

Editorial: Living in changing times

Tony Keen

In his British Science Fiction Award-winning book *It's the End of the World: But what are we really afraid of?*, Adam Roberts use Thomas Bayes' Theorem to argue that, statistically, the end of the world is not likely to be in the immediate future, but that it becomes more probable in the longer term, perhaps a century or two (2020, 16-22). In the summer of 2021, as forest fires swept through Turkey, Greece, southern Italy, Provence, Lebanon, Israel, California and Siberia, following 2020 fires in Australia, India, China and elsewhere, the idea that the world is in imminent danger for a man-made climate catastrophe becomes really rather easy to believe. As I write this, the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) has just formally begun in Glasgow. There is much big talk, but it is hard to believe that such talk will actually result in action. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic has not gone away, despite the government of the UK often acting as if it has. As Juliette Harrison noted in the editorial to the last issue (2020), we live in a time that will be looked back on as pivotal in the history of the planet.

At such a time, our work, like that of the 'straight' historian, is vital. We seek to understand, explain and demonstrate how a fictional version of the past is constructed. This becomes ever more important. Last week, the UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, stood in the Colosseum in Rome and gave a speech that involved claiming that the Roman empire fell primarily because of uncontrolled immigration (Cordon 2021), a claim that few actual historians believe (though Tom Holland mounted something of a defence on Twitter), but which very much suits Johnson's post-Brexit attempt to demonstrate the benefits to leaving the European Union. Other politicians make statements that require their audience to forget about things that happened last year, or even last month. It is incumbent upon us as scholars of historical fiction to respond.

This special issue of the *Journal* looks at an element of the past that can be understudied; how it sounded. Inevitably, many of the contributors have chosen to engage with music. Gabriel Duckels underlines the important of contemporary pop music in novels of the early days of the AIDS crisis. Kevin Farrell looks at the figure of Bob Marley and his music in Marlon James' *Man Booker*

Prize-winning *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014). Kristin Franseen's subject is portrayals of the composer Antonio Salieri in detective fiction. Tomer Nechustan examines the ways in which movie musicals recreate the past. Eric Lehmann looks at how Beck Hansen reconstructed a lost past way of selling music in his 2012 project *Song Reader*. Nodhar Hammami Ben Fradj goes beyond music to actually look at sounds in general in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and show how sounds engage with colours and shapes in that novel.

This has also been a period of transition at the *Journal of Historical Fictions*. This special issue was begun by Juliette Harrison, who then had to move on for the happiest of reasons (and we send our best wishes to Juliette, husband Justin and new arrival John). Jacobus Bracker then shepherded the issue through most of the production process, but was unable to stay with it, so I have stepped in to get this issue over the final hurdle. Once that is done, I too shall be on my way, and a new editor will take the *Journal* forward.

Rest assured, we shall continue our mission.

Works cited

Cordon, Gavin, 'Boris Johnson warns of new "dark ages" if global warming is not confronted', *Evening Standard* (2021) 30 October 2021, <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/boris-johnson-roman-empire-prime-minister-rome-people-b963413.html>, accessed 2 November 2021.

Harrison, Juliette, 'Editorial: 'Historical fictions' when the world changes', *Journal of Historical Fictions*, 3.1 (2020) 1-5.

Roberts, Adam, *It's the End of the World: But what are we really afraid of?* (London: Elliot & Thompson, 2020).