

# Journal of Historical Fictions

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# From Elitism to Democratisation: A Half-Century of Hercules in Children's Literature

Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University

**Abstract:** *This paper focuses on retellings of the Hercules myth for children, over a period of fifty years, showing how presentations of the myth for children have changed during this period, under the influence of changing ideas, and against the background of the perception of the classical world as elitist. It demonstrates that although Hercules was originally depicted in a reverent manner, by the end of the twentieth century a change was occurring, as a result of the screen adaptations that had popularized the hero. These led to a resurgence in number of books about the hero, and a change of attitude towards him, with Hercules treated humorously and with far less deference than before. More recently this has developed into a trend whereby amateur writers have appropriated the hero for themselves, adapting the original tale with an enthusiastic abandon, a move that also reflects the recent popularity of classical myth in the digital age of globalisation. Limited as the present study is, the Hercules books for children demonstrate that the so-called democratization of classics is real, ongoing, and reflected even in a very specific group of works targeted at a particular readership.*

**Keywords:** *Children's literature, mythology, popular culture, Hercules, Heracles*

Over the past few years there has been a burgeoning of interest and research into the role that elitism plays in our understanding and perceptions of the classical world. Scholars have examined the role that elitism and class have played, and continue to play, in interaction with Greece and Rome.<sup>1</sup> A new openness exists in examining post-colonial receptions of classical material and the cultural hegemony of traditional sources, with a plethora of journals, blogs and conference panels<sup>2</sup> considering the so-called democratization of classics.

This research has shown that over the last half century, the role of Classical Studies has changed enormously in the Western English-speaking world. In the middle of the twentieth century, knowledge of Classics was still seen as a mark of intellect and good education, left over from the period in which the

<sup>1</sup> There is a large bibliography on the issue of classical studies and its changing role, both in the United States and Britain, the two areas under discussion in this paper. See for example, Culham and Edmunds(1989); Hardwick and Harrison (2013); Adler (2016); Stray (2018).

<sup>2</sup> There was, for example, a panel at the Celtic Classics Conference in 2017, organized by Jenny Messenger and Rossana Zetti, on this topic.

knowledge of Latin and Greek gave distinct advantages, and ensured one a place in the higher echelons of society.<sup>3</sup> With the social revolutions of the 1960s, in particular feminism, the civil-rights movement, and the beginning of gay-rights activism, however, the ancient world came to be regarded as the bastion of conservatism, and thus seen as in opposition to such ideas. In the brave new world of equality, Classical Studies was an elitist profession, which divided the haves from the have-nots, the privileged from the oppressed.<sup>4</sup> As postmodernism emerged, attitudes towards the ancient world changed again, and the world of Greece and Rome was given new life, in the form of receptions of the ancient world that not only legitimized but even encouraged reinterpreting, recasting, rewriting, and reinventing that world (see Maurice 2013). Such new creations particularly seized on classical myth, which appeared in various genres of popular culture, such as film, drama, television and literature.

Receptions of the ancient world in children's literature have featured in varying quantities, at each stage of this evolution. Research into the field has in recent years begun to attract the attention of scholars, with collections by Lisa Maurice, Katarzyna Marciniak (who also heads the ERC-funded international project, *Our Mythical Childhood*), Helen Lovatt and Owen Hodkinson, and Deborah Roberts and Sheila Murnaghan (Maurice 2015; Marciniak 2016; <http://www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/>; Lovatt and Hodkinson 2018 and Roberts and Murnaghan 2018). These works examine the different ways that ancient Greece and Rome have had an impact on children's culture and literature, discussing the popularisation and adaptation of ancient texts and myths for juvenile audiences, and the reasons for such manipulations. Such studies provide the context for theoretical approaches to children's literature and the classical world.

As these works demonstrate, children's literature and culture impose particular conditions on these receptions. By its very nature, any book that is written for or given to children involves by definition an element of ideology.<sup>5</sup> As Seth Lerer puts it, 'the study of children's literature is cultural studies' (Lerer 2008, 9). Since the classical world has so often been a vehicle for elitism within

<sup>3</sup> See Stray (1998) 280-297.

<sup>4</sup>As Edith Hall and Henry Stead have shown (Classics and Class: <http://www.classicsandclass.info/groundwork/> (accessed 21 July 2019), and forthcoming, 2019)), the influence of the classics among the working classes of Britain was actually far greater than has generally been recognized. Nevertheless, the public perception of classics as something for the elite was so pervasive that it has consistently coloured the attitudes of wider society, reinforcing this stereotype listed here.

<sup>5</sup> In Peter Hunt's words, 'It is arguably impossible for a children's book ...not to be educational or influential in some way; it cannot help but reflect an ideology and, by extension, didacticism....Children's writers are in a position of singular responsibility in transmitting cultural values.' Hunt (1994) 3, also quoted by Maurice (2017) 4.

traditional education, such works on Greco-Roman themes are often even more loaded than other works for young people. There is both a belief that it is in some way ‘good’ for children to learn about the Greeks and Romans, and also a recognition that these ancient tales have high entertainment value, providing a tension between the two aspects of didacticism and amusement. This tension is often highlighted further by the fact that classical myth is frequently at odds with contemporary ideals and educational and moral principles; yet, despite these difficulties, it is often specifically directed towards children, and targeted with a specific message for its intended audience.

This paper focuses on a particular group of receptions, namely retellings of the Hercules myth for children, over a period of fifty years. As such it provides an opportunity to study how presentations of the myth for children have changed during this period, under the influence of these changing ideas, and against the background of the perception of the classical world as elitist. I examine a range of books published between 1970 and 2018, in both the UK and the USA, focusing on two central categories; books used in reading schemes, and general children’s books not intended for classroom use.<sup>6</sup> During this period, a number of retellings of the Hercules myth appeared, with two periods seeing particular waves of popularity; in the early 1970s, only two were published, followed by another two in the early 1980s, but a rash of post-Disney’s *Hercules* (dir. Ron Clements and John Musker, 1997) books were produced in the late 1990s and the first years of the second millennium. This was then followed by a lull, preceding a further flurry of new books centring on the hero that have appeared over the last eight years.<sup>7</sup>

## Hercules, 1970-2003

### *The American Hercules*

From the earliest days, Greece and Rome has played a large role in influencing the founders of American society, and had been the cornerstone of traditional American education. Nevertheless, over time, with the development of the humanities curriculum and its stress on ‘Great Books’, the word ‘classics’ was extended, as Eric Adler has explained, ‘to define any time-tested works of high culture, rather than to denote the study of Greco-Roman antiquity. The Great Books — all of them — were “classics”’ (Adler 2016, 40). It is within such an understanding that the American Hercules books from the 1970s and 1980s fall; all were written by highly respected authors, and produced by weighty

<sup>6</sup> I exclude both textbooks/academic-style books for use in school, and other genres, such as graphic novels and comics, which have their own agendas and conventions.

<sup>7</sup> I discount republications of books from the early part of the twentieth century, since they clearly cannot be representative of contemporary values; they do, however, reflect the current interest in the hero himself.

publishers, who aimed to educate and improve the minds of the young with worthy texts, and fall within collections of books that are thought of as ‘classic’. These are all extensive prose retellings of the Hercules myth, text heavy books designed to have literary merit, and to introduce children to a tale with which they should be familiar if they are to be regarded as well-educated. The four books in question are Ian Serrailier’s *Heracles the Strong* (1970); Robert Newman’s *The Twelve Labors of Hercules* (1972); Bernard Evslin’s *Hercules* (1984) and I. M. Richardson’s *The Adventures of Hercules* (1983).

All of these books focus on the figure of Hercules because of his status as a classical hero, and thereby, reflecting the elitist attitude towards the classical past that was prevalent at the time, worthy of attention and presentation to young readers. It is notable that the first two, published at the start of the 1970s, preceded a period of turbulence with regard to this outlook in the United States. As recent scholarship has shown, the decades immediately following this were the ones in which major controversies and soul searching rocked the classics departments of North America (Adler 2016, 40). This period saw disputes between traditionalists and conservatives, and anti-traditionalists and progressives, as questions were raised regarding the perceived dominance of dead white males over education, to the exclusion of women, ethnic minorities and non-heterosexual groups. Despite the fact that classicists themselves were only on the margins of such debates, their research field uniquely managed to unite both sides of the debate in the conclusion that classics, and the study of the ancient languages in particular, was ‘stodgy and elitist... a discipline so outmoded that it failed to win even the traditionalists’ assent’ (Adler 2016, 40). It is surely no coincidence that tales of Greek mythology for children, until then a staple of juvenile publishing, dried up at this point, with no Hercules stories published for more than a decade.

Hercules came to prominence for children in the United States with his arrival on screen in the last years of the twentieth century. *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* hit television screens in 1995, introducing a new generation of youth to the hero, as portrayed by Kevin Sorbo. The series continued until 1999, while its spin-offs, *Young Hercules* and the even more spectacularly successful *Xena: Warrior Princess* ran from 1998-9 and 1995-2001 respectively. Meanwhile, in 1997, Disney released *Hercules*, the 35th animated feature in the Walt Disney Animated Classics series. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, who had already achieved notable success with *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Aladdin* (1992), it was a successful movie, being generally well reviewed and making a total of \$99 million in revenue in the United States during its theatrical release and \$252,712,101 worldwide ([https://movies.fandom.com/wiki/Hercules\\_\(1997\)](https://movies.fandom.com/wiki/Hercules_(1997))), accessed 13 November 2019). The popularity of the film led to a further direct-to-video prequel *Hercules: Zero to Hero*, and a syndicated Disney TV series, *Hercules: The*

*Animated Series*. Classical mythology in general, and Hercules in particular, were suddenly exciting and attractive popular heroes.

As a result of this popularity, Hercules suddenly begins to appear in more children's books at this period than before, with four volumes being published in 1997 alone, one more in 2000, and another, a pocket board book to accompany the *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* series, in 1998. These Hercules volumes capitalise blatantly on the new interest in and excitement at Hercules. The *Legendary Journeys* board book is a by-product of the television series, while Kathryn Lasky and Mark Hess' *Hercules, The Man, the Myth, the Hero* (1997), was published by the New York based Hyperion books, a company owned by the Disney corporation. Similarly Bob Blaisdell's *The Story of Hercules* (1997) explicitly exploits these contemporary depictions of Hercules, with the back cover explaining enticingly, 'youngsters already familiar with Hercules from television and film versions will enjoy reading about other feats by the intrepid hero'. While two of the works are Basal readers used in schools, and quite different in content and tone from the screen productions, even these capitalize on the popularity of Hercules, with whom children were now familiar, as a result of the screen depictions.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the rise of Hercules as a result of popular culture products aimed specifically at youth, the approach by authors, themselves representatives of earlier generations, was still one of venerability when dealing with the classics, the subject matter treated weightily. Blaisdell's book is a typical output of the Dover *Children's Thrift Classics* series, which primarily reprints works in the public domain and markets them at low cost. These include classic children's books, folk and fairy tales and mythology, all literature deemed by publishers and educators to be suitable reading matter for youngsters. The Hercules volume is a detailed and somewhat idealised narration of the ancient hero and his exploits, culminating in his apotheosis and ultimate marriage to Hebe. Similar in tone is Georges Moroz's version, published in two editions by imprints of the American company, Random House books,<sup>9</sup> which, like Blaisdell's work, is a comprehensive retelling that employs relatively sophisticated language. It also adopts a scholarly tone, including a quote from Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, and includes a list of the gods, a map of ancient Greece, an introduction, bibliography and an eleven-page afterword, which is academic and intellectual in tone, and seems to be more aimed at parents than young readers. This is indicated by the concluding paragraph, which talks of, 'a link between Greek

<sup>8</sup> Marc Cerasini's *The Twelve Labors of Hercules* (Random House, 1997), and Della Rowland's *Hercules and the Golden Apples* (McGraw-Hill, 2000). On the characteristics of such readers, see Horning (2010) 121-131, and below part II.

<sup>9</sup> The book was published as *Hercules - The Complete Myths of a Legendary Hero* by Laurel-Leaf Books in 1997, and then as *Hercules, The Twelve Labors* a year later by Yearling Books.



culture and more ancient cultures from the neighboring Near East', the Indo-European connections, and possible echoes of 'magical and religious practices dating back to the prehistory of mankind' (p. 131).

It is clear that the later works, published in the wake of the popularisation of the character, continue in the same vein of worthy reverence towards the subject matter that the earlier books had demonstrated. Moroz's approach in particular glorifies the classical Greek tradition, which he clearly regards as worthy of admiration, talking of 'what is specifically Greek in these stories, the beautiful complexity of some of the narratives, and the peculiar relationship between men and gods, with their unmistakably Greek way of highlighting the divine in man and the human in the gods' (p. 131). This is actually a contrast to the earliest days of American children's literature, when Nigel Hawthorne produced 'free, child-friendly versions of the myths' that were 'distinctly American reinventions', that aimed to throw off the stuffiness of the Old World, as represented by Ancient Greece, and embrace the excitements of the New (see Murnaghan and Roberts 2018, 43-4). It seems that, despite the rebirth of Hercules as a popular hero, which inspired the publication of books centred around the figure, the elitist approach to the Classical past remained in the style of the works produced at this time.

The American books from the twentieth century not only maintain this attitude of reverence to the subject matter but also present the myth in a didactic manner, teaching moral lessons. Hercules, as a figure, does of course present challenges to such an approach, since the tale in its traditional form is not one often regarded as edifying for youth, with illegitimacy, madness, child-murder and cross dressing all featuring. Thus, as in the Disney productions, the myth has been sanitised and softened in these retellings, in order to make it suitable for young audiences (see Maurice 2019b). Thus Hercules may be described as attacking, rather than murdering, his children (Richardson), and the labours may be a test from Zeus of the hero's worth, rather than atonement for such an act (Blaisdell). Hercules' parentage is sometimes fudged over (Serraillier), and in one case (Evslin), the hero is not even the son of Zeus, but rather of the kindly Amphytrio. Hera's enmity is caused purely by jealousy, since she heard rumours of the child's godliness and therefore immediately decided that he was the child of Zeus, albeit not entirely without cause, 'For, as king of the gods, he had always felt free to take as many wives as he liked' (p.6). Other sanitizing elements include the removal of the Amazons and any element of rape in the story of Nessus, who in this version is no longer even a centaur, but 'a young warrior of Calydon... who was a marvellous horseman. He rode so well that his body seemed to grow out of the horse's body', and therefore earned the nickname of 'the centaur' (p. 131). Any sexuality is removed or softened, with Omphale appearing only in Newman's version.

Efforts to turn Hercules into a paradigm for young readers go beyond plot changes, however. The hero had long been a figure who, despite the darker elements of the tale, has been utilised as an educational or moral role model, and this is a prominent feature of the American books.<sup>10</sup> Such an approach in fact has long roots in the United States. From the time of the Founding Fathers and through the antebellum period, classics had been the mainstay of the educational system:

Americans... continued to use the classics in the same way that the founding generation had used them, as a favored source of symbols, knowledge, and ideas... antebellum Americans used classical symbols to communicate, to impress, and to persuade. They continued to derive from the classics both models and antimodels of personal behavior, social practice, and government form. They persisted in viewing the study of the classics as an indispensable training in virtue (Richard 2009, x).

Even with the fall from supremacy of Classic Studies in education, the idea that they could, and should, be used to teach correct behaviour continued and remains apparent in these books. The message of Richardson's *The Adventures of Hercules* is the universality of Hercules' heroism and his innate nobility; Serrailier's version glorifies the hero's physical strength and the way in which he uses his abilities to overcome obstacles and Evslin's *Hercules* explicitly states the writer's educational agenda of providing an inspirational example for youth, saying,

boys and girls, dreaming into the fire, see pictures in the heart of the flame and pin their own face on Hercules as he fights the Nemean Lion and the Hydra and the three-bodied giant... And these boys and girls, dreaming into the fire, promise themselves that they will be brave when they grow up and always fight those shapes of evil called monsters and always dare to be gentle, too (p. 140).

In Evslin's *Hercules*, a Christianizing spin is also placed on the story, with the hero a selfless character who undergoes apotheosis in order to teach the gods humanity:

Behold the man,' said Athena. 'He, lying there, was the best and strongest, the bravest and most gentle of humankind. Let him join us here on Olympus and teach us to be human, too, before man, learning cruelty from us, destroys himself.' 'So be it,' said Zeus... So Hercules was taken among the gods and lived among them, teaching them humanity. And Hera pretended it was all her idea (p. 138).

<sup>10</sup> See Stafford (2012), esp. 201-244 on the hero's post-Classical reception. For a recent analysis of the element of conflict so prevalent in the reception of the Hercules myth, see Rowland (2016). For Hercules as an allegorical role model, see Lerer (2008) 22. On the Prodicus myth, see Grayling (2011) 11-22,

Lasky and Hess' volume also invokes Christianity, presenting a Jesus-like Hercules, whose ultimate death brings a cleansing from shame through his acceptance and the fire of the pyre. The invoking of Christianity, overtly or implicitly, is a long established tradition (see Stafford 2012, 202-218). Lasky herself writes in an author's note on the final page of the (unpaginated) book:

The message of the superhero is a compelling one for children as well as adults, that through toiling and suffering, people can overcome evil. Or, as one classicist<sup>11</sup> wrote of Hercules, 'Born a man – risen to god; suffered toils – conquered heaven'.

Hercules for children, then, in late twentieth century America, is a more than just a muscleman; he is also a moral paradigm exemplifying American virtues, and subliminally presenting the idea that the classical world, that bastion of elitism, is the place in which these virtues are rooted, though it should be stressed that he is only a paradigm for male readers, and the nature of Hercules makes him an uncomfortable option from the point of view of gender considerations so important in the second millennium. In the twentieth century, however, Hercules became an ideal figure who could be popularly employed by authors keen to educate the young.

### ***Hercules in Britain***

Very few Hercules books were published in Britain in the period that saw nine separate works appear in the United States. By contrast, the British output up to 2003 consists of only two books, both of them published in the later years of the period. The absence of the hero from British children's literature may be partly a result of the traditional division in British reception of the classical world for children along the lines of Roman history/Greek mythology, with the ancient world most commonly met in the form of historical fiction.<sup>12</sup> This particularly focuses on Roman history, which is familiar ground for British children due to its inclusion in the national curriculum (Hodkinson and Lovatt 2018, 11). In contrast to the USA, where the ancient world is covered in the social studies sections of the educational curriculum, and includes both mythology and a wider perspective on ancient history, the Rome-focussed British educational system places less emphasis on Greek mythology (see Provenzo, Jr. 2009, 2.732-34). This division along national lines probably also plays a part in the difference between the two outputs, although the comparative size of the United States in

<sup>11</sup> That classicist was Wilamowitz (1895) 38, 'Mensch gewesen, Gott geworden; Mühen edordet, Himmel erworben'.

<sup>12</sup> For the Greek mythology and Roman history as the two main receptions of the ancient world in children's literature, see Maurice (2015) 1-3. Hodkinson and Lovatt (2018) 32 n.7. point out that this division 'is complicated by the fact that much of the 'Greek' myth is derived from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*', but since the most commonly retold element of the Hercules myth, the twelve labours, does not feature in Ovid, this is less problematic when dealing with the Hercules books.

relation to the United Kingdom must be a contributory factor towards the smaller number produced in Britain.

Hercules' absence is still somewhat notable even within this wider context however, for other heroes do feature in juvenile British popular culture at this period; in the mid-1980s, Odysseus featured in two popular television series, while Theseus was adapted for children's television anthology series *Jackanory* by Tony Robinson (Miles 2018, 158-60). Yet Hercules seems not to have the attraction at this stage that he had in the United States. Even the impact of television and film seems not have made an impact on British publishing, with none of the rise in the popularity of Hercules that occurred in the States reflected in the literary output of the United Kingdom. While the Kevin Sorbo Hercules series did not receive wide release in Britain, being shown only on the cable Sky One channel, and thereby with limited viewing potential, the same cannot be said of Disney's *Hercules*. Yet unlike in the United States, these popular culture versions did not seem to give a boost to the Greek hero's popularity in children's books.

In both of the two cases in which Hercules does feature centrally, a Christian spin is placed upon the story. James Riordan's *The Twelve Labours Of Hercules* (1997), illustrated by Christina Balit, has Hercules being described as a saviour: 'With Hercules' death, Earth had suffered a heavy loss, and Atlas' weight felt lighter. But Zeus gained an immortal son of whom he could be justly proud – the glory of Hera and the saviour of the gods!' (p. 61). In Geraldine McCaughrean's *Hercules* (2003), an extended novel in which the story was told in depth, the message is even clearer. The book, published by Oxford University Press, was part of their *Heroes* series, which also includes *Perseus* and *Theseus*. Republished in paperback two years later, this is a novel running to 121 pages, with developed characters, relationships and settings, and even including details such as the story of Prometheus, Chiron, the choice between virtue and vice, and the death of Linus. McCaughrean faced difficulties in adapting this story for children, stressing that with Hercules:

The contents make him 'unsuitable' for educational use. Also, I cannot say I like him. He just goes around killing things and stealing people's sweethearts/daughters/sons etc. He is a stranger to chastity or fidelity or unselfishness... The Greek myths are often amoral but, as heroes go, Herakles in particular makes a terrible role model for 21<sup>st</sup> century boys!<sup>13</sup>

In order to solve this problem, McCaughrean therefore reinterpreted the tale rather strangely, in order to warn against the dangers of alcohol, under the influence of which the hero kills his own children. In fact, the only positive feature McCaughrean found in Heracles was in his redeeming of Prometheus, whose story she unfortunately confused with that of Chiron:

<sup>13</sup> From an email correspondence with the author in June 2017.

The thing I like best about him is that his death redeems Prometheus from everlasting torture, but he only seems to sacrifice himself because he wants to be dead... The Christ-like Prometheus is the true hero of the story.<sup>14</sup>

This glorification of Prometheus leads to a harsh condemnation of the pitiless Olympian gods by Hercules in the Prometheus episode at the end of the book. Since McCaughrean makes the Prometheus-Christ link explicit, the book can therefore be seen as a Christianizing take on the ancient myth, whereby Christian values, and mercy in particular, are promoted.

## Hercules in the Second Millennium

### *Hercules as a Model for Literacy*

If British publishers showed little interest in producing narrations of Hercules' life for leisure reading at the cusp of the second millennium, the same cannot be said of the reading schemes used in British schools in the following years. In the UK, as in the USA, despite the differences between the two education systems with regard to schooling ages, division of educational stages, philosophy and ideology among other issues, basal readers (graded textbooks used to impart and improve literacy) have been a staple of the teaching of reading since the nineteenth century. They continue to be used in the form of reading schemes, with most of the major educational publishers producing their own programmes used in primary schools. Usually written for the six to eight year old reader, these books aim to improve reading fluency and increase enthusiasm for reading. This is reflected in the much greater emphasis placed upon fiction, as opposed to non-fiction, in these readers (see Moss and Newton 2002, 1–13). Hercules is a recurrent subject of these books, all of which focus almost exclusively on the twelve labours in their retellings.

Almost every major British reading scheme includes at least one volume on Hercules. The Usborne reading scheme features two such books, both in series two of the Usborne Young Reading books, and aimed at the six and seven year old age group: *The Amazing Adventures of Hercules* by Claudia Zeff (2004) and *Hercules The World's Strongest Man* (2011) by Alex Frith, illustrated by Linda Cavallini and Stephen Cartwright respectively. Collins, meanwhile, included *Hercules: Superhero* (2005) by Diana Redmond and Chris Mould as part of their Big Cat reading programme, aimed at ages 7–11, or key stage 2 of the British National curriculum. Tony Bradman's *Hercules the Hero* from 2013, illustrated by Steve May, is part of the White Wolves Fiction guided reading scheme, published by A & C Black, a British book publishing company that has been owned since 2002 by Bloomsbury Publishing. Finally, in 2014 the Oxford reading tree programme also published a volume, *Hercules the Hero: a Myth*

<sup>14</sup> From an email correspondence with the author in June 2017.

from *Ancient Greece*, written by Michaela Morgan, and illustrated by Glen McBeth, intended for seven to eight year olds. There are also two such books from the United States; one in the McGraw-Hill reading programme, written by Betsy Hebert and illustrated by Yevgenia Nayberg which, like the 2001 book from the same scheme, is entitled *Hercules and the Golden Apples* (2014). The second, *Hercules* (2008), by Shannon Eric Denton and illustrated by Andy Kuhn, was published by ABDO publishing, in their *Short Tales* series. It is striking that almost all of the reading scheme books are British, and that, while Hercules is thought to be a figure of interest, at least by those creating reading schemes, this is far more the case in the UK than in the USA. In the United States, basal readers were often traditionally adapted versions of classics books – *Black Beauty*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Treasure Island* and so on; the lack of a core text for the Hercules myth thus does not lend itself readily to this tradition, and may explain the lack of a comparable number of books from the United States.

It is more likely, however, that the prevalence of Hercules also reflects the stronger classical tradition within British education (see Shen 2016); there is perhaps, in Tony Bradman's words, a feeling that 'everyone should know something about' the ancient world, of which Hercules is an outstanding representative (p. 48). In Britain, the emphasis on creating an enjoyment and appreciation of reading also adds to the attraction of Hercules' colourful life as subject matter.<sup>15</sup> As a hero, Hercules does much to ease the constant tension in children's literature between appearing educational and appearing fun. He is a classical hero, and therefore a suitably worthy figure to be introduced; but he is also an exciting character whose exploits are enjoyable to read.

In addition, Hercules' story fits the requirements of reading schemes well on a practical level since the iconic twelve labours fit nicely into the short chapter structure and repetitive language required at the typical level at which the hero features. All of these books share the common features typically found in works of this genre: large font, short sentences, distinct spaces between words and lines, leaving plenty of white space on the page and clear demarcation of episodes into manageable chapters; and ample illustrations on each page (see Horning 2010, 121-131).

Most strikingly, these books are in almost every case light-hearted, and often comic, the illustrations hand drawn and with the emphasis on humour. Bradman and May's *Hercules the Hero*, for example, features cartoon style illustrations, and chapter titles such as 'Some interesting little jobs' (in which Hercules tackles the Nemean Lion and the Hydra) and 'A few busy weeks' (covering six further labours). The language is contemporary, adding a bathetic air to the

<sup>15</sup> On this aspect as an aim of British education, in contrast with that of the United States, see Wood (2015).

ancient tale, so that in Bradman's text, 'Eurystheus nearly choked on his supper when Hercules returned' (p. 22), and Cerberus is described as Eurystheus' 'new pet' (p. 41). In place of Hera's bitter enmity towards Hercules, the relationship is presented as minor intra-family bickering, which Hercules takes on in a good-natured manner, with no anguish or distress: 'Everybody liked him and thought he was terrific. Everybody, that is, except one of the Immortal Gods... Hercules was still feeling confused. But then he sighed. Hera was an Immortal Goddess, so it was his duty to obey her' (Bradman 2013, 8-9, 16).

As a larger-than-life hero, with a history of being depicted as a comic buffoon as long as that of being depicted as a tragic hero, Hercules is suited to a humorous approach which typifies such books. Yet he seems to have been only rarely presented in this manner for children before the present renderings, and in the late twentieth century American books, often seems a rather tormented figure. In an overturning of this approach, Hercules is now treated with humour in the reading schemes, in order to appeal to the young readers. This is a feature that is most probably influenced by Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson series, which approaches Greek mythology with a strong dose of juvenile humour, mixing the classical elements with the modern world and attitudes for maximum comic effect (see Morey and Nelson 2015). Yet such an irreverent approach to ancient myth is not entirely the result of the influence of Riordan's works, which in fact are themselves typical of receptions in the second millennium, and a far cry from the attitude of the previous century. Such an attitude also extends to other recent works, as we shall now see.

### ***The Postmodern Hercules: The Appropriated Hero***

Recent years have seen a change in the world of publishing, with access to digital books and technology leading to a rise in self-publishing (see Ziv 2002). Self-publishing does not have the stigma previously attached to vanity publishing, providing an inexpensive, quick, efficient, and indeed sometimes lucrative, way for an author to produce and sell books, either in digital or print form. Self-publishing is becoming more and more popular; according to one recent report, 'in 2012 fifteen of the top one hundred bestselling Kindle titles in the UK were self-published, twelve self-published authors sold more than 100,000 copies, and fifty authors earned at least £50,000 from their self-published books' (*Forbes*, 14 January 2013, quoted in Clark and Phillips 2014, 132).

The popularity of self-publishing is reflected in the fact that seven such volumes for youngsters on Hercules may be found on amazon.com, six appearing since 2016, presumably in the wake of renewed interest in the figure as a result of the two Hercules movies of 2014 (*Hercules*, dir. Brett Ratner, and *The Legend of Hercules*, dir. Renny Harlin, both 2014). Equally striking is the nature of all these books, only one of which, Simon Spence's, *Herakles, Book 5 - Early*

*Myths, Kids Books on Greek Myth* (2016), is a conventional retelling of the Hercules myth. Spence is a trained classicist, and he has an agenda and mission, which led him to publish his own series on Greek mythology, of which the Hercules volume is the fifth. This series aims ‘to bring Greek myths to young kids in a fun and exciting way, but to keep the earliest versions of the stories’. His intention was to introduce young characters to mythological figures, and ‘to excite and inspire young minds with the oldest Greek tales’ (<https://readersfavorite.com/book-review/perseus>, accessed 21 June 2018) through the inclusion of images, influenced by great art, such as classical Greek vase painting and sculpture ([https://www.goodreads.com/author\\_blog\\_posts/14808006-early-myths--bringing-the-earliest-tales-to-life](https://www.goodreads.com/author_blog_posts/14808006-early-myths--bringing-the-earliest-tales-to-life), accessed 21 June 2018).

Other recent retellings of the Hercules myth are much freer adaptations, and are decidedly modern in outlook and language. In Ryan Madison’s *Hercules, The First 6 Tasks* (2013), written by an enthusiastic amateur author, he explains that the entertainment value of the story is of greatest importance to him, and therefore he does not, ‘allow the truth to intrude too much and mess up the tale’ (Kindle loc. 22). This attitude towards ‘the truth’ explains some rather strange additions and alterations in the book. These include the fact that Hercules is here the king of Sparta, although in the confused retelling there is also a love story element with Alexander the Great and Helen of Sparta. The latter is rescued by and falls in love with Hercules, despite being betrothed to her (and Hercules’) cousin, Alexander. Later he also saves Oedipus, falls in love with Antigone (the plot of Sophocles’ *Antigone* is also inserted somewhat clumsily into the tale), goes to the Delphic oracle of Hermes, and uses ‘the magic candle of Time’ to view his earlier life. Presumably for its entertainment value, this work includes a very bizarre description of the Omphale episode, in which the cross-dressing is detailed, but then followed by a typically contemporary, amateur psychology-based statement that, ‘It was a relationship of total dependence and at the same time totally fulfilling, in which the mother is ever-present and satisfies all needs’ (Kindle loc. 770).

Lee Smyth’s *Hercules, Gods Versus Titans* (2018), the third book in the *WARRIORS* series, similarly makes various changes and additions to the story. This version retells the story of Hercules in the first person, the narrative alternating between a fictional character, ‘Ty’ (Tydeus), supposedly the grandson of Homer, and the bard himself. The king for whom Hercules performs his labours is Naxos, King of Mycenae, rather than Eurystheus, and he performs only six such labours, while the story itself is set after the Trojan War. After the sixth labour is recounted, the story then deviates widely from the Hercules myth and narrates a version of the Gigantomachy. In addition to the Hercules myth, the employment of the figure of Homer allows for the inclusion of various other myths (Prometheus, Pandora and Orion), which he retells over the course of the book. Strikingly, and clearly influenced by recent screen depictions of pagan gods



(Maurice (2109) 193-99; Tomasso (2015) 147-57), at the end of this story Hercules sacrifices himself and becomes apotheosised, while Zeus and the Olympians are killed, in a very postmodern retelling of the ancient myth.

Despite these variations, these works are still relatively straight narrations of the Hercules myth, but other recent publications deviate widely from the ancient myth, demonstrating contemporary attitudes towards the classical past with a range of most-modern interpretations. Some are barely connected to the ancient myth at all, such as the rather curious twenty-eight-page digital picture book for young children, *Heroic Hercules and the Baby Dragon* (2017), by Michael and David Sorrow, which features Hercules as a very young child. He is recognisable as an ancient character only by his Greek style clothing (sandals, a laurel wreath, beige shorts and white vest top with clasps at the shoulders) and a lone classical pillar. Despite his declaration of heroism, here defined as saving people from danger ('I'm heroic Hercules. I save people. Whenever there is danger in town I'm called upon to help' (Kindle loc. 2-3)), he has no connection with the Hercules of ancient tradition. The danger in this case turns out to be a baby dragon who is eating the mayor of the town's garden, and who needs to be returned to Patagonia. In order to accomplish this, Hercules goes to his friend, Delightful Da Vinci, who lends him his 'Flying Wonder Machine' with which to take the dragon home. This fanciful short tale thus presents a somewhat incoherent and bewildering mix of diverse traditions; Da Vinci, dragons, ancient Greece and South America (Patagonia) are randomly incorporated, in a tale that has some mild elements of humour, and features a Hercules heroic in an entirely modern sense.

Some books follow the Percy Jackson trend by mingling the past and present and bringing the ancient world into twenty-first century society. Clearly influenced by Rick Riordan's books, and aimed at the same age range, is Connor Hoover's *Camp Hercules* series (2018), for example, of which three have so far been published (Connor Hoover is a pseudonym for P.J Hoover, who has written a number of other standalone book and series for children – see <http://www.pjhoover.com>, accessed 25 June 2018). These stories centre around a boy named Logan, who is unwillingly sent by his mother to a mythology themed summer camp, at which each bunk has to re-enact one of the twelve labours of Hercules. Logan is dismissive of the camp, until it emerges that this is not fantasy after all, and that he is battling against real monsters, in the company of Hercules and other mythological creatures. Peppered with comedy that results from the incongruity of a modern teen interacting with ancient mythological characters and ideas, it also contains adventures and quests in a more traditional mode, involving encounters through which the young protagonists – and by extension the readers – become heroes themselves. Equally concerned with issues facing young people today is another book in this genre, *The Golden Gloves of Heracles & Hercules's Gauntlet* by a young writer, Jermaine Nnamdi Carew, who published the book in 2017 at the age of nineteen. Although the

book is full of grammatical infelicities, the work is of interest in that it is also an ‘issue’ book (on these, see Leland and Harste 2000, 4); the ancient mythological figures meet the modern world in order to treat topics of importance and anxiety to contemporary teens, including bullying, self-image, popularity, celebrity, courage, heroism and happiness. Another example of this mixing of the modern and ancient worlds is Gerald Vinestock’s *Crib and the Labours of Hercules* (2017), where the monsters that Hercules once destroyed have returned and are threatening present-day Greece. Athens Airport is under attack by man-eating birds, a huge boar and a deer are destroying crops, Amazons are rampaging, Crete is plagued by a terrifying bull, and the hydra is in danger of paralysing the entire country. In need of a new Hercules, the hero – or more accurately, heroine, since this is a contemporary example in which a female lead is found in the Hercules books – who steps up to save Greece is a ten-year old girl named Crib, ineffectively assisted by her rather useless uncle.

This free approach to myth is not confined to self-publishing, although the unregulated nature of such works does permit more freedom than in traditional publications. Nevertheless, similar trends may be seen in the recent Hercules books that have been published in this manner. One of the most interesting is a picture book for younger children, *Hercules on the Bayou* (2016), which is a fascinating mix of the tales of Ancient Greece and Cajun Louisiana, described as ‘two of the greatest storytelling cultures’ (flyleaf of book). Produced by the Pelican Publishing Company, a New Orleans based publisher that specialises in books on Louisiana and Southern culture, this is an amusingly illustrated colour picture book, the tale of Hercules, the adopted son of Claude and Claudette, a kindly Cajun couple. It tells ‘the story of mighty Hercules and his many labors, rerouting a river, defeating flying, man-eating pests; and slaying the monstrous, regenerating... crawfish?’, and includes mini aetiological tales (known as *pourquoi* in the Cajun tradition), explaining things such as why mosquitoes buzz in people’s ears and how cottonmouth snakes got their name. The author of the book, Connie Collins Morgan, grew up in a Cajun family in Lafayette, Louisiana, but studied children’s literature at university; both elements are the inspiration for this original twist on the Herculean myth, in which the uber-muscled hero is barefoot and dressed in overalls, facing his difficulties with a cheery, but goofy, grin.

Some other recent Hercules books are equally original in their interpretations. One, Kate McMullan and Denis Zilber’s *Get to Work, Hercules!* (2010), is revisionist in nature, starring Hades, the premise being that the god of the underworld is a heroic figure, and Zeus a liar, who made up the original myths in order to promote himself.<sup>16</sup> This is the seventh in a series entitled *Myth-O-Mania*, aimed at pre-teens and published by Hyperion. In this version, Hercules

<sup>16</sup> This is the seventh in a series entitled *Myth-O-Mania*, published by Hyperion. The series is aimed at preteens.

is portrayed as a fool who needs the help of Hades in order to complete his quest, in a humorous, modern twist on the ancient tale. Others feature time-travel, with comedy resulting from the incongruence between the two periods as the ancient characters meet and interact with modern children. Into this category fall Francesca Simon's *Helping Hercules* (2012, illustrated amusingly as ever by Tony Ross), in which an obstreperous girl named Susan is taught to be helpful through being forced to assist heroes with their tasks. In the case of Hercules, to whom the first chapter is devoted, Susan, to her disgust, has to help clean the Augean stables. A similar approach also features in *Here Comes Hercules!* (2017), written by Stella Tarakson and illustrated by Nick Roberts, the first in the *Hopeless Heroes* series, aimed at six to ten year olds. In this version, Hercules is released from imprisonment in an ancient jar where he had been trapped by Hera when it is broken by Tim, the young protagonist of the story. Hercules' disastrous attempts to help Tim occupy the majority of the book, which is packed with comic scenes centring around Hercules' bumbling clumsiness and inability to understand situations, in an interpretation reminiscent of many of the ancient tales of the hero's buffoonery, but set firmly in the modern world.

It should also be noted that in the latest batch of Hercules books, unlike in earlier periods, no geographic pattern can be seen. Of the eleven works published since 2010, five (Sorrow, Morgan, Smyth, Hoover and McMullen) are by American writers, four (Spence, Vinestock, Nnamdi, and Simon) by British writers, and two (Madison and Tarakson) are the products of Australian authors. This change reflects the new global economy and society of the twenty-first century, in which books are uploaded and downloaded worldwide at the click of a button.

More importantly, however, all of these books demonstrate an interest in the ancient world, and reflect the interaction between different media of pop-culture, with blockbuster movies leading to a surge of interest in other fields, including fanfiction and other creative writing. They also constitute a rewriting of the myths that demonstrate much about contemporary attitudes to sources. There is clear influence not only of works such as Riordan's series, but of fanfiction, which commonly features a mixing of genres, characters, periods and fictional and non-fictional series. Such receptions are typical of postmodern receptions (see Maurice 2013). Similarly, many of these works reflect modern concerns, with female characters taking a much more central role than in previous works, and an abundance of issues of current importance to young people, such as depression, popularity, and empowerment. The mixing of contemporary and ancient also allows for irony and metatextual references caused by the resulting incongruence, while the manipulation of content and contexts is typical of current receptions, which commonly feature a 'remix culture' approach to their sources. This phenomenon has been summarised by Ika Willis as follows: 'Contemporary pop culture... tends to treat classical myth in a decontextualized

and ahistorical fashion. In so doing, however, it sets up myth as popular, counter-hegemonic storytelling over and against history as master-narrative' (2017, 115).

### **Conclusion: The Democratisation of a Classical Hero**

Re-tellings of the Hercules story for children can be seen as part of a wider picture that reflects the changing role and status of Classical Studies in the modern Western world. In the late twentieth century, at a period when Classics was regarded as elitist and isolating, Hercules was only rarely presented to young readers. When he did feature, it was in a traditional, reverent and lofty manner, the product of writers and publishers who grew up in an era in which knowledge of the ancient world was considered a mark of education and presented to youngsters as something they 'ought' to be taught. This is particularly the case in the United States, where Hercules was still treated as an educational and moral paradigm in the early 1970s, but is also clear from the Christianised Hercules of the two British works published at the turn of the millennium.

By the end of the twentieth century, however, a change was occurring, as a result of the screen adaptations of Hercules that had popularized the hero, leading, in the United States, to a resurgence in books about him. Although the phenomenon did not feature in exactly the same way in the United Kingdom, where Hercules became a suitable subject for early readers in the form of reading scheme books, nevertheless a change of attitude can be seen within these books, with Hercules treated humorously and with far less deference than before. Writers began to exploit the figure for comic potential, as the hero descended from the ivory tower in which he had been placed, and captured the imagination of authors and readers alike.

This attitude has expanded still further in recent years as amateur writers appropriated the hero for themselves, adapting the original tale with enthusiastic abandon. This enthusiasm for classical myth in general, and Hercules in particular, continues to grow, as evidenced by the popular movies of recent years, and also by other receptions found in popular culture, including fanfiction and self-published works. This popularity, centred on a global culture facilitated by digital technology and the internet, breaks geographical boundaries, and brings the classical world into the realm of the wider population. Limited as the present study is, the Hercules books for children demonstrate that the so-called democratization of classics is real, ongoing, and reflected even in a very specific group of works targeted at a particular readership. This surely is a reason for hope and elation; despite fears regarding the marginalization of Classical Studies, Hercules is still very much alive and well in the second millennium.

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# **'I am the voice of the past that will always be': the Eurovision Song Contest as historical fiction**

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**Abstract:** *The Eurovision Song Contest has been called everything from 'the Gay Olympics' to 'a monument to drivel', but can it also be thought of as historical fiction – and what could that reveal about how narratives of national and European identity are retold internationally, or about how mechanisms of fictional narrative can structure popular cultural forms not necessarily considered fiction? Beyond the intertextual influence of historical/pseudo-historical fiction on how designers have staged certain contemporary Eurovision performances to mediate distant national pasts to a transnational audience, some entries have been structured as historical fiction more systematically by consisting of first-person narratives where the performer embodies and voices a character representative of what is being constructed as a collective experience in the national or European past. Often these concern historical memory of war and trauma, such as Eimear Quinn's 1996 winning Irish entry (where a mystical spirit narrated Ireland's 'hunger and pain'), Lisa Angell's 2015 French entry (the story of a survivor from a village destroyed by enemy soldiers) or 2016's winning Ukrainian entry, Jamala's '1944'. Yet beneath even this level, the contest itself might be considered a historical fiction in terms of its founding myths of post-WW2 reconstruction, post-Cold-War unity and dehistoricised diversity – a recent past that Eurovision viewers are invited to wish Europe had really enjoyed.*

**Keywords:** *Europe, Eurovision Song Contest, historical fiction, memory, narrative, national identity, popular music*

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The Eurovision Song Contest has been called many things, but rarely historical fiction. This annual televised competition which fuses the genres of flagship entertainment property and international competitive event has been organised under the auspices of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) of public service broadcasters since 1956 (Vuletić 2018). Like other events of its scale, it now extends its liveness into the social media sphere, as viewers' 'second-screen activity' sharing images, clips and reactions spills into the feeds of users who are

not watching it live (Highfield, Harrington and Bruns 2013, 317). It invites its audience in more than 40 countries in Europe and outside it (Carniel 2019), to participate in what the conventions and rituals of the contest conjure as a transnational spectatorial community, which feeds off viewers' affective relationships to what Cornell Sandvoss has described as its 'interplay of territorial and symbolic belonging' (2008, 191). It creates 'playful' opportunities to reconfigure this interplay (Kyriakidou et al. 2018), particularly around the nexus of queerness and nationhood (Rehberg 2007). Yet the attachments it depicts and the meanings viewers make of them are still structured by grander narratives of national and European identity and indeed Eurocentrism (Sieg 2013b), which sometimes articulate and sometimes silence narratives which could be termed fictional about the past.

Like international sports tournaments, Eurovision functions as what Goran Bölin (2006, 190) and many others have termed a 'mega-event' – a term originally coined by Maurice Roche (2000) for the Olympic Games and international expos – that invites its audience to take pleasure in the spectacle of nations competing with one another. Indeed, the resemblance has increased since the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Swedish Television (SVT) started hosting Eurovision in arenas rather than theatres in 1998/2000, and since it began leaving increasingly large tourist footprints on host cities' urban space following Kyiv's first Eurovision in 2005 (Helbig 2013, 199). Eurovision celebrates a European collective whose boundaries once seemed ever-expanding when the contest echoed post-socialist European enlargement, and can now appear disarmingly fluid (Pajala 2012). Yet it simultaneously reaffirms the idea that the world is naturally divided into culturally and historically distinct nations; some Eurovision researchers thus see it as expressing 'banal nationalism' (eg Zaroulia 2013, 33), the sociologist Michael Billig's term for the discursive practices that reify nationalism as an organising principle in public consciousness (see Billig 1995). More recent nationalism scholars have been reconfiguring Billig's idea of banality through discourse into a more micropolitical, everyday lens (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). But this can point even more sharply to the role Eurovision has played in mediating everyday experiences of belonging to 'Europe' on the part of competing or non-competing nations, and also on the part of transnational communities based on fandom and/or sexuality which cross national boundaries and involve thousands of individuals every year.

Besides the structural and discursive factors embedded in what and how Eurovision broadcasts, Eurovision also gives rise to its own spaces of sociality. These include the mixture of 'playful nationalism and cosmopolitan fandom' (Kyriakidou et al. 2018, 604) that constitutes fans' experience of the live event, including Eurovision parties held in homes and bars for the grand final (where much humorous enactment of symbols and clichés of national identity is liable to take place) (Singleton, Fricker and Moreo 2007, 16) and fandoms where that

offline and online sociality continues year round. Eurovision has been particularly charged with queer associations, firstly since a large gay male fan base with some representation of other non-normative sexualities and gender identities had begun gathering around its kitsch value by the early 1980s, and secondly since its first openly gay and trans performers took part in the late 1990s (Iceland's 1997 contestant Páll Óskar and Israel's 1998 winner Dana International respectively). The victory of the Austrian bearded drag queen Conchita Wurst symbolically reaffirmed this link in 2014 (Baker 2017). The media scholar Peter Rehberg (2007) famously described Eurovision as a (then) rare site where queerness and nationhood can be celebrated at once, and Eurovision's added communal significance to queer fans who treat it as ritual has sometimes led fans and journalists to liken it to the Gay Olympics or the Gay World Cup, even the Gay Christmas or (in Israel) the Gay Passover (Lemish 2004, 51).

Eurovision is thus a 'nexus' where, as Jamie Halliwell (2018, 117) writes, 'different sexual orientations converge and network with others based on their like-minded interest' in the contest and its past performers. It is, or so its organisers once hoped, a space where international media attention could spotlight the condition of human rights and democratic freedoms in years when the contest has been hosted by semi-authoritarian regimes (Gluhovic 2013). It was even a focal point of international protest itself before the 2019 contest in Tel Aviv, when the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement called on queer viewers in particular not to be complicit in (according to BDS activists) the Israeli government's use of the arts and appeals to LGBTQ-friendliness to deflect international attention from human rights violations against Palestinians (Gauja 2019, 33–4). To viewers who do not watch Eurovision, including North Americans who began encountering it through the social media feeds of Europeans watching it live, it might primarily be a spectacle where media have primed them to expect national stereotypes, glittery costumes and politically-motivated skulduggery at voting time. In the often-misattributed words of the French critic Michel Bourdon, praising his country's decision to pull out for a year in 1982 as a blow in defence of high culture against mass entertainment, it was even memorably described as 'a monument to drivel' (Vuletić 2019, 43). Eurovision has been called all these things; it is much more counterintuitive to see it as historical fiction. Yet extending critical lenses on historical fiction towards Eurovision poses wider questions about how cultural artefacts which, in terms of genre, would not usually be considered fictional still engage in creative narrations of the past which implicitly furnish national and transnational collectives with historical myths. Indeed, at Eurovision, that furnishing is sometimes explicit not implicit.

**Eurovision: performing identities for the European gaze**

The structure of Eurovision, where more than forty three-minute performances selected by participating broadcasters now compete in two weekday semi-finals and a Saturday-night grand final, pits performers, songs and backstage delegations against each other in the name of nations for points which expert juries and voting publics will award on behalf of nations too. Elements of this process have varied over the contest's lifetime. For its first five decades it was one night a year, until the introduction of semi-finals in 2004 allowed all interested broadcasters to take part annually. Votes were awarded by expert juries only until 1997–8, when public televoting became the norm, and the current combination of jury and public voting was only instituted in 2009 after adverse reactions in western Europe to a string of eastern European countries winning the public vote in the 2000s. But despite these changes, the principle of songs, singers and juries representing nations is deeply embedded into Eurovision's logic as an event. Wrapped around the performances, according to the contest structure, are opening and interval acts, presenters' scripts, and the arena's and contest's visual identity and branding, all of which are decided by the host broadcaster – conventionally the broadcaster from the country which won the previous year. Host countries become the 'symbolic centre' (Bölin 2006, 202) of Europe while Eurovision is taking place.

In the contemporary political economy of public diplomacy and touristic promotion, the right to host Eurovision has been a particularly powerful platform for nation-branding for states on the periphery of Europe with ambitions to reconfigure how they are perceived in the West, and/or with aggressive promotional strategies already in place to influence international opinion. A paradigmatic example of the first was Estonia's victory in Eurovision 2001 and hosting of Eurovision 2002, which gave an unexpected boost to the Estonian government and the branding agency it had already hired to relaunch Estonia as a Nordic, not post-Soviet, nation (Jordan 2014, 290). A canonical example of the second was Azerbaijan's hosting of Eurovision 2012, integrated into an existing nation-branding campaign under the slogan 'Land of Fire', which entailed the controversial compulsory purchase and demolition of a residential neighbourhood to construct an opulent arena so that Baku could bid to host future international sports mega-events (Militz 2016). Even in years where hosting Eurovision does not play into such immediate and concrete promotional strategies, Eurovision is still positioned as a competition between *nations* through practices such as labelling the recipients of votes by national instead of personal names. This makes Eurovision a site where viewers are invited to see national identity represented in every performance, and also to see explicit and implicit claims about what it might mean to be European, including appeals to a common European past (Fricker and Gluhovic 2013).

A key theoretical insight from Eurovision research has thus been to regard Eurovision entries as quite literally ‘performing’ national and European identity (Fricker and Gluhovic 2013), employing a mode of thinking about identity and embodiment that implicitly or explicitly points back to Judith Butler’s notion of the ‘performativity’ of gender (Butler 1993, 2). These performances of collective identity are gendered, ethnicised and racialised, playing on and sometimes with viewers’ expectations of who is imagined to belong to a given nation and what the national specificities of their pop and/or folk music traditions are (Sieg 2013a, 250–1; Jordan 2015, 130–1). Eurovision’s structure as a spectacle of competition between nations inscribes every embodied performance on a Eurovision stage with communicative significance, displaying it to viewers as a representation of that nation’s identity and how close it is to the centre or periphery of ‘Europe’. Songs and music contribute sonic and kinaesthetic dimensions to how these meanings are made. On the spectrum between modernity and tradition that fuels the contested discursive fields of so many national identities (Todorova 2005), a nation (or rather the performer(s) charged with embodying it) might seek to perform virtuosity in an internationally popular and therefore cosmopolitan style of music, not to mention competence in an international language. It might alternatively perform national specificity by presenting folk or popular cultural tradition specific to that nation, or rather something that has been imagined and reinvented as tradition.

Indeed, even the ways that Eurovision entries package folklore can be opportunities to display competence in recognising and adapting to the imagined ‘European gaze’ (Heller 2007, 201) that structures Eurovision, and thus to claim a position at the centre rather than the periphery of Eurovision’s geopolitical imagination. Ruslana and the production team behind her entry ‘Wild Dances’, which became Ukraine’s first Eurovision winner in 2004, famously designed its performance by repackaging rhythms, instruments and visual decorations associated with Hutsul folk customs (Pavlyshyn 2006, 477).<sup>1</sup> The Hutsuls, a group from western, Transcarpathian Ukraine, were already somewhat romanticised within Ukraine as timeless and mystical bearers of tradition, not least through the ‘ethnographic spectacle’ of Sergei Parajanov’s 1965 film *Tini zabymux npedkiv* (*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*) (First 2015, 95); Ruslana had already begun adapting Hutsul instruments, singing and visual symbols into a performance aesthetic before she was selected for Eurovision (Wickström 2008, 75). Outside Ukraine, in the context of Eurovision, these traditions largely became read as traditions of *the Ukrainian nation*, as if the customs of Ukraine’s ‘extreme west’ in the Carpathians were in fact a wellspring for the entire country. That national whole included the much more populous central and eastern regions with which, as Serhy Yekelchuk argues, the song ‘had nothing to do either musically or visually’ (2010, 223).

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10XR67NQcAc> (accessed 26 August 2019).

Adopting the persona of an entrepreneur of exoticism who was capable both of researching supposedly authentic traditions and blending them with modern elements to match the contemporary musical marketplace's demands, Ruslana talked in interviews about her own cosmopolitan cultural tastes, including listening to Deep Purple. The dark brown leather armour she and her dancers wore on stage meanwhile very readily evoked comparisons to *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001). This series had itself drawn on the tropes of exoticism that the 1990s world music market had constructed around east European traditional music by using the music of Bulgarian polyphonic women's choirs for its theme tune (see Buchanan 2007, 255–7). Ruslana's Hutsul project was a creative adaptation of Hutsul heritage which broke with the fixity of the Soviet era's ethnological approach which displayed folk customs as unchanging museum pieces (Pavlysyhn 2006, 480). Yet it still cast Ruslana in a position not unlike the role of 'recorder/viewer' and traveller that Parajanov had adopted vis-à-vis his own 'reconstructed and ahistorical Carpathian ethnoscape' to stamp his film with authenticity (First 2015, 95). This was the gaze of 'ethnographic authority' (Clifford 1983) towards the exotic which has structured the imaginative politics of travel writing, anthropology and world music alike, and with which postmodern and/or postcolonial historical fiction often plays.

Ruslana, alongside the previous year's Eurovision winner Sertab Erener from Turkey, is widely credited with inspiring a mode of translating essentialised folklore into 'ethnopop' along with many other Eurovision entrants from peripheralised regions of Europe in the 2000s (Baker 2008b).<sup>2</sup> Both this specific genre of Eurovision entry, and the very nature of how audiences are invited to make meaning out of Eurovision performances in general, rests on the convention that vocalists on a Eurovision stage are seen as enacting performances of national and European identity which are gendered, ethnicised and also racialised. Their performances are inherently embodied in the sense that audiences interpret them through what they perceive about the bodies of the performers, how they are clothed, how they are moved and how they sing. In practice the whiteness of Eurovision performers almost always goes unmarked unless perhaps they are rappers (performing music racialised as black), while black or biracial performers representing nations which are conventionally racialised as white, including Romani musicians (Szeman 2013) and singers from the African diaspora (Mutsaers 2007), are much more marked and visible in the Eurovision space. The ideological framework of celebrating diversity that the EBU and successive host broadcasters have inscribed around Eurovision has led Katrin Sieg (2013b, 22) to argue critically that:

<sup>2</sup> Erener's entry entry blended R&B with Turkish 'arabesk' pop and appeared to be set in a harem (Gumpert 2007): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3i4S4E7h3I> (accessed 26 August 2019).

[t]he contest has become a central venue for staging neo-liberal regimes of race, where not only do performers of colour warrant their respective nations' pluralism and tolerance, but also racial difference begins to animate and energize the European self (Sieg 2013b, 22).

This 'fiction' (Lentin 2016, 43) of a supposedly post-racial Europe is increasingly appealed to at Eurovision today.

The notion of an 'international gaze' or 'European gaze' that orders what audiences expect of different nations and their place in Europe's symbolic hierarchies does not, however, just explain how audiences make sense of performances. Such gazes also influence how performances are *created*, since participants and delegations are very likely to be aware of them. The dynamics of representing national identity at Eurovision are, I have argued elsewhere (Baker 2008b, 181), similar to the process John Urry (2002) termed 'the tourist gaze' to explain how nations represent themselves at international expos and World's Fairs; indeed, they are part of the same process, since all stem from the same Eurocentric structures of thought and feeling that have shaped collective self-representations even in nations which did not exercise and were not subject to overseas European colonial power. Since delegations are aware they must appeal to voters across Europe in order to win, they craft performances in response to their perceptions both of what the European gaze might want to see in general and also what it wants to see from their nation in particular. This dynamic produces the same structural pressures towards self-exoticism that shape longer-form creative media such as cross-cultural fiction and transnational cinema (see Iordanova 2001; Huggan 2002).

The stakes of these politics of representation are revealed when contentions occur over whether an entry is appropriate to represent a certain nation at Eurovision. For instance, throughout south-east Europe, the symbolic boundary between 'Europe' and the 'Balkans' has been constructed as also symbolising the difference between modernity and backwardness, and this makes aspirations to be recognised as (culturally, economically and politically) European translate into unease about seeming or sounding 'too Balkan'. During the Errener- and Ruslana-inspired 'ethnopop turn' at Eurovision in the mid-2000s, this unease conflicted with awareness that an essentialised 'Balkan' character was exactly what the European gaze demanded in cultural production from the region. The paradox was even more sensitive in Croatia, where the form of nationalism that became hegemonic before and during the 1991–5 war of independence rejected the notion that Croatia as a western and European country could share any cultural heritage with 'the East', 'the Balkans' or Serbian culture. Croatia's selection of the well-known pop-folk singer Severina (whose music already 'sounded Balkan' to Croatian critics) with a song repackaging song and dance from the Dinaric region (Croatia's 'internal other') for Eurovision 2006 became almost the most serious Croatian television scandal of the decade, not least when

the ex-Yugoslav world music entrepreneur Goran Bregović was revealed as part of the team (Baker 2008a).<sup>3</sup> Though few entries become quite so contentious in their home countries, all are created for Eurovision's distinctive mixture of representational, competitive and creative ends. How then might the subject matter of historical fiction, or indeed the devices of historical fiction, serve the purposes of crafting Eurovision performances?

### Historical fiction on the Eurovision stage

The most easily apparent combination of Eurovision and historical fiction manifests when entries and their presentation either directly reference an existing artefact of historical fiction intertextually, or create space for the viewer to make that association and project what they know and enjoy about the existing text on to the new performance in front of them. The same semiotic move occurs in artistic sports like international figure skating when a competitor's performance and costume references a historical character, inviting the spectator to incorporate that personage's meanings into how they interpret the performance of national femininity or masculinity before their eyes (Kestnbaum 1993, 120). A very small number of entries have been named after historical figures,<sup>4</sup> or used their names as metaphors to communicate at least some lyrical meaning to listeners who did not speak the language of the song.<sup>5</sup> These were predominantly from the late 1970s and almost all from the period when Eurovision enforced a 'national language rule' requiring all but six lines of each song to be in an official language of the country it represented. Dana International's victorious 'Diva', required by Eurovision rules to be in Hebrew, similarly hailed 'Viktoria', 'Afrodita' and 'Kleopatra' as transnationally-intelligible ancient predecessors of the stage diva that her song both lauded and declared herself to be.<sup>6</sup> (The fan responsible for translating 'Diva' on the website that has become Eurovision fandom's established point of reference for translations glosses 'Viktoria' as the Roman goddess of victory (Leuchtman 2010); I may not have been alone in the British audience when the 1998 contest aired from Birmingham in hearing it as meaning Queen Victoria instead).

Other Eurovision performances have situated themselves in the past through costume, lyrics or musical archaism. Yugoslavia's 1968 representatives

<sup>3</sup> Bregović came from Sarajevo but had chosen to live in Belgrade as well as Paris during the Bosnian conflict and from the perspective of much of the Croatian media therefore appeared to have sided with Slobodan Milošević against Bosnian independence.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Karine Strom's 'Mata Hari', Norway 1976; Forbes's 'Beatles', Sweden 1977; Tania Tsanaklidou's 'Charlie Chaplin', Greece 1978; Dschinghis Khan's 'Dschinghis Khan' ('Genghis Khan'), Germany 1979; Doris Dragović's 'Marija Magdalena', Croatia 1999.

<sup>5</sup> ABBA, 'Waterloo', Sweden 1974; Anita Skorgan's 'Casanova', Norway 1977; Cadillac's 'Valentino', Spain 1986; Wilfried's 'Lisa Mona Lisa', Austria 1988; Tony Wegas's 'Maria Magdalena', Austria 1993; Alexandra and Konstantin's 'My Galileo', Belarus 2004.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fv83u7-mNWQ> (accessed 26 August 2019).



Dubrovački trubaduri ('The Troubadours of Dubrovnik') evoked the high collars and puffed sleeves of European Renaissance menswear – the golden age of Dubrovnik as independent Ragusa – when they performed the mandolin-backed 'Jedan dan' ('One day'). Anita Buhin (2015, 16) credits this entry with affirming the 'romantic Southern myth' of Yugoslavia's Mediterranean geopolitical identity on the Eurovision stage. The song was set in the then-contemporary 1960s and described the mandolins and guitars of Dubrovnik's vibrant street music scene playing just as they had in long-ago times, except 'now our hair is longer and we only dance to beat music' ('sad smo s dužom kosom i plešemo samo "beat"'). The large majority of viewers who did not speak what was then called Serbo-Croatian would primarily have gained an impression of medievalism instead.<sup>7</sup>

Korni Grupa, the well-known rock band selected to represent Yugoslavia in 1974, began their song 'Moja generacija' ('My Generation') in the midst of the Second World War in 1942, where the narrator's mother 'bore him to dream of freedom' ('mene majka moja rodi da sanjam o slobodi'). This was one of many Yugoslav pop and rock songs from the mid-1970s that attempted to rearticulate Josip Broz Tito's legitimising myth (of the Partisans liberating Yugoslavia) through the voices of contemporaneous youth, though most of this context too would have been lost on viewers outside Yugoslavia.<sup>8</sup> The Portuguese band Da Vinci offered what Apostolos Lampropoulos (2013, 143) calls 'a song openly praising colonialism' in 1989 when their entry 'Conquistador' ('Conqueror') set its action in 'a new world, a poets' dream' ('um mundo novo, um sonho de poetas'). Here, the conquistadors 'brought the light of culture [and] sowed bonds of tenderness' ('levaram a luz da cultura, semearam laços de ternura'), with destinations including Brazil, Praia (the capital of Cape Verde), Bissau, Angola, Mozambique, Goa, Macau and Timor.<sup>9</sup> ABBA's 'Waterloo', the crossover between Eurovision and historical representation that might well first come to mind, stood as historical metaphor more than historical fiction (the song's lovers have reached a relationship crisis as decisive as the Battle of Waterloo), though their conductor Sven-Olof Walldoff famously wore a Napoleon outfit on the podium. Through ABBA's lyrics, Brendan Simms writes in his history of the battle, 'a generation of teenagers knew – even if it was all they knew – that at "Waterloo Napoleon did surrender"' (2015, xv).<sup>10</sup>

A further interplay between Eurovision and historical fiction involves entries that seem to reference popular historical or pseudohistorical audiovisual fictions by echoing their aesthetics of primordialism or medievalism. This has become possible since the mid-2000s as Eurovision staging and televised

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjBLXBBuGcg> (accessed 26 August 2019).

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2x5vawmtvE> (accessed 26 August 2019).

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rv9KZy1tjiA> (accessed 26 August 2019).

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FsVeMz1F5c> (accessed 26 August 2019).

(pseudo)historical fiction have both grown in scale and budget. Ruslana's appropriation of the Bronze Age via *Xena* in 'Wild Dances' is still probably the most elaborate example, and stands by no means alone in employing that representational shortcut for transmedial performances that are intended to connote 'strong, Amazonian' women in the ancient past (Carlà and Freitag 2015, 247). The 2018 Danish entry by the singer Rasmussen, meanwhile, opened a dense intertextual web connecting Eurovision, the television series *Vikings* (2013–) and *Game of Thrones* (2011–19), and Scandinavian 'Viking' history. Rasmussen, and the five long-haired, bearded white men who joined him on stage waving tattered flags and marching in long black coats, were widely called 'the Danish Vikings' by fan media and commentators (Zeihner 2018).<sup>11</sup> Rasmussen's own Facebook page for communicating with Eurovision fans used the same term (Rasmussen 2018), and before the contest he told BBC Scotland that his song was inspired by the story of St Magnus (1080–1115) being 'a pacifist Viking refusing to fight for his king' off Anglesey in 1098 (Delday 2018). The Viking heritage that furnishes Denmark and other Nordic nations with iconic pasts, where 'notions of authenticity and commodification' have long been at commercialised odds (Halewood and Hannam 2001, 565), has been televisually remediated since 2013 by the History Channel's *Vikings*. This drama, based on the sagas of Ragnar Lothbrok, has, through its production and costume design, epitomised medievalism in the sense of reinterpreting and restyling the medieval past through 'modern investments in and desires for history' (Taylor 2019, 60). It bears many similarities to the style of *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), a fantasy narrative which nevertheless rests its worldbuilding on a claim to represent medieval worldviews authentically in the course of enchanting them with magic and the supernatural (Carroll 2018).

Both Ruslana's mediation of *Xena* and Rasmussen's mediation of *Vikings*, which itself remediates both prior fictionalisations of the Viking past and the aesthetics of *Game of Thrones*, therefore, demonstrate Eurovision taking up artefacts of historical and pseudohistorical popular culture as meaning-making ingredients. The historical and the pseudohistorical are, for these purposes, impossible to separate. These performances' intriguing elements from a historical fiction perspective involve their aesthetics of 'pastness' (Ricoeur 2004, 102) much more than any drawing of firm lines between what is historical fiction and what is fantasy fiction that builds worlds by harnessing popular imaginings of the past. Metal bands and world music performers (plus their stylists) often remediate aesthetics of 'pastness' too (Ćolović 2006; Bennett 2015). The aesthetic of *Game of Thrones* and the aesthetic of *Vikings* are already interdependent, and indeed part of the *Vikings* sales-pitch is effectively as a real-world *Game of Thrones* (Raymer 2015) – where the fantastic has fuelled the popularity of the historical, rather than the historical driving attention to the

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0kP074Mw0k> (accessed 26 August 2019).

fantastic as it is often thought to do. The two series' aesthetics were already intertwined by the time they reached Eurovision.

Beyond these intertextual stylistic harnessings of historical fiction and telefantasy, however, a more complex relationship between historical fiction and Eurovision also manifests in Eurovision entries that could be said to be framed as historical fiction themselves. Eurovision has lent itself, especially during significant historical anniversaries, to songs that commemorate an aspect of a national past which is being shown off to a European audience, or an aspect of the European past that the song invites the audience to remember collectively. A memorial function on its own does not necessarily make a song fictional. Where Eurovision entries could come closest to historical fiction, however, is the style of entry in the form of a first-person narrative where the performer embodies and voices a character representative of collective 'mythscape' (Bell 2003) in the national and/or European past. At Eurovision, this device has lent itself particularly well to communicating and re-creating historical memory of conflict, trauma and war once we examine where it has tended to appear.

Ireland's Eurovision winner in 1996, Eimear Quinn's 'The Voice', contains the line which gave this paper its title and appeared at the height of Western popular culture's fascination with 'Celtic' themes, designs and sounds in the 1990s. This cultural moment had itself been spurred on by *Riverdance*, the extravagant Irish dance stage show narrating a history of Ireland from pagan ritual to diasporic reunion which made its debut as the interval act when Dublin hosted Eurovision in 1994. *Riverdance* was frequently seen in the 1990s as symbolising Ireland's economic resurgence as the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' (Farrell-Wortman 2010, 312–13). 'The Voice' was created at a significant moment in the Northern Ireland peace process, while the ground-breaking Provisional IRA and Loyalist ceasefires of August and October 1994 still held; the IRA's breach of the ceasefire with the London Docklands bombing on 9 February 1996 would likely not have happened before 'The Voice' was written, if the song was ready for selection on 3 March.

If the lyrical world of songs is in any case a 'fictive setting' (Strand 2013, 137), the sonic and embodied first impression of Brendan Graham's song and Quinn's performance would have coded it as Irish, Celtic and folkloric to mid-1990s viewers even without Ireland's name appearing on screen. Employing the ethereal voice which had captured Graham's attention when he saw her perform as a member of the Irish traditional choral group Anúna, the fair-haired and white-gowned Quinn stands spotlighted at centre stage to narrate the story of an encounter between a young woman and a spirit whose voice is carried on the wind. The spirit quickly takes over the narration, making her self-declaration the song's 'I'.<sup>12</sup> This apparently female presence introduces herself as 'the voice

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozacB4\\_SwtY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozacB4_SwtY) (accessed 26 August 2019).

of your history', one that will 'set you free' if the listener 'answer[s] my call'. Hidden in the wind, the rain, and natural landscapes of summertime, autumn, winter and springtime rebirth, the voice repeatedly declares itself with significant nouns. The second line of the chorus, 'I am the voice of your hunger and pain', would in an Irish context above all echo the Great Famine, while listeners elsewhere in Europe might fill the line with memories of hunger and suffering in their own collective pasts. The declarations continue: 'I am the voice that always is calling you' – at a time when the Irish president Mary Robinson had famously been reimagining Ireland's identity as a diasporic nation through a series of political speeches, with the Famine as the collective trauma of their exodus (Gray 2000); 'I am the voice of the past that will always be, filled with my sorrows and blood in my fields'. Lest the narrative dwell on the kinds of atavistic violence that were (wrongly) being widely ascribed as causes of violence such as the Yugoslav wars, it concludes on a note of hope and reconciliation, 'I am the voice of the future... bring me your peace and my wounds, they will heal.'

At this point in the mid-1990s, Eurovision makes an unexpected bridge with the remarks of the historical fiction scholar Amy Elias on writers' yearnings in the late twentieth century to put themselves into a dialogic relationship with history:

[W]e strive to have a dialogue with history, perhaps because we perceive it to be not a *thing* or a sterile collection of written texts but rather a cacophony of voices of living beings who preceded us in time. If we hear and perceive history as human voice, then there is an odd logic to why we pursue a dialogue with the past (Elias 2005, 168).

Elias's imagined idea of being able to have a dialogue with history is here made literal. This song was broadcast to viewers and expert juries across Europe at a hopeful yet uncertain moment in the Northern Ireland peace process, a full year (give or take ten days) after European commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of VE Day (see Ashplant, Dawson and Roper 2000, 81). It was also part of the first Eurovision since the end of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, which when they broke out in 1991–2 had so unsettled European fantasies of post-Cold-War peace. Though only containing three verses and a chorus, it has a narrative, it has a central character, and it invites its listeners to identify with that character's emotions so that giving it meaning as a listener involves calling to mind which hunger, pain or bloodshed might be being remembered or healed: these are devices through which fiction works.

Quinn's song was a sombre winner, and if not for the popularity of Celtic aesthetics and symbols of Irish culture in mid-1990s Eurovision (Singleton 2013, 149) would seem an unexpected one. The same could be said for another Eurovision entry crafted as a first-person historical narrative, Jamala's '1944', which won for Ukraine in 2016 and became one of Eurovision's most

geopolitically significant songs to date. This was the first Ukrainian entry to have been devised since Russia had annexed Crimea in February 2014 and war had broken out between the Ukrainian military and Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine. (National Television Ukraine (NTU) had not been able to afford participation in Eurovision 2015, and its 2014 entry had been chosen in December 2013, before the Euromaidan Revolution had even taken place). Just as the public broadcasters of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina had both used their countries' first Eurovision appearances as independent states, in 1993, to narrate the impact of their ongoing wars of independence to a European audience (Andjelić 2015), Jamala's song drew similar attention to what was occurring in Crimea – but in her case did so by constructing a narrative ostensibly about 1944, not 2014.

### **Historical fiction and memory politics at Eurovision: telling stories about 1944**

The year of 1944, when Stalin deported the Crimean Tatars to Central Asia, represented not just a parallel but a continuum in the narrative of Ukrainian/Tatar victimhood and Ukrainian/Russian relations that Jamala's song invited the listener to co-create. Not only was Jamala's own family background Tatar, but her parents and grandparents were still in Crimea and had been living under occupation since 2014, unable to reunite with her. In pre-contest interviews, Jamala drew direct links between the two historical moments, telling *The Guardian*:

Of course it's about 2014 as well. These two years have added so much sadness to my life. Imagine you're a creative person, a singer, but you can't go home for two years. You see your grandfather on Skype who is 90 years old and ill, but you can't visit him. What am I supposed to do: just sing nice songs and forget about it? Of course I can't do that (Walker 2016).

The song's opening lines, accusing 'strangers [who] are coming / They come to your house / They kill you all and say "We're not guilty"', not only frame its emotive stakes from the beginning but intertextually invite the listener to recognise Russian government disavowals of responsibility for persecution in Crimea and for the separatist offensives in Eastern Ukraine as disinformation (see Pomerantsev 2015). The chorus's switch into Tatar, the language of Jamala's family heritage, employs a common Eurovision linguistic strategy of singing verses in English and the chorus in a national language: this balances the transnational communicative opportunities of English as a *lingua franca* and the cultural objectives of performing a national language and/or an ethnic minority's language on the Eurovision stage (see Motsenbacher 2016, 143).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B-rnM-MwRHY> (accessed 26 August 2019).

The strategy also facilitated allusions to traditional and neo-traditional Crimean Tatar folk songs. Two lines from *Ey, güzel Qırım* (*Oh, beautiful Crimea*), which commemorates the Tatars' exile under Stalin, were incorporated into the chorus, and the eight-second 'melismatic wail' Jamala so viscerally performs in the middle eight 'recalls the snaking modal melody of the traditional Crimean Tatar song Arafat Dağı' (Sonevytsky 2019). This wail, Maria Sonevytsky observes, performs an anguish which both communicates grief at a personal and national tragedy and draws viewers into a 'shared emotional state' of grieving with Jamala:

Through sonic entanglement with the *duduk* [a traditional wind instrument from Crimea, Turkey and the Caucasus], Jamala here communicates anguish on another register, without translation into words... Furthermore, the power of this meta-affect is almost certainly heightened through normative gendered associations with performative anguish (Sonevytsky 2019).

The historical fiction of Jamala's '1944', established through words yet sealing its aesthetic effect on the listener without them, was potentially a fiction intended to have a direct impact in international politics by contributing to public sympathy for the Ukrainian cause versus Putin's Russia. Within Eurovision's distinctive geopolitics of sexuality and nationhood, the association with state homophobia many Western fans projected on to Russian entries since the passage of the so-called 'gay propaganda' laws in 2013 may temporarily have given such sympathies weight.<sup>14</sup>

The most audiovisually complex example of a Eurovision performance framed as historical fiction, however, is another song commemorating war's toll on civilians, Lisa Angell's 'N'oubliez pas' which represented France in 2015. This contest took place in VE Day's 70th anniversary month and amid the 'centenary moment' (Pennell 2017, 256) of commemorations of the First World War. The song's video was filmed at battlefield sites in Normandy (which provided the song's audiovisual text in the weeks before Eurovision, when fans encounter songs' preview videos online),<sup>15</sup> and its stage performance depended heavily on LED technology to create the backdrop of a devastated village. Here, Angell sings in first person as the survivor of a massacre in a village which has been 'erased from maps and memories' ('effacée des cartes et des mémoires'), leaving only tears, ashes and 'the melody of our prayers' ('le chant de nos prières'), after thousands of soldiers speaking foreign words of hatred came ('avec des mots de haine que l'on ne connaissent pas').

<sup>14</sup> The law's proponents also wanted Russia to leave Eurovision so that Russian TV would not have to broadcast performances embodying non-normative sexualities and gender relations – hence Russian Eurovision entries themselves were caught up by the atmosphere that fans decried.

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kG\\_WJU2s5ho](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kG_WJU2s5ho) (accessed 26 August 2019).



To the extent that the song's audiovisual and embodied narrative invites viewers to ask what happened there in order to complete the story, the transnational centenary commemorations surrounding viewers in 2015 might have brought the Great War to mind particularly soon. It would have taken more reflection and knowledge to hear, for instance, any echo of the memorialisation of another destroyed village which is well known in France, Oradour-sur-Glane, where the Waffen SS massacred 642 villagers in June 1944 and which Charles de Gaulle ordered should stand in its devastated state as a memorial to the Nazi occupation (see Farmer 1999). The song is not identifiably about Oradour, yet does echo the kind of 'chronotope' or archetypal location that Oradour has become in French public memory, as well as comparable sites of memory in other countries where the trauma of foreign occupation is part of national narratives of the past.

Interestingly, the video and staging of 'N'oubliez pas' differ somewhat in which wars they seem to reference, with the video's shots of villages and military graveyards in Normandy, including the American Cemetery, being charged with French Second World War memory in particular.<sup>16</sup> The live performance, with the backdrop of the ruined village reconstructing itself as the song builds, particularly seems to evoke tropes of First World War memory in a centenary year like 1915. This occurs most of all at the song's middle eight when four ghostly military drummers (white men in cream-coloured uniforms) appear in the foreground of the reconstructed street and start marching forward while dozens more of them march digitally in step behind them.<sup>17</sup> While Eurovision rules only permit six performers to be on stage (preventing entries from containing massed crowds, bands or choirs), digital technology here nevertheless allowed the designers of the performance to fill the stage. Whether intentional or not, the image recalled the ghostly returns of military dead that marked the climaxes of several classics of post-First World War cinema, including the 1930 adaptation of *All Quiet on the Western Front* and, much more grotesquely, Abel Gance's 1919 and 1938 *J'accuse!* (Winter 1995, 140–1). Here, however, the return of the dead appears to be as a sacrifice bringing about reconciliation and reconstruction, rather than a rupture that seeks to jar its audience away from investments in war.

Fans and the media interestingly received 'N'oubliez pas' as much less political than two other entries with which it had much in common: the Armenian entry of the same year (first titled 'Don't Deny', then 'Face the Shadow'), which united musicians from the worldwide Armenian diaspora together to commemorate the Armenian Genocide at its own centenary and speak out against its denial, and Jamala's '1944'. '1944', indeed, depicts essentially the same situation as 'N'oubliez pas', a massacre in a village (not to

<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Laura O'Brien.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJful-Jtc9o> (accessed 26 August 2019).

mention the same year, to the extent that the Allied liberation of Normandy is part of any viewer's context for the song). Yet 'N'oubliez pas', unlike 'Don't Deny'/'Face the Shadow' or '1944', was never called into question as potentially 'too political' for Eurovision, which prohibits political 'lyrics, speeches [and] gestures' during the contest (Eurovision.tv 2019). The Armenian Genocide and the occupation of Crimea in this discursive framework appear to be the outcomes of contested ethno-political conflicts where supporting one narrative over another is a political choice. The French experience of the World Wars, meanwhile, is allowed to stand as an expression of a transnational European culture of memory mediated through European institutions which is itself the product of a politically negotiated consensus. The difference between which histories become framed as potentially in breach of Eurovision's rules against political messages, and which histories do not, hint at a historical metafiction in which the shaping of European remembrance is the responsibility of Europe's North and West. The implication is that the symbolic centre of Eurovision's Europe might shift from city to city and periphery to periphery but its structural centre is still in the quadrant understood as Europe's core.

### Conclusion

The conventions of Eurovision performance, which offers entries to viewers as embodied performances of national identity, lend themselves to elements of historical fictional narrative strategies including intertextuality and the mediation of collective pasts. At a deeper level, however, the contest as ritually re-narrated by presenters and participants might be considered a historical fiction in terms of the founding myths of post-WW2 reconstruction, post-Cold-War unity and de-historicised diversity on which it depends – a recent past that Eurovision viewers are invited to wish Europe had really enjoyed. This has in fact been the interpretation of Eurovision that informs what is to date the contest's most extensive impression on (another genre of) fiction, Catherynne M Valente's comic SF novel *Space Opera*.<sup>18</sup> The interplanetary song contest imagined in *Space Opera*, where two washed-up glam rock stars from a near-future United Kingdom must save Earth from annihilation by performing and not coming last, is the aftermath of a devastating galactic war that the inhabitants of the surviving planets vowed never to repeat:

When it was all done and said and shot and ignited and vaporized and swept up and put away and both sincerely and insincerely apologized for, everyone left standing knew that the galaxy could not bear a second go at this sort of thing. Something had to be done. Something mad and real and bright. Something that would bring all the shattered worlds together as one civilization. Something

<sup>18</sup> This passage draws on my earlier discussion of the novel in Baker 2018.



significant. Something elevating. Something grand. Something beautiful and stupid. Something terribly, gloriously, brilliantly, undeniably *people*.

Now, follow the bouncing disco ball. It's time for the chorus (Valente 2018, 8–9).

The answer, affirming the authorial voice's fantasy that '[w]hen the world is fucked, you go to the theater, you go to the shine, and when the bad men come, all there is left to do is sing them down' (Valente 2018, 144), is an annual song contest between all the remaining sentient species of the galaxy, filled with allusions to Eurovision songs and the languages they have been heard in. Every alien species takes its name from a word in a different European language; every chapter is named after the English translation of a Eurovision song title. *Space Opera* offers a guiding vision of Eurovision as a continent-wide (extrapolated to galaxy-wide) performance of reconciliation, where old enemies have looked back on their devastating history and promised to put war aside. This echoes the transnational consensus over the memory of the World Wars that European institutions first attempted to build through political and economic projects of Western European integration in the 1950s and then reaffirmed through 50th anniversary commemorations of VE Day in 1995.

Eurovision, indeed, has retrospectively dated itself back to the earlier of these moments: while the EBU was separate from the Council of Europe (founded in 1949) and the early 1950s institutions that became the European Economic Community in 1958, it nevertheless articulated and sometimes even anticipated the symbolic expressions of European 'unity in diversity' that these institutions' political and cultural policy imagined (Vuletić 2018). The EBU and its most prominent annual live event are thus among the organisations that co-operate in 'affirm[ing] the existence of "European culture" as part of a language of belonging, recognition and partnership' (Sieg 2013b, 22). While the interne-cine destruction of *Space Opera*'s Sentience Wars is more reminiscent of European public memory of the First World War than the Allied struggle against the Axis powers in the Second, both European institutions, and Eurovision itself, have subtly joined in the myth-making of 1914–45 as one long war when they perform reconciliation through commemoration and song.

*Space Opera* is not the only trace Eurovision has left in speculative fiction. Another future Eurovision is glimpsed in Dave Hutchinson's near-future *Fractured Europe* sequence, set on a continent which has broken up into hundreds of waxing and waning mini-states. This Europe has reverted geopolitically to something approaching a medieval system of international sovereignty filtered through the transnational 'mediascapes' and 'financescapes' (Appadurai 1996, 33) of late capitalist globalisation. Its Eurovision has more than five hundred entries with the grand final performances lasting two whole days and voting taking up another three (Hutchinson 2015, 219). (Both Valente and Hutchinson take digs at the notorious mismatch between the power of the UK pop industry

and the country's record at Eurovision: it has been 'some decades since any part of Britain had managed better than thirtieth place' in Hutchinson's Eurovision (Hutchinson 2015, 219), while among *Space Opera*'s contestants are a species whose 'early... winning streak, combined with their overwhelming cultural and military hegemony, proved so irritating to the rest of the galaxy that it has become something of a beloved tradition to vote them down into the lower ranks every single year until they cry' (Valente 2018, 168)). However, even if it is not the only Eurovision in SFF, *Space Opera*'s Eurovision is the one most driven by what has retrospectively become Eurovision's own founding myth.

As an event, Eurovision itself is not structured as historical fiction in the sense of creating aesthetic effects out of probing 'the gaps between known factual history and that which is lived', to adopt Jerome de Groot's description of historical fiction as craft (de Groot 2009, 3). Its direct representations of the past are too sparse to say that it exists to 'enforce... a sense of historicised "difference"' on its viewers or to engage them 'with... tropes, settings and ideas that are particular, alien and strange' (de Groot 2009, 4) by virtue of *temporal* distance. The distances that structure it are cultural and spatial, though informed by Eurocentric temporalities of modernity and backwardness that loom whenever ideas of 'Western' and 'Eastern' Europe are at hand (Sieg 2013a). Its imagination can sometimes be historical but is not, on the face of it, historiographical. Rather, it is a setting where fictional and narrative techniques that mediate representations of the past can be used to enhance spectatorial identification with performers' embodiments of national cultural identities, bringing to the fore a certain narrative of that nation's history that may provoke resonances with other national pasts. The extent to which these will appear to be 'political' or 'non-political' in the contest's own terms is likely to depend on how central or peripheral those nations have been in transnational European memory politics writ large.

Nevertheless, Eurovision rests on historical fictions of its own. One is the myth of 'unity in diversity' with which the EBU and European Union have both sought to emphasise 'plurality and resistance to homogenization' as a cultural value around which nations can co-operate (Carniel 2017, 15). Another is the fiction that today's Europe exists in cosmopolitan and multiracial harmony, detached from the coloniality with which imaginations of and identifications with 'Europe' have been invested in the past and present (Sieg 2013b). The assemblage of individuals and organisations that constitutes 'Eurovision' is by no means alone in separating the heritage of maritime exploration (the theme of Lisbon 2018's visual identity) from the history of colonial expansion and enslavement that funded and impelled those voyages, or supposing that the politics of co-operating with the current Israeli government can be separated from the occupation of Palestine; but the Eurovision contest is still noteworthy as another site which reproduces these silences in viewers' everyday worlds. The most significant result of considering Eurovision as historical fiction may therefore not

even be to observe how intertextual allusions to certain artefacts of popular historical fiction can be remediated in Eurovision, or to show how mechanisms of fictional narrative can be adapted into popular cultural forms not generally thought of as fiction. It may be to draw attention to the constitutive role that historical fictions play in the shaping of national and European identities, that is, the ways in which Eurovision and many other contexts invite viewers, listeners, readers, users and participants to identify with pasts that never existed and yet can comfortingly be desired to be true.

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## **'The cage of my moment': a conversation with Emma Donoghue about history and fiction**

Ciaran O'Neill, Trinity College Dublin, and Emma Donoghue, author

***Abstract:** This conversation with the Irish author Emma Donoghue is focused on her relationship with history and fiction. Topics discussed include the relationship between scholarly research and the writing of historical fiction, the author's sense of duty to the past. We talked about the process of writing historical fiction, and the importance (or lack of importance) of having an 'authentic' link to the moment, or the material that one works with. It is in this context that the author speaks of historical fiction as something that has helped her to open the 'cage of her moment'. The conversation took place in front of a large audience at Boston College on 1 December 2018. It was held at the end of a one-day symposium on History and Fiction at Connolly House, a renowned centre for Irish Studies in the United States, and for this reason the interview concludes with a wider consideration of the author's Irish identity and how living outside of Ireland has effected it in recent decades.*

***Keywords:** Emma Donoghue, Irish Studies, Historical Fiction*

While historical fiction has burgeoned in the last decade or so globally, Irish readers have reacted somewhat ambivalently to this booming market. This is, in part, due to a growth in the market for children's literature and non-fiction for adults (Farmer 2018, 243), but also because most emerging Irish writers such as Sally Rooney, Donal Ryan, and Liz Nugent seem to shy away from historical themes. The prime beneficiaries, then, have been experienced authors who have a long track record in producing high quality historical fiction. Irish authors such as Emma Donoghue, Colm Toibín and Sebastian Barry can now address historical phenomena with the expectation that their readers will buy their books and engage with them. What impact does this public recalibration of history in fiction mean for Ireland, so obsessed for so long with its contentious past? How faithful are contemporary Irish novelists to the historical record, and how ethical or experimental can we expect them to be?

To answer some of these questions, and to pose others, I decided to interview one of Ireland's most famous authors, Emma Donoghue. Now based in London, Ontario, and globally famous in the wake of her bestselling novel *Room* (2010), Donoghue is also one of the most prolific contemporary Irish writers of historical fiction. She has published ten novels for adults so far, five of which might

be classed as contemporary, and five which are unambiguously historical fiction. To this can be added five short story collections, four of which are historically themed, and a considerable back catalogue of drama, screenplays, and children's literature. Donoghue also has a very impressive academic background, having completed a D.Phil in Literary History at Cambridge in 1996 (Donoghue 1996). From this work some related non-fiction works have also emerged, including a survey of lesbian-themed works in early modern England, a double biography of Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, and an award-winning study of passion and desire in lesbian fiction in western literature (Donoghue 1993, 1998, 2010).

This conversation took place in front of a large audience at Boston College on 1 December 2018. It was held at the end of a one-day symposium on History and Fiction at Connolly House, a renowned centre for Irish Studies in the United States, where I was based for the Fall semester on a Visiting Fellowship with the Burns Library. The symposium sought to pose specific questions about the relationship between history and fiction within Irish Studies as a field, an area that is understudied relative to its reading public (see further Cahalan 1983; Dunne 1987; Kreilkamp 1998; Garratt 2011 and Costello-Sullivan 2018). This Irish element figured occasionally in our conversation, but the ground we ranged across was much wider than that. Donoghue has given multiple interviews in both popular and academic contexts, and so I made some effort to avoid topics that she has covered exhaustively elsewhere, such as motherhood, lesbian themes, feminist perspectives, and biography (see for example Bensyl 2000; Donoghue 2002; Grassi and Fantaccini 2011; Ue 2012; Donoghue and Palko 2017 and Lackey 2018). Instead, we aimed at the intersections of history, research, and literature when possible. We talked about the process of writing historical fiction, and the importance (or lack of importance) of having an 'authentic' link to the moment, or the material that one works with. That Emma speaks of historical fiction as something that helped her to open the 'cage of her moment' is something that might interest readers of this journal. The conversation below was recorded in audio, and is lightly edited in the transcript, for flow. Where possible I have tried to retain both the sense of an audience and of Emma's own exuberant personality.

### Interview

CON: Before the global success of *Room* (2010) you were known to all of us in Irish Studies as one of the finest purveyors of historical fiction, and that is a trend that you haven't since abandoned. I have just finished re-reading *Slammerkin* (2000) after many years, and it is so interesting to talk to you about how your historical fiction has developed in the intervening years, and how some of the threads in that earlier work have come to life in more recent collections like *Astray* (2012) and your novel *The Wonder* (2016). Why do you think you turn

so often to the past for inspiration or as a resource, and do you see yourself primarily as a writer of historical fiction?

ED: It could be poverty of imagination, you know? Sometimes I think if I was just better at making things up I wouldn't need to rely so much on what *has* happened. But it's more that I get hooked. I come across these things in everyday life and I just get compulsively interested in them and it seems as if only writing a novel will solve the puzzle to my satisfaction. It certainly doesn't make life easier, for all that it is handy to have something to write about, it actually doubles your work because you have to be a historian first and then you have to offend yourself as a historian because you end up saying to yourself, 'actually, never mind if there was no newspaper edition on a Sunday, you know? There will be in my book!'. The reader may not even notice, but when you change the facts you are always aware of it. Often I have to telescope the facts. Any time I have ever written about a court case, for instance. Court cases take so long, so I always have to find some way to shunt it into a smaller space. So, yes, I would say that I am primarily a historical fiction novelist. It just so happens that *Room* was contemporary, and that it hit the big time, but most of what I write is in some way inspired by history. I think doing a degree in English, and doing a PhD in eighteenth century literature set me on this course. I might have ended up a very different kind of novelist. I think it freed me from my own cultural moment. I'm always hearing Irving Welsh on the radio blabbing on about how you can only authentically write a book about your own time. That to me is just such a narrow vision of what a novelist does. My own father is always irritating me by quoting Henry James on historical fiction and how it's all a cod! But doing a PhD helped me to open the cage of my moment and let me step out and let me realise I could write about anything at all.

CON: Penelope Lively once wrote that 'fiction can seem more enduring than reality. Pierre on the field of battle, the Bennet girls at their sewing, Tess on the threshing machine - all these are nailed down forever, on the page and in a million heads' (Lively 1987, 6). As a historian it often pains me that novelists are so much more adept at making the past come to life for others. Why do you think those images that Lively mentions resonate so strongly, and why are historical novelists so much better at building these worlds in a way that historians just don't seem to be?

ED: Well, historians are playing by very specific rules. Any time I have written literary history or biography, it's a good discipline because it reminds me of what it means to stick to what – so far as you can tell – is *true*. It's *so* freeing when you are writing fiction then, you can fiddle with the ingredients in the

recipe. Whether you are writing a biography of Charles Dickens, or a short story about a young woman whom Charles Dickens helped to emigrate, those are similar *ingredients*. In fiction you can stick closely to fact and on the same page using the same words as a historian would – for instance if you are quoting a real letter by Dickens, at that moment your text overlaps perfectly – and on the same page you can write an entire conversation that never happened and that you are just making up.

I find when I am writing historical fiction I find I really like the factual bits, and I stick very closely to what we know about my subject's lives, but then I come to a point where we don't know what they do for the next three years and I can just make it up! And I really enjoy those moments. I remember spending an entire day in the Bodleian library when I was researching my novel *The Sealed Letter* which is about a Victorian divorce case (Codrington v Codrington, 1864). There was a reference in the court case (as reported in the newspapers) that talked about this packet that one of the lawyers kept brandishing and saying 'if this were opened it would give my client reasons for asking Ms Faithful to leave his wife's house'. And I thought 'what's in the packet?!'. I remember thinking I should make a real effort to find what was in that packet. So I went to the Bodleian, and went through his papers, and didn't find it. And I was so happy! Because I could make it up! And I *knew* it wouldn't say whatever I wanted it to say. So it's a bit perverse, my historian self and my novelist self.

CON: So it's about exploiting the gaps between what you can verify? That's where you can do your best work?

ED: Yes, it is. And there are lots of things that people don't record. Things they were ashamed of. Deeply private things. Their sex lives. So you'll often have quite a lot of fact about their public lives, but not about their private lives. You can take advantage of that.

When I write about the poor, just to generalise, I have to make up a lot more than I do about the rich. The poor obviously didn't get leisure to write diaries and letters. But on the other hand, the poor sometimes came up against the state, so you have lots of hard evidence about their pregnancies and crimes and diseases and so on. The one time I wrote about the rich in my novel *Life Mask*, which was about aristocrats at the end of the eighteenth century, I was just overwhelmed. I just don't know how Hilary Mantel manages it, you know, to write about famous people who have left so many records. It just means you have to cut your way through this dense undergrowth of texts. So I would highly recommend writing about the poor and obscure (*laughter*).

CON: That seems very wise! I have a question about language – such a site of contestation in historical fiction. The novelist David Mitchell has talked about the problem of dialogue, language, and historical fiction. He says ‘to a degree, the historical novelist must create a sort of dialect. I call it ‘Bygonese’, which is inaccurate but plausible. Like a coat of antique-effect varnish on a pine new dresser, it is both synthetic and the least-worst solution’ (Mitchell 2010, Stocker 2012, 313). Do you embrace Bygonese as an author, or do you suffer it?

ED: I love him. If David Mitchell is writing about seventeenth century Japan, the fact that he is writing it in English frees him. It’s a translation anyway. If you are writing about the 1950s in your own language, you will probably try to write in the language that you think they might have used. If you are writing about the 1150s, well it’s a bit of a foreign language, and you are going to have to come up with something different. So for me that bargain with the reader depends on the where and when of what I have set. I avoid deliberate anachronism, but if you actually use the grammatical structures of the day it will all feel very wooden, and far away from the reader. And I don’t want that. So, it can be a struggle to find the correct Bygonese if you like. It’s a compromise, but all dialogue is. When I was writing *Room* I was trying to come up with a plausible language for a child which is really far more like adult speech. But if I actually wrote like a 5 year old nobody would understand it.

CON: Quite a lot of your work has come out in short story form. I wonder if you find a big difference when you work out some history in a short story or a novel? How do you choose which one becomes a novel and which one comes out in shorter form?

ED: It makes my publishers groan. They say I am throwing away the good effect of *Room*! (*laughter*). But I love them [short stories], so what can you say?! I like to think that the length is intrinsic to the story. However big a canvas it needs. When I was planning the collection called *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002) one of the cases involved a girl who killed her employer with a meat cleaver on the Welsh border. And I quickly realised that to explain this murder was going to take a novel. I couldn’t get people to sympathise with her in five pages, so it became my novel *Slammerkin* (2000). Sometimes though, it is based on more pragmatic factors. How long I can bear to spend in this world, in this space? Another of the short stories in that same collection, called ‘Revelations’, is about an eighteenth century cult where a women of considerable character managed to gather her congregation in a barn on a mountain to wait for Jesus. And to not eat in the meantime. And for weeks they all fasted. And the reason that was a short story was that I just couldn’t face being in that locked barn for

several years of my life with these people as all those people got hungry. I remember thinking 'this is good material and I could easily squeeze a novel out of it', but I just couldn't face it. Whereas with *The Wonder* I was writing about somebody who was fasting, but was a much more likeable kid. And that made all the difference. Short stories allow you to be experimental. A short story is an affair not a marriage (*laughter*). Literary adultery is a useful way to spend your time!

CON: I notice that very few people ever bring up your PhD topic in interviews, and yet it seems obvious that it might be an important entry point to your work. The title was 'Male-Female friendship in the eighteenth century'. How important was writing your PhD to the development of your historical fiction?

ED: Oh it caused it! If I hadn't written my PhD I suspect I would have ended up writing contemporary novels. My first two novels were Dublin novels set before and during the boom. That was my territory. And the identity politics of the early '90s would have encouraged that. Most writers stick with what they know. I was a new Irish 'lesbian voice' and so I did that for a while. My first short story collection was composed of fairy tales, which was the first time I stepped away from the present to the pre-modern world. But then when I started writing my first historical fiction novel, *Slammerkin*, I had a feeling that I could write about anything, and I feel I've really broadened out from that. I may have started out writing about women but I have spread all over the place now. And I never would have done any of that without the comfort and ease with history and with research as a process that doing a PhD over many years in Cambridge gave me. So with PhDs, it's not about who reads them, it is about who you become when you are writing them. It's very precious to me, that period of time. I look back on those years with real affection. Just that feeling of plunging into sources and doing way more work than you needed to out of sheer intellectual curiosity. And it's never wasted.

CON: Authors sometimes say that they don't read criticism of their work, but you actually engage with your readers, and especially academic work on your novels. Do you ever resent or reject that work?

ED: I'm pretty laid back about it to be honest. It's usually clever stuff. Each academic tends to see what they are looking for, you know. If a historian of materiality and objects reads *Slammerkin*, it will be all about ribbons and dresses or something. Italian academics often write about my fairy tales, for example.

And academics will often engage with novels that have not received a big readership commercially, for example. So it's a lovely other world in which your work can make ripples. Take my novel *Hood* (1995), for example, which was a commercial failure, but academics have often used it. I'm really a lapsed academic myself. I always thought I might be a professor like my father was, so the least I can say is 'I loved your essay', for example.

CON: That brings me to my next question, which is about being the daughter of a very prominent cultural figure in Ireland – your father Denis Donoghue is a leading critic. Was that an advantage or a disadvantage to you as a young writer?

ED: Yes, well, I have seven siblings and not all of them are interested in fiction. My parents always spoke a lot about literature and the arts. I suspect my seven older siblings would get away from the table very quickly and I would stay there and ask questions about *Finnegan's Wake*! I feel I was very favoured in a way because I would go on long walks with my father, and for much of my upbringing he was only working (teaching at NYU) for about half the year. So I would get these long leisurely walks with him on piers where he would talk to me about literature and so on. He writes beautifully, and it strikes me now that although I didn't end up an academic like him he has a very similar approach to writing. He will write about English or Irish or American literature, or he'll mention *The Simpsons* if it happens to come up. In fact we joke that if we ever mention something about pop culture to him it invariably ends up in his writing. I remember showing him a Lady Gaga video, and up it popped in his next review. Nothing is wasted! So, I think his feeling of being an intellectual who can address anything he wants to is something that has stayed with me. I think that has probably affected me very much in my approach to fiction.

CON: I'd like to take us up sequentially through some of your early historical fiction, if I may. You published *Slammerkin* back in 2000, and both it and *Life Mask* (2004) seem to me both novels that emerge in some sense from your comfort zone historically, in that they are both based on eighteenth century British subject matter. Looking back on this – do you think you had to begin in that comfort zone?

ED: I think so. At the same time I was doing my PhD I was doing a book called *Passions Between Women* (1993) with a small press in London, which was about representations of love between women. That was a parallel project to my PhD and I read a huge amount in preparation for both. I was asked for a short story for an anthology at that time, and I was doing a bit on Mary Wollstonecraft

in my PhD, and the education of girls, and so that was my very first piece of historical fiction I think. And it came straight out of the PhD really. So, yeah, it all began in the eighteenth century for me. Everyone is biased about their own century, but I do think that in many ways the eighteenth century is the wellspring of our culture. Ideas about democracy, women's rights, human rights, civil rights. They all sprang up there. The idea of the mobile individual escaping their background. These are all eighteenth century ideas, and so it was a great place for me to start.

CON: Will you ever return to the elite world in your historical fiction, or will you likely continue to write the marginalised?

ED: My ideal literary source is one sentence, really. In the case of *Slammerkin* the story came out of two words. The girl said that she committed the murder for 'fine clothes'. And I just got obsessed with that phrase. I mean, I like dresses myself but I don't think I could kill for them. That idea of what clothes could have meant to a girl, that's what drew me in.

CON: Your next historical work was *The Sealed Letter* (2008), a novel that focuses on a real divorce case, *Codrington v Codrington* (1864). This is the novel that includes perhaps the most historical evidence within the text itself, something you integrate into the novel a great deal. Why did you do that?

ED: Yes, there were daily reports in the press, and since my subjects were reading them at the time it seemed right to include those reports. The people in the court case were self-conscious and in the spotlight. The husband and wife at the centre of the case couldn't speak in court as they were just assumed to be biased. They were trapped in the wings while servants spilled the beans, and their lawyers spoke, and their enemies spoke. They just had to grit their teeth, so I thought that put them in a fascinating position. They were just readers of their own story.

CON: The novel of yours that most people will have read is *Room* (2010), which you have called elsewhere both a career peak and an aberration. It is a novel in your oeuvre that seems to come out of nowhere. A brilliant book, and an attempt to explain the inexplicable. It's also the first work of yours to reach the silver screen. How did you find the experience of transformation and adaptation? You retained full authorial control, but what was it like to re-excavate that text and reimagine it on to the screen?



ED: I loved it. The last thing your film company will want is for the author to do that work. Many are the novelists that are actively discouraged in fact. They are told that (typically a she) doesn't have the skillset, and to leave it to the experts (typically a he). 87% of films are written by men, so it's completely unlike novel-writing in that way. So, nowadays whenever I meet an author whose work is being considered for adaptation I always tell them 'Do it yourself! It's not rocket science!'. I think because I have always enjoyed the interplay between history and fiction in my work I really relish the question and process of adaptation. It really reveals the good aspects of both mediums, really. It's a bit like being an immigrant, in some ways, it makes you savour both places even if you feel a little caught in the middle. When I had finished *Room* it seemed obvious to me that it could work as a film, and so I thought that since it would be hard to get that gig as a newcomer to film I had better just go ahead and write the screenplay without telling anyone I was doing it. I thought 'I'll write it myself, and then refuse to sell the novel to anyone that doesn't want to use my script.' If they had *all* come back to me and said the script is rubbish I might have been overwhelmed, but that didn't happen. What I found really interesting about the adaptation was that it gave me a chance to play to the strengths of this new medium. I thought about film and what it does, and the grammar is light, and angles, and faces. It's not primarily psychological, though it can of course have psychological effects. A novel is all the words that are going through your character's head. A film is all about what you can read on their face. Totally different. So rather than looking at each page of *Room* and wondering what to keep, it was about telling the story again in light. The movie begins with Ma flashing light and trying to attract the attention of a neighbour or a passer-by, in fact, quite unlike the book, because *light* is what film is good at. The movie is far more compact, and moves far more quickly, and all these things come out of the differences inherent in the medium. Books are so long and slow, and accommodately formed, allowing many changes of mood. Sitting in the editing room with Lenny [Abrahamson, our director] it became obvious that film was about rhythm, and we cut out lots of things because of that. I had a really direct and intimate relationship with my director, and beautiful films can come out of that.

CON: Since *Room*, you published *Frog Music*: a novel that centres on a person whose every action seems to be an event. The book is based on Jenny Bonnet, a real-life cross-dressing, frog-catching Parisian who was tried for murder in San Francisco in 1876 (Sears 2015, 64-74). Was it fun to write? It sure seems like it must have been.

ED: Great fun. It's more of a detective novel than anything I have written so it was a new genre, and I wanted to get it right. I felt self-conscious about trying

to make it a literary novel, and yet satisfy the crime readers. Crime readers are very sophisticated about their genre. They want there to be enough hints, but they don't want the ending to be obvious. You only want the cleverest of them to guess the ending, not a majority. They get enraged if you mess with the genre, particularly if you are new to it. So I wanted to get it right, and I think comfort zones are bad for a writer, and I wanted to try something new. It was my first one set in America, and I just enjoyed that new idiom. But I still brought in stuff from home in a way. At one point I found out that Bonnet was sent off to an industrial school, and as an Irish novelist that fascinated me, of course, since locking up our young is a key part of our history in a way. Since *Room* I am much more interested in plot, I would say. Plot wasn't something that I was really all that natural at, I have always been much more character driven, and interested in psychology and so on. But since *The Sealed Letter* I have worked a lot on plot, and developed a new technique of charting in advance what will happen in each chapter as well as what would be revealed, and then take out all the bits that seemed unnecessary. I tried to make my structure more lean. And it is thrilling to see that people can become gripped by your story. I think that plotting is evident in *Frog Music*, and probably in *The Wonder* (2016) too.

CON: Your most recent book for adults, *The Wonder*, is also the first of your historical fictions to be set in Ireland. The novel is set in about 1859 in the midlands of Ireland and focuses on a so-called fasting girl who becomes a sort of lightning rod for political and religious tensions in the locality and further afield. The other main character is a Nightingale nurse – Lib Wright – who comes to care for the little girl at the centre of the story. Lib seems to stand as a proxy for English ideologies on Famine-era Ireland and she is resentful of the traditional way of life that she rejects as a modern and scientific rational medical professional. She seems to quote from Florence Nightingale's *Notes on Nursing* (1859) as if it were a bible. What are you doing with Lib in the novel?

ED: Yes, Lib sometimes stands for modern views of the past. Sometimes, when she is scorning the past and the filthy peasants and their lazy ways, she is being a modern person, and sometimes she is being an English person, and sometimes she is just wrong. A stranger come to town is the classic set up for a novel, and it allows you to ask questions of the environment that locals wouldn't ever ask. If you want to reveal a world quite fast then you have a stranger turn up and ask lots of questions. I did think that the girl's case would be likely to raise lots of issues. *The Wonder* is a first for me in that it doesn't deal with an actual historical case as such. I was so wedded to my method ever since *Slammerkin*. I usually write historical fiction about real cases, and I was quite proud of that. But with *The Wonder* I wanted to write about fasting girls, and there was this Welsh case that intrigued me, but it was just so sad because the girl starved to death.

The newspapers funded a sort of watch, and she slowly starved to death in front of them. So I thought, that's just too grim for me, sorry. I got that idea years ago, in the late '90s, and then in about 2013 I was looking back over old ideas and I thought it was really a shame that I never did the fasting girl story. So I decided I would make it up! A different version of that story with a less grim ending. Novelists do that all the time. They write a fictional story that is very soaked in the past. That way you can bring all the historical research but not be so tied to the ending.

CON: Irish historians always think long and hard about looking at the Famine in our work, for good and for ill, and partly because there is very often a strong reaction. Did it give you pause for thought? Is that why you set the action a little after the Famine?

ED: I was squirming a little bit, certainly. These fasting girl cases stretch from the sixteenth century to the present. In fact there was a recent one in India, so I could have set it anywhere. I wanted to choose my own cultural setting, and I wanted to show the sheer range of opinions that could converge on one little girl. So the nineteenth century seemed useful, because earlier it might have been a purely religious interpretation, and any later it would have been more obviously scientific. Doctors began to label things like anorexia nervosa from the 1870s onwards, and I always find it much more interesting to go back before the labels are firmly applied. I thought if I set the novel in the mid nineteenth century then some people will see it in terms of magic or religion and others would see it in terms of neurasthenia. I wanted a maximum range of interpretation, and by setting it in Ireland after the Famine I could place it in the aftermath of an event I've never been able to write about head-on. Perhaps Jewish writers feel the same way about the Holocaust. It's a big brutal subject that they feel guiltily tied to but can't find a way to make it fresh. I feel like that about the Famine, and I thought if I set *The Wonder* in the aftermath I can say some things about the psychological damage done to us by the Famine but it isn't as direct as if the people are rotting in the hedgerows. I was worried that people would think the novel was anti-Irish in some way. Lib says a lot of anti-Irish things, but by the end I have made her eat her words. She gets things wrong or thinks people were stupid. One of the things I tried to do was make the journalist character a Protestant, but I ended up making him a Catholic to show the range of Catholic attitudes.

CON: In the novel you seem to indict everyone. The state lets the girl down, the doctors let her down. And Lib lets her down by letting her get to the point of starvation on her watch?

ED: With my historical fiction I often read around lots of contemporary understandings of a particular issue. In the case of *The Wonder* I read a lot about eating disorders but tried very hard not to allow any twenty-first century attitudes into the novel itself. I tried to have my characters think like people who had never heard of anorexia. One of the things that really struck me from my background reading was the agony for parents on which treatment to choose. There are some schools of thought that emphasise autonomy for the patient, and then there are doctors that will tell parents that their child is hurting themselves and that they need to feed them and make them safe. I wanted to give that dilemma to Lib. She has been hired in bad faith. She has been hired to supervise rather than truly treat. And even when she tries to help the child she doesn't really know how. There are moments where she tries to overrule her, moments where she tries to strengthen her. It's all about parenting really. Everything I have written in the past 15 years has been about parenting. My kids sometimes ask if I ever wrote anything before they were born!

CON: One of the things that we can say when we stand back from your fiction is that there is a persistent focus on the underrepresented, and on women. There seem to be a couple of types that recur. The sexually 'promiscuous' or problematic female, and then the sturdier middle-aged professional woman that you sometimes juxtapose with that 'other' woman.

ED: My PhD was the start of all that. I remember being in some reading group or seminar where we were all talking about revisionism and giving voice to the voiceless. I found that such a thrilling endeavour, and it certainly affected my fiction. I would say it started with women and then I have often written about 'freaks' and about slavery in various ways. I've done two novels about sex work, which is sort of the ur-job that stands for so many aspects of being a woman. It's hard not to come back to it. In *The Sealed Letter*, the reason why I wrote about that case, I think, was that it seemed so incongruous to have such a highly respected professional woman called as a character witness to a divorce case centring on a so-called 'slutty' military wife like Helen Codrington. Fido was a printer, and a spinster, so it was the yoking together of those two women that really drove the novel. When I write about these professional women characters, I notice that I often have them have an antagonistic relationship with the media, or society in general. I'm interested in how women define their own work, and how much to reveal about one's self or one's work. The other recurring trope in my fiction is obviously also that of cross-dresser, or gender bending characters, who are everywhere in my work.

CON: My last question is about how your earlier 1990s work is now passing into history as you watch and how that feels as a writer of historically sensitive fiction. If we think back to *Hood* or *Stir Fry*, do you see them as period pieces and reflective of that early boom-time Ireland?

ED: It's funny, I usually listen to each of my audiobooks in the car once at least. And recently a version of *Stir Fry* came out in audio and I found I just couldn't listen to it, it was too much. I was 17 when I went to university, and I just couldn't bear to inhabit that world again! But I don't feel bad about it, it is just of its moment. *Hood* is about bereavement, so it lasts more strongly for me, and it is based on my own convent school days and being an angst-ridden closeted lesbian and so on. *Landing* – a novel very few have read – wasn't published in Britain at all but is about an Irish woman moving to Canada and is pretty autobiographical as well. So clearly my autobiographical work doesn't tend to sell very well! I really have to transform my own story for it to work, so it's like it should be me and a baby, but in a locked room!

CON: I'm wondering about the mechanics of your historical fiction and your creative process as a writer. How do you stop yourself researching more and more detail, and when do you know you have enough?

ED: It isn't a matter of time usually. I have never felt I should have done less, you just have to be ruthless about what you include in the book. So in the case of *Frog Music*, for example, I hadn't read all that much about the period really and I remember coming across an eccentric photographer called Eadweard Muybridge who happened to be in San Francisco at the time that the novel was set. He was hiring sex workers for his work, and so I thought I would write a few scenes in which my main character would pose for him. So I spent a week or so researching him. But then I thought he was distractingly famous – this guy – and he was involved in a murder case of his own around that time. He was the first to use a defence centred on concussion, in fact, in a case where he was accused of shooting his wife's lover. So his case was getting in my way too much, so I simply excised him from the novel. You don't necessarily have to include something in the book just because you did the research, which I think is just as true for a novel as it is for a PhD. In *Slammerkin* I remember agonising over whether I would include the name of the king at the time the novel was set. But I realised that might not figure very strongly in the world of my sixteen-year-old street prostitute. So I didn't include it, and it was quite freeing really. A ruthless commitment to point of view can really help I think. Only include what the character would care about. If you are going to include an anecdote it really has to fit. I've never thought I can get away without reading extensively

about something. You sometimes need to read six books to get that gem or nugget. But I enjoy that a lot usually, and the internet has made the research process so much easier I think.

CON: How important is your Irishness to your writing?

ED: I do think of myself as an Irish writer, partly because I think if you spend the first twenty years of your life somewhere it inevitably soaks through you somehow. I think I bring not only the gabbiness of the Irish to my writing work but also a great deal of confidence about being a European as well, and about being part of the British Isles, and part of the Atlantic or Anglo world. So I always feel I have a finger in all these pies in a way. And I have been an immigrant twice, which also means I feel I can write about being in different places – something that is almost defining about the Irish experience. When I first moved to Canada I remember speaking to a rather gloomy academic at a party who thought that because I was moving to Canada I could never be famous anywhere. And he used the example of Brian Moore, who he argued had reduced his reputation by moving around so much. I was a bit alarmed by it, and I suppose it might be true in some ways. But I have so benefited from the freedom to write about different places and in different modes, that I try not to worry about it too much really. Your time is limited, get the head down and write the book!

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Emma's reflections on her writing of historical fiction help bring into sharp relief some of the thornier aspects of writing from an explicitly feminist point of view. The idea that a writer can escape the 'cage of her moment', only, perhaps, to have to inhabit a cage from another era convincingly is certainly one of the reasons why this author's work continues to compel. This seems to connect to the problem of migration. Donoghue is a writer who seems comfortable addressing historical issues, events, and themes in a number of places, and it is her professional experience of research that frees her to do so. The confidence and sense of expertise that followed her doctoral work in Cambridge provided that original impetus for her historical fiction, and perhaps enables or eases her continued intellectual engagement with scholars who work on her fiction in the academy. This is relatively rare – at least at this depth – so she may be an outlier, but it shows just how overstated that gap between writers of history and fiction can be. Just as Penelope Lively was inspired by her undergraduate education at Oxford at a key moment in new historicism, so too is the historical fiction of Donoghue building out from and expanding on a long and mutually reinforcing research career.

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**Emma Donoghue's Fiction**

*Stir Fry* (1994)

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*Kissing the Witch* (1997)

*Slammerkin* (2000)

*The Woman Who Gave Birth To Rabbits* (2002)

*Life Mask* (2004)

*Touchy Subjects* (2006)

*Landing* (2007)

*The Sealed Letter* (2008)

*Room* (2010)

*Three and a Half Deaths* (2011)

*Astray* (2012)

*Frog Music* (2014)

*The Wonder* (2016)

*Akin* (2019)