramas, graphic novels, board games, video games, ghost stories, and statues. A statue or portrait is in itself a work of historical fiction. A living subject is carefully posed, or a deceased subject is re-created from photographs, memories, and other images. The pose is carefully chosen to represent the person in the way the artist and/or commissioner wants them to be represented.

The choice of what statues are placed in public spaces, of who is represented and who isn't, of how these people are represented, then forms new stories, narratives about the past that are told across the landscape. A statue or other form of public art is not a neutral device for the presentation of facts, but a story put on public view in the expectation that it is something to celebrate.

How these stories are told is important. A running joke in the NBC sitcom *Parks and Recreation* (created by Greg Daniels and Michael Schur, 2009-2015) featured the 'horrifying' (Episode 1.01) murals lining the corridors of City Hall. The murals were considered offensive because they depicted violent incidents from Pawnee's past, mostly violence against Native Americans (a Chief being executed, everyone present at a mixed race wedding being murdered). "We... need better, less offensive history" says Leslie of one mural that the town actually considers replacing (but doesn't) (Episode 2.09). But it is not the mere depiction of past violence and injustice that forms the basis of the joke – it's the fact that a mural in a City Hall is expected to be celebratory. There are places and forms to tell violent stories of injustice, but when a story is portrayed as an emblem of what a place or a people are, that is when the aspects chosen for celebration become significant.

World-changing events can also bring into sharp relief the question of time that I addressed in my conference paper; the question of how ‘historical’ a historical fiction has to be. Definitions of what makes a fiction ‘historical’ in the genre of historical novels often focus on the idea that a certain amount of time must have passed between the events and the writing of the novel, whether that’s 40-60 years (Fleishman 1971, 3-4), 50 years (The Historical Novel Society, 2020), before the author was born (Stocker 2019, 78), or before the author ‘came to consciousness’ (Atwood 1998, 1510). The idea that there is some set amount of time that shifts a work from being ‘contemporary’ or about the ‘recent past’ to being ‘historical’ appears deeply engrained.

As Emma Darwin has pointed out, many of these definitions exclude a very well known historical novel, L. P. Hartley’s *The Go-Between*, because it is based on the author’s childhood memories and is therefore too autobiographical (Darwin 2010, 266). I mention *The Go-Between* in particular because its famous opening line rather neatly sums up my own approach to this problem of how old something has to be in order to be ‘historical fiction’. ‘The past is a foreign country’, Hartley said, ‘they do things differently there’ (Hartley 1997 [1953], 5). Historical fiction takes the reader to a world that is not the world they live in and that they cannot visit because it no longer exists, and that is as true of Hartley’s work, infused as it is with his own memories, as of a work written entirely based on research. It would be fair to say that the world depicted in historical fiction never really existed in that form, being the creation of its author or maker, but that is where the research (or memory, in Hartley’s case) comes in – historical fiction represents an attempt to recreate something like a world that once existed, whereas fantasy and science fiction, for example, invent a world that never has.

In my conference presentation back in February I looked at two examples of screen representations of the recent past: the film *Good-Bye Lenin!* (dir. Wolfgang Becker, 2003), set in East Berlin 1989-1990, and the TV series *Chernobyl* (created by Craig Mazin, 2019), set in Chernobyl, 1986-1987. Both are set behind the Iron Curtain, before the fall of the USSR; so both are set in a world that no longer exists, and both make a clear point of that fact. Mazin makes this clear in the podcast accompanying the show, saying, ‘this could only have happened in the Soviet Union; only the Soviet Union could have solved this problem’ (Mazin 2019). *Good-Bye Lenin!* is even more explicitly about a world that has vanished, or an idea of a world that has vanished. It is a self-conscious nostalgic reflection on an idea of what the DDR was, ‘Ein Land, das es in Wirklichkeit nie so gegeben hat’ as main character Alex says (‘A country that never really existed’). The film, in fact, is about a historical fiction within a historical fiction. Although the film was made only eleven years after its setting (it was filmed in 2001), everything in it, from pickle jars to clothing to cosmonauts, is of the past and no longer part of the world we now live in, in Berlin or anywhere else.

I've been thinking about this even more over the past few months. I mentioned at the beginning of this piece that February 2020, less than four months ago, feels like a long time ago. That's because the world we lived in last February is not the world we are living in now. Last February, I could travel by plane from the UK to Austria for the conference; we all met and shook hands; we all sat in hot rooms together for hours without fear. Perhaps some day (in late 2020? Early 2021? Later than that?) the current coronavirus pandemic will pass and all those things will happen again, but the world will never be quite the same. Businesses will have disappeared, people will have shifted in their attitudes and feelings, many will work from home more often. Millions of people will hug their mums more often. Many people have learned to use new technologies to communicate with each other, and will keep doing so to keep in touch with friends and family spread across the globe more often and in different ways than they have before.

And then there are the ways millions of people right now are more deliberately trying to bring about permanent change addressing problems that already existed. The Black Lives Matter movement has been around for a long time (and the Civil Rights movement far longer again) but the hope for many is that now, this summer of 2020, is a turning-point; that these protests, on a scale not seen since the 1960s, will bring about real change. And in the background of all of it, there is climate change. Our world is changing, and whatever we do, we will start to feel the effect of those changes over the next 10-20 years. The hope of many is that we will change ourselves in response; even if we don't, change will come anyway. The historians of the future will see 2020 as a turning-point in the history of the world, and we have the unusual and sometimes uncomfortable experience of knowing that is the case even as we live through it.

The speed of change over the course of this year reminds me of something Margaret Atwood said in her 2017 'Introduction' to her most famous work, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Part of the inspiration for the novel, she said, was her awareness that 'established orders could vanish overnight. Change could also be as fast as lightning' (Atwood 2017, ix). Perhaps our world will not change quite so much or quite so quickly. Perhaps the widespread lockdowns will come to look more like an aberration; perhaps the protests will not bring about the change their organisers hope for, and the Earth will limp on a few more years while we continue to try to keep going as we have been. But I think one of the things this pandemic has taught us is exactly what Atwood was saying with *The Handmaid's Tale* – the world can change, and quickly. People can change their behaviour and everything we thought we knew about how society works can be turned on its head. Perhaps that's why the protests in the wake of George Floyd's death are happening on such a scale – perhaps people have been given hope by the extraordinary (if temporary) changes brought about by the pandemic that real (and lasting) change can happen. Perhaps, with shifted values, real action in the face of climate change will become possible.

If the world is really changing, I think there is a very real argument to be made that a novel written in 2021 but set in 2019 may be a work of historical fiction. A novel written in a year or two's time but set in 2020 will surely feel like historical fiction. The world we will be living in next year will not be the world we lived in last year – and that will change the stories we tell, along with everything else. We won't ever be able to return to that past world – and that is what will make the stories we tell about it 'historical fiction'.

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