Historical Fiction: Towards A Definition

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Abstract: *This paper explores the origins and theoretical response to the historical novel. It touches on the nineteenth century split between academic history and historical fiction, which promoted an artificial opposition between history and fiction, and discusses the lack of scholarly definitions of the genre. Issues surrounding the classifications that are available are examined, before a new definition is proposed.*

Keywords: historical fiction, historical novel, definition, postmodernism, historiography, H. White, J. De Groot, G. Lukács

Early scholarship's impact on definitions of the historical novel

Although not the first critical study of historical fiction (Herbert Butterfield's *The Historical Novel: An Essay* was published in 1924), it is Lukács' book *The Historical Novel* (1937) which has arguably had the greatest impact on modern scholarship with regard to the historical novel. This Marxist study dated the birth of the genre specifically to Scott's *Waverley* (1814), and tasked the genre with explaining major social transformations, such as the rise of Hitler in Germany. Lukács, however, questioned whether any issues were unique to historical fiction, saying, 'one could go through all the problems of content and form in the novel without lighting upon a single question of importance which applied to the historical novel alone' (Lukács [1937] 1962, 242). If, as this statement suggests, there is little that is distinctive about the historical novel, and, therefore, no challenge to be met by the writer, other than that presented by any other type of novel, then it seems understandable that Lukács fails to define the genre. As a writer of historical fiction, my own practice leads me to disagree.

Fleishman's critical examination of the genre *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott and Virginia Woolf* (1971) offers the following definition:

> Most novels set in the past – beyond an arbitrary number of years, say 40-60 (two generations) – are liable to be considered historical, while those of the present and preceding generations (of which the reader is more likely to have personal experience) have been called "novels of the recent past." Regarding substance, there is an unspoken assumption that the plot must include a number of "historical" events, particularly those in the public sphere (war, politics, economic change, etc.), mingled with and affecting the personal fortunes of the characters.
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> One further criterion is to be introduced on *prima facie* grounds. There is an obvious theoretical difficulty in the status of "real" personages in

> "invented" fictions, but their presence is not a mere matter of taste. It is necessary to include at least one such figure in a novel to qualify as historical. The presence of a realistic background for the action is a widespread characteristic of the novel and many panoramic social novels are deep in history. The historical novel is distinguished among novels by the presence of a specific link to history: not merely a real building or a real event but a real person amongst the fictitious ones. When life is seen in the context of history, we have a novel; when the novel's characters live in the same world with historical persons, we have a historical novel (Fleishman 1971, 3-4).

The differentiation between texts set in the 'recent past' of which 'the reader is more likely to have personal experience' and texts which are 'historical' is interesting, in that it is the reader who is the focus. Looking at the position of the reader opens the possibility of contemporary novels becoming historical over time, as when the text was authored is not relevant. Butterfield disagrees:

> although in a sense every novel tends to become in time a historical novel, and there will come a day when "Sonia" will be useful to the historian for a certain kind of information, yet a true "historical novel" is one that is historical in its intention and not simply by accident, one that comes from a mind steeped in the past (Butterfield 1924, 4-5).

That a novel must be *intended* to be an historical novel to be a 'true' representation of the genre makes the role of the author central. A novel such as *Pride and Prejudice* could be considered historical under Fleishman's definition, but Austen might take issue with this as it was never intended to be an historical novel, but 'pictures of domestic Life in Country Villages as I deal in' (Austen, quoted in Kasmer 2012, 1). Austen's 'I' can be seen both as the author 'I' who writes, and the individual 'I' who experiences such 'domestic Life', making her work both contemporary and based on her own experience. Kasmer found correspondence that shows Jane Austen was asked by a proxy of the Prince Regent to write an historical romance based on his family line. Her response was a polite rebuff, on the basis that that she could not write such a novel to save her life (Kasmer 2012, 1). Austen's juvenilia included *The History of England*, so she had experience of writing history, but did not choose to bring this into her novels (Kasmer 2012, 2). Fleishman does not consider the position of the writer, instead linking the 'arbitrary number of years, say 40-60' to the likelihood of this being a time the reader would have lived through (Fleishman 1971, 3). He is not bold enough to state that it must be outside the reader's lived experience. This may be due to increasing lifespans requiring a gap of more than a hundred years between the period in the novel and publication, to ensure events would be outside living memory, and this is a step too far for Fleishman.

Fleishman's next criterion is that the 'plot must include a number of "historical" events', and no rationale for this is given, beyond an 'unspoken assump-

tion'. He may accept this, but the breadth of historical fiction precludes this as a requirement. The historical novel can bring to light events not previously within the public sphere, or use fictional situations to explore character, without this having an impact on its claim to be 'historical'. The demand that the novel includes 'real' people seems to be, within Fleishman's mind at least, a defining characteristic. He states that 'when the novel's characters live in the same world with historical persons, we have a historical novel' (Fleishman 1971, 3-4). The requirement to include 'real personages' could also keep the historical novel from exploring marginalised groups and less well documented stories, as 'what the historical record has rendered invisible will remain so unless we avail ourselves of the power to fictionalize' (Kadish 2018).

What are the origins of the historical novel?

More recent studies by Maxwell (2009), Stevens (2010) and De Groot (2010), have identified examples of historical fiction older than Scott's *Waverley* (1814), and shown the development of the historical novel alongside the novel. (I have not included studies such as Hamnett 2011, which focuses on the nineteenth century, or others such as Wallace's *The Woman's Historical Novel,* 2008, which are only interested in a particular aspect of the genre).

Maxwell notes that most historical fiction appears 'after 1820 or so… thanks to the impact of Walter Scott' (Maxwell 2009, 1), but argues that its true origins lie in mid-seventeenth century France, in texts such as Madam de Lafayette's *Princess of Montpensier* (1662) and *Princess of Cleves* (1678) (Maxwell 2009, 12). Maxwell states that '[de] Lafayette pioneered the basic approach and the others worked out their own variations', listing Walter Scott amongst her 'followers' (Maxwell 2009, 12). Stevens, whose book, *British Historical Fiction before Scott*, is based on the premise that the historical novel existed before Scott, does not, however, look beyond Britain for its origins. She identifies Thomas Leland's *Longsword, Earl of Salisbury* (1762) as the first historical novel, arguing that 'although historical settings can be found in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century fictions, Leland's text inaugurates a new and markedly different wave of historical fiction' (Stevens 2010, 4).

De Groot agrees with Maxwell that the first historical novel is *Princess of Cleves*, but he identifies earlier formative examples. These include Homer, Virgil, Wu Cheng'en, and Chaucer, and he also considers the history plays of Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Jonson, as well as the poetry of Milton, to be historical narratives (De Groot 2010, 12). Cervantes' *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605) is examined by De Groot for what it says about how 'fictions of the past might infect the present'. De Groot considers it historical on the basis that 'it takes place "not long since"' (De Groot 2010, 13). Daniel Defoe is mentioned in passing by De Groot, but *Memoirs of a Cavalier* (1720) and *Moll Flanders* (1722) are overlooked by Maxwell, and excluded by Stevens, because

they purport to be factual accounts. Such a framing narrative should not exclude them from consideration. In the absence of a definition, it is unclear on what basis judgements about which novels should be included as historical are being made.

What makes a novel historical?

All of these scholars, while exploring the origins of the historical novel, fail to give a clear explanation of what it is. Stevens notes that 'identifying a work as an historical novel tells you something about its setting, but little about its artistic aspirations' (Stevens 2010, 3). She at least identifies 'setting' as the determining factor. Later, Stevens outlines her criterion for the texts she excludes from her corpora – 'novels that were not set in the past or had only the vaguest of historical backdrops I set aside, the others I examined more closely' (Stevens 2010, 15). She does not relate the location in time to the position of either the writer or the reader, but, as Stevens excludes some eighteenth-century novels with the 'vaguest of historical backdrops', her criteria must be based on when the novel was originally written or published.

Similarly vague, De Groot offers a number of aspects of the historical novel that 'might be taken as a good working definition' (De Groot 2010, 19), such as writers who create '"authentic" characters within a factual-led framework, and write stories about them which will communicate as much as is necessary of the past' (De Groot 2010, 19). Alternatively, he offers the presence of 'the author's note, introduction or explanatory section appended to all historical fiction since Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814)' (De Groot 2010, 217), as the genre's defining feature. In his first stab at a definition, De Groot's 'factual-led' narrative, which conveys the 'past', fails to specify what is meant by the 'past'. His claim about the inclusion of an author's note seems slightly facetious; it is improbable that this would be the only basis for such a judgement. Maxwell avoids presenting his own definition for the genre, and instead reports the views of critics, who saw the novel as 'corrupt' when 'mixed with historical materials, creating what was understood to be a deceptive, discordant combination' (Maxwell 2009, 11). Again, we have the term 'historical', without any other terms of reference.

Can't define or won't define?

Most recent studies of historical fiction do not provide a definition, and there seems to be a trend in modern scholarship on the genre to avoid proposing one. It is as if, like the famous Supreme Court Justice's definition of pornography, it is enough to say of the historical novel that 'we will know it when we see it'. Or, as Avrom Fleishman puts it, 'everyone knows what a historical novel is; perhaps that is why few have volunteered to define it in print' (Fleishman 1971, 3).

In *Remaking History* (2016), De Groot does, however, offer an explanation for the lack of a definition:

> Manifestly, the term "historical fiction" is not something definable and comprehensible. This paradoxical, contradictory phrase is unstable, while striving for clarity, a characteristic that might be descriptive of historical fictions themselves. The phrase – "historical fiction" (or replace fiction with "film", "TV", "novel", "game", and the like) – is inherently contradictory (or a tautology, insofar as all history is fiction) (De Groot 2016, 3).

Putting aside the question of medium, we are offered two opposing explanations as to why historical fiction is not 'definable' (De Groot includes discussions of TV, film, theatres etc. as historical fiction in his 2016 book *Remaking History*, but an examination of the differing parameters and constraints of each form of historical fiction deserves its own paper so my definition will focus solely on the novel). Either 'historical' and 'fiction' are in opposition, one a metonym for truth and the other for falsehoods, or they are *both* fiction. De Groot adds a cherry to his cake by stating that these contradictions typify the genre.

Truth vs fiction?

To examine this further, let us start with the oppositional claim of truth and fiction. In *Tropics of Discourse*, Hayden White traces this idea back to the separation of history writing, which was 'conventionally regarded as a literary art' (White 1978, 123), into two distinct disciplines - history and historical fiction. Underlining this break, White notes that historians define their work in opposition to that of the novelist:

> In the early nineteenth century, however, it became conventional, at least among historians, to identify truth with fact and to regard fiction as the opposite of truth, hence as a hindrance to the understanding of reality rather than as a way of apprehending it. History came to be set over against fiction, and especially the novel, as the representation of the "actual" to the representation of the "possible" or only "imaginable" (White 1978, 123).

This dichotomy relies on fiction being something inherently false, but White has been developing an argument over decades that fiction can actually aid the presentation of 'truth', as 'the conjuring up of the past requires art as well as information' (White 2005, 149). He seeks to dispel the artificial divide between the writer and historian, and advocates 'literary writing', confronting the prejudices against using literary techniques head on, saying, 'the first misconception is that "literature" stands to "history" as "fiction" stands to "fact" and that, therefore, any treatment of such morally charged events as the Holocaust entails a fall from historical realism into fictionalisation' (White 2014,

17). This gets to the heart of why historians have traditionally rejected any association with the novel, fearing that it could undermine or overwhelm and aestheticize realism.

Maria Margaronis outlines the difficulties of writing an historical novel for the modern writer noting the belief that:

> the worst historical crimes of the twentieth century (especially the Nazi genocide of the Jews and Stalin's gulag) are literally unspeakable, and that only those who lived through them – only a Primo Levi or a Nadezhda Mandelstam – have the right to break the silence (Margaronis 2008, 139).

Levi died in 1987 and Mandelstam in 1980 so does this mean that once survivors have gone we can no longer talk about or examine such events as using 'the classical idea of authenticity: the person speaking is the person who saw these things' (Margaronis 2008, 139)? Neither the historical novelist nor, usually, the historian is a direct witness to events but must reconstruct the past, so to claim one is 'false' and the other 'true' is naive at best.

Further supporting White's claim that the divide is simulated, we can identify a parallel move by practitioners of the historical novel towards realism as a result of criticism. This occurs at the same moment as we see historians distancing themselves from fiction in the pursuit of rigour. Stevens investigates not just early examples of the historical novel, but the criticism that accompanied them and, she argues, contributed to popularising the genre. She notes the role of critics in shaping it:

> by praising what they saw as good historical fiction, and especially by condemning what they saw as generic failure, reviewers performed a disciplinary function, establishing rules for the genre that still largely obtain today (Stevens 2010, 124).

These 'rules' centre on the presentation of historical events and details. Stevens identified the development of the genre, along with the increasing seriousness with which authors pursue research as:

> a movement from the use of legendary tales in the historical romance to a dependence on more scholarly historical and antiquarian works, and the strategies of formal realism in the historical novel involve more detailed portrayals of historical milieus, including authenticating features such as footnotes and learned prefaces (Stevens 2010, 4).

Research and the methodologies applied by authors are, for Stevens, a sign of the maturing of the genre, and these 'authenticating features', along with the inclusion of author's notes, seek to deflect criticism. Getting the facts straight becomes fundamental for authors as well as critics, as 'in both types of writing a set of concerns emerges, including a concern for the morality of works and their suitability for younger readers, an interest in their depictions of historical

manners and figures, and an identification of anachronistic moments in the novels' (Stevens 2010, 128). De Groot's charge that historical fiction is undefinable, due to fiction equating to falsity, is not borne out by the focus on 'getting it right', so we can move on to looking at whether 'history is fiction' (De Groot 2016, 3).

History = fiction?

Obviously, the past is not fiction, as certain events really did happen, but history and the past are not the same thing; the one being an incomplete and limited representation of the other. To represent the past, De Groot argues, 'both novelist and historian are using trope, metaphor, prose, narrative style' (De Groot 2016, 113), which is true, but it is not clear that this amounts to history being fiction. As noted earlier, White describes the professionalisation of history as premised on the conscious decoupling from the techniques used by earlier historical writings. The historian aims to 'expunge every hint of the fictive, or merely imaginable, from his discourse, to eschew the techniques of the poet and orator, and to forego what were regarded as the intuitive procedures of the maker of fictions in his apprehension of reality' (White 1978, 123). This, however, has not been entirely successful:

> Viewed simply as verbal artefacts, histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another. We cannot easily distinguish between them on formal grounds unless we approach them with specific preconceptions about the kinds of truth that each is supposed to deal in. But the aim of the writer of a novel must be the same as that of the writer of a history. Both wish to provide a verbal image of "reality" (White 1978, 122).

White is clear that 'histories and novels' use the same literary form, and, as he also notes, history does not have its own technical language, like a science such as chemistry, so the tools to hand are the same, making the outputs appear 'indistinguishable'. Narrative, in particular, is a shared device, but White made a distinction, even while explaining how close the two disciplines are, describing the novelist as piecing together 'imaginary events, whereas historians are dealing with real ones' (White 1978, 125). He has not adopted the extreme postmodernist stance that history is a variety of fiction, but argued that it makes use of the same toolbox.

There is general agreement that history is narrative, like fiction, with historians such as Tosh having stated 'narrative too is a form the historian shares with the creative writer – especially the novelist and the epic poet' (Tosh 2015, 125). Munslow has gone further; he acknowledges that history is a 'fictive construction' and describes the historian as working with the 'story space' to 'impose an order through interpretation' as well as making 'authorial decisions' (Munslow 2007, 124-7). He concludes that 'the fundamental mechanics

and rules of authoring a narrative do not change' for the historian, as compared to the fiction writer (Munslow 2007, 127). There is a rejection of an opposition between 'history and fiction', but Munslow does not collapse the two terms, retaining a distinction between 'the "non-history narrative" and the "history narrative"' as 'the reality of the past is a fundamental constraint on the nature of the history' (Munslow 2007, 126-8). Even allowing for the possibility that history can be false, intentionally or unintentionally, history is not fiction, although it uses the same techniques.

Is the historical novel different from the novel?

De Groot's argument that '"historical fiction" is not something definable and comprehensible' (De Groot 2016, 3) falls away, if the two terms are neither in opposition nor the same. We must return, therefore, to where we started, with Lukács' contention that the historical novel is not distinct from the novel, as there is no 'single question of importance' (Lukács [1937] 1962, 242) which applies to it alone.

It is De Groot who, amongst the modern critics, has the most to say about the difference between the novel and the historical novel. He argues that:

> The historical novel, then, is similar to other forms of novel-writing in that it shares a concern with realism, development of character, authenticity. Yet fundamentally it entails an engagement on the part of the reader (possibly unconsciously) with a set of tropes, settings and ideas that are particular, alien and strange. The experience of writing, reading and understanding historical fiction is markedly different from that of a novel set in the contemporary world (De Groot 2010, 4).

Setting aside De Groot's assumption that 'realism, development of character, authenticity' are the 'concern' of the novel, it is the contrast between the familiarity of our current world and the difference of the historical past which he initially sees as requiring a fuller 'engagement' by the reader and, implicitly, the writer. As readers, and writers, we are used to imagining ourselves into characters to walk in their shoes. The further that a world is from our own, the more difficult that task becomes, and the greater the demand on the reader's attention. Historical fiction is, following De Groot's argument, different from contemporary fiction, in that it forces the reader to pay more attention. This does not take account of the complexity of the text without its setting.

In the six years between the publication of *The Historical Novel* (2010) and *Remaking History* (2016), De Groot's thinking shifted. He uses the example of Hamlet's 'What's Hecuba to him?' (*Hamlet*, II, ii, 563-4) speech to explore the space between the understanding of then and the enacting of now, which he argues is 'inherent in all historical fictions' (De Groot 2016, 8). The play within the play arouses emotion in Hamlet, and the audience, but both are aware of its falseness. The representation of the past enfranchises the viewer by

showing and revealing, by staging the internal historiographic debate of each text. An audience can see the joins. Fundamental to the encounter with the historical text is the desire for a wholeness of representation that understands that the text is fundamentally a representation (De Groot 2016, 8).

It is not just the strangeness of the past the reader must contend with, but the recognition that there is a performance of 'pastness' with which they are being asked to engage; an implicit duality. Yet the readers' identification with this performance allows empathy to develop, so, like Hamlet, the reader can be moved while under the spell of the narrative. De Groot connects this, in the historical novel at least, with a demand for realism:

> The realistic heft is what is looked for in the novels - reviewers regularly emphasize the authenticity, the affective impact, of historical fiction (it smells right, it feels right, the snap and tang of the past are communicated effectively) (De Groot 2016, 14).

De Groot points to this in his review of Hilary Mantel's novel, *Wolf Hall*, but does not note the trend of having historians, even those whose field is far from the period in question, review historical fiction. An example of the practice is TV historian and classicist Bettany Hughes reviewing *Bring Up the Bodies* for *The Telegraph*.

Hughes' review of *Bring Up the Bodies* explicitly connects detail with the doubling effect, saying, 'as with the great mimetic historians of the 19th century, by corralling this kind of vivid detail, Mantel encourages us to be in two times at once' (Hughes, 2015). The 'vivid detail' provided by Mantel helps the reader connect with the past, but they still maintain a connection to the present, a kind of 'what's Cromwell to us?'

Different rules for the novelist vs the historian?

In his preface to Jenkins' *Re-thinking History*, Munslow puts his finger on the fundamental difference between the historian and the novelist, saying, 'moreover, we cannot empathise with people in the past because not only is it plainly impossible to "get inside someone else's head", but to translate another's intentions from their actions is an epistemological step too far' (Jenkins 2003, xiii). The historian cannot take the empathetic leap, constrained as they are by theory and practice, but the novelist can. Lukács made the point that 'the "cult of facts" is a miserable surrogate for this intimacy with the people's historical life' (Lukács [1937] 1962, 253). Lukács was an advocate for either a scholarly presentation by the historian, or an artistic one by the novelist. The two were distinct to Lukács, and the artistic presentation must privilege a truthful spirit over facts. He gave as an example the portrayal of his great hero Marx, and stated that what is known from historical sources is not enough to give a satisfying picture; 'this would all be historically true, but would it bring us any

nearer to Marx's great personality? Despite the authenticity of all the individual features this study could be that of any mediocre scholar or bad politician' (Lukács [1937] 1962, 308). He admitted to preferring a less factually accurate depiction, which has more of the interior of the man, as facts about Marx could only represent the exterior, without succeeding in bringing the character to life. According to Lukács and Munslow, the limitations imposed on the historian do not allow for the engagement with character required by the novel.

In recognising the advantages the techniques of the realist novel provides, Lukács has not accounted for the impact of engaging with the historical record in how the historical novel is approached by the writer and the reader. He has failed to consider how this complicates the 'problems of content and form' (Lukács [1937] 1962, 242). There are clearly similarities between the contemporary and the historical novel, but we should not overlook or minimise the disparities. Different expectations and standards apply, probably due to historical fiction's link to history writing, and the impact of the split with history in the nineteenth century. Having examined both De Groot's and Lukács' separate reasons for not defining historical fiction, and finding the barriers scalable, it is time to move on to developing a definition.

How have the practitioners defined historical fiction?

In the absence of a useful model amongst the academic studies, the Historical Novel Society seems the next logical place to look. It provides the following definition:

> There are problems with defining historical novels, as with defining any genre. When does "contemporary" end, and "historical" begin? What about novels that are part historical, part contemporary? And how much distortion of history will we allow before a book becomes more fantasy than historical?
>
> There will never be a satisfactory answer to these questions, but these are the arbitrary decisions we've made.
>
> To be deemed historical (in our sense), a novel must have been written at least fifty years after the events described, or have been written by someone who was not alive at the time of those events (who therefore approaches them only by research).
>
> We also consider the following styles of novel to be historical fiction for our purposes: alternate histories (e.g. Robert Harris' *Fatherland)*, pseudo-histories (e.g. Umberto Eco's *Island of the Day Before*), time-slip novels (e.g. Barbara Erskine's *Lady of Hay*), historical fantasies (e.g. Bernard Cornwell's *King Arthur* trilogy) and multiple-time novels (e.g. Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*) (Lee 2017).

This definition starts by outlining the difficulties involved before offering something partial and 'arbitrary'. Sitting in the middle of Fleishman's '40-60' (Fleishman 1971, 3) year range, Lee gave 'at least fifty years' as the gap needed to make a book historical, but specified that this is between when the 'novel must have been written' and 'the events described'. This makes the author the determining factor in whether a novel is historical, and even allows that the fifty-year rule can be breached, if the novel was written by someone who was not alive at the historical moment depicted. Curiously, there is no consideration of the reader's position. This would mean that the very recent past could be considered historical, as long as the writer approaches that past 'only by research'. This alters the notion that the historical novel is determined from an absolute, if arbitrary, amount of time passing, in the same way that an object becomes an antique once it is a hundred years old. Instead it becomes a relative term, which applies in relation to the specific author. In the hands of a writer born after 1985, for example, the events of the British miners' strike could make for an historical novel, although for a writer alive at the time of the events, it would be excluded under Lee's definition.

Sarah Johnson has discussed a number of alternative definitions. Johnson questions whether any potential definition should be 'relative' or absolute, and, if 'relative,' should this be in relation to the author or the reader (Johnson 2002)? The description 'fiction set in the past' is considered, but is dismissed by Johnson as too simple, as is the contention that 'all novels are historical, but some are more historical than others' (Johnson 2002). She does, however, provide the definition used by the *Historical Novels Review* – 'a novel which is set fifty or more years in the past, and one in which the author is writing from research rather than personal experience' (Johnson 2002). This has similarities to the Historical Novel Society's definition, in that 'fifty years' is the amount of time which has to pass before a novel becomes historical, but the definitions do not agree, which is curious, as the society produces the magazine. There is no exception to the fifty-year rule, and the author must not be using 'personal experience'. This means our putative book based on the miners' strike will not be considered 'historical fiction' unless it is written in 2035 or later.

When is the past historical?

The question of how far back we have to go before the past is 'historic' is answered by Margaret Atwood as follows: 'well, roughly, I suppose you could say it's anything before the time at which the novel-writer came to consciousness. That seems fair enough' (Atwood 1998, 1510). Atwood's linking of 'historic' to the 'consciousness' of the writer seems to imply that it is the lack of 'personal experience' of the time period which makes a novel historical. This provides the rationale lacking from definitions which impose an arbitrary time

period as a qualification. This also connects to how Jenkins defines history. She states that 'unlike direct memory (itself suspect), history relies on someone else's eyes and voice; we see through an interpreter who stands between past events and our readings of them' (Jenkins 2003, 14). The writer of historical fiction has to access the time period only through sources, and it is the removal of the possibility of direct access to the time period which makes a novel historical. The historic past is not the writer's past; it belongs to someone else, and must be imagined. This mediation of events through 'someone else's eyes and voice' means the writer has to bridge the gap for themselves as well as for the reader.

Atwood's language is tentative, and she uses qualifiers such as 'roughly' and 'I suppose you could say', so I would push the definition further to make it less indeterminate. It might be difficult to assess the age at which a writer became 'conscious'. Margaronis uses Atwood's definition to describe *Atonement* as Ian McEwan's 'first true historical fiction' on the basis that it is 'set almost entirely in the time before he was born' (Margaronis 2008, 141) so let us say that the 'historic' past for the writer is what happened before they were born. An individual could not have had 'personal experience of those events' which happened before they entered the world, so they must have accessed them only through research. Writers themselves point to the necessity of using others eyes and voices to write historical fiction; as Ian McEwan says, 'The writer of a historical novel may resent his dependence on the written record, on memoirs and eyewitness accounts, in other words on other writers, but there is no escape' (cited in Margaronis 2008, 146). The writer has to utilise 'someone else's eyes and voice' and project their own historical imagination, not to a known past of which they have experience, but into the strangeness of a past which exists before the self. It is the act of bridging that gap which makes a novel intentionally historical. My definition is, therefore, that the historic past is any time before the writer was born.

Reader vs author?

In conceptualising a time before they existed, the writer plays with bones, prefiguring their own inevitable mortification or, as Barthes might put it, the author enters their own death as writing begins. In literary terms, 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author' (Graddol & Boyd-Barrett 1994, 170), so how do we reconcile this with a definition centred only on the author? What is the position of the reader in relation to the text? The age span of a reader may vary by as much as century – as mentioned already, 'suitability for younger readers' was an early concern for historical novelists and helped shaped the genre (Stevens 2010, 128). If we determine what the historical past is in relation to the writer, must we also apply the same rule for the reader, or is the reader's position privileged over that of the writer? Foucault con-

ceptualises history as engagement between the writer, their text, and the reader, admitting a role for the author, which Barthes rejects as a limiting factor (Munslow 2000, 109). Even allowing the text primacy, content and form are connected, so we should consider genre. If, as already noted, genre divides the historian and the historical novelist who take the same traces of the past, and who, by applying separate methodologies, produce very different outcomes, then I would argue that methodology separates the writer of contemporary from the writer of historical fiction, as the writer of historical fiction must consider the relationship between their text and the historical record as part of its creation, thereby providing a bridge for the reader. Simply put, 'for those living in it, the past was their present' (Atwood 1998, 1511), so contemporary fiction does not become historical fiction over time, as its relationship with the historical record does not change. A novel can only be considered historical when the setting is before the writer was born, as then the writer has to reconcile the historic past with their own time. This is a convention of form in the novel's creation, and should not limit readings of the text.

The reader's relationship to the text, however, should not be discounted. Arguably, the imposition of a fixed amount of time before a novel can be considered historical is a mechanism to safeguard against the reader having 'personal experience' of the time period, and Fleishman was explicit about this in his definition (Fleishman 1971, 3). Johnson noted that 'to a reader born in the 1960s, novels set during the Second World War may be considered "suitably historical," but readers who vividly remember the 1940s may not agree' (Johnson 2002). She then asks 'should the definition be relative, so that a novel can be considered historical by one reader, but not by someone else?' (Johnson 2002), but shies away from exploring this idea further. In the example I used earlier, a novel set during the 1985 miners' strike would be read very differently by someone who recollected the period, compared to a reader born after 1985. An historical novel may then only be experienced as historical if the setting is before both the writer and the reader were born. For categorisation purposes, the label 'historical novel' may be applied in relation to the author, but its status at consumption is also dependent on the position of the reader. We can therefore talk about the historical novel as being a relative concept. Those texts which are set in the past, but do not meet the criterion on the part of the writer, reader, or both, may be termed 'novels of the recent past' (Fleishman 1971, 3).

Towards a definition

Having formulated an initial definition, I must come back to the question of the styles of novel enumerated in Lee's definition for the Historical Novel Society. These sub genres can be seen as outliers within the overall genre, and therefore provide the most challenge to any definition. There are some prag-

matic rules that could be applied, for example, it is an historical novel if more than half the text is set in the period before the writer was born, and this equally applies to the reader. This accounts for what Lee terms 'time-slip novels' and 'multiple-time novels'. De Groot limits the historical novel to one that operates 'within a factual-led framework' (De Groot 2010, 19), but the incorporation of some fantastical elements does not necessarily conflict with this. 'Alternate histories' and 'pseudo-histories' are more problematic. In presenting a distortion, such as Nazi Germany winning World War II, an author is no longer allowing readers to join them on the shared plain of history, but is shifting the action to a parallel realm unlimited by the traces of our past. Therefore, due to their nature, such texts are more akin to speculative fiction; indeed, they could be termed speculative fiction with a historical setting, and might more properly be seen as a separate, albeit related, sub-genre of speculative fiction.

To recap, therefore, a novel is historical when the main setting is a time before the writer was born, and the writer operates within a factual-led framework without seeking to distort the past with an alternative or pseudo history. The novel is consumed as an historical novel when this is true, and when the main setting is before the reader was born. A novel set in the past but after the writer and/or reader was born can be termed a novel of the recent past, and alternate histories and pseudo-histories can be seen as historically-set speculative fiction.

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