
Chapter 1

Introduction

Historical Fiction Old and New

In the early 1980s, just as the New Historicists, with their invocation of “the historicity of texts and the textuality of history” were transforming the way readers understood literature, Umberto Eco’s novel *The Name of the Rose* became both a critical success and a bestseller. Widely celebrated as a postmodern historical novel, this dazzling mixture of “thick” historical research and popular detective fiction elements invited its readers to view historical fiction as an academically respectable genre, and a vehicle for recovering and reimagining the past in unconventional ways. A few years later, Eco responded to published commentary on his novel in an eclectic text called *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*.¹

Originally published as an eighty-page mixture of short, fragmentary chapters, photographs, and illustrations of medieval architecture and manuscripts, the *Postscript* is partly a “poetics” designed to “help us understand how to solve the technical problem which is the production of a work” (Eco, *Name of the Rose* 508). Eco explains how the historical fiction writer must become immersed in historical evidence: to tell a story, “you must first of all construct a world, furnished as much as possible, down to the slightest detail” (512). In his case, this required committing himself to a specific date, reading architectural plans and registers of the holdings of medieval libraries, and even counting the steps in a fourteenth-century stairway. Eco’s *Postscript* is also a manifesto proclaiming the authority to which serious historical fiction can lay claim: the characters in a historical novel may not appear in

encyclopedias, he notes, but everything they do could only occur in that time and place. Made-up events and characters tell us things “that history books have never told us so clearly,” so as “to make history, what happened, more comprehensible.” By reimagining the past, the novelist thus performs the analytical role of the historian, by “not only identify[ing] in the past the causes of what came later, but also trac[ing] the process through which those causes began slowly to produce their effects” (534). In constructing a world, the novelist also “constructs a reader,” for one important difference between serious and formulaic historical fiction, Eco says, is that innovative historical fiction like *The Name of the Rose* “seeks to produce a new reader” whereas formulaic fiction “tries to fulfill the wishes of the readers already to be found in the street” (522–23).

In the years since Eco’s novel appeared, a number of contemporary novelists, most of whom are not exclusively or even principally known as writers of historical fiction, have been similarly immersing themselves in the language, the texts, and the material culture of the past, and have produced some remarkable works of fiction. What they share with the New Historicists—and what distinguishes their novels from traditional or “classic” historical fictions and allies them with postmodern fictions—are a resistance to old certainties about what happened and why; a recognition of the subjectivity, the uncertainty, the multiplicity of “truths” inherent in any account of past events; and a disjunctive, self-conscious narrative, frequently produced by eccentric and/or multiple narrating voices. Postmodern fictions frequently play genres off against one another, making fluid the boundaries between novel and autobiography, novel and history, novel and biography, and combining different “registers of discourse,” to use Linda Hutcheon’s term (such as the mix of literary-historical, theological-philosophical, and popular-detective-fiction discourses in *The Name of the Rose*). At times, Hutcheon adds, such fictions are “formally parodic” in their “critical or ironic re-reading of the past,” but as historical fictions, they are nevertheless “modelled on historiography to the extent that [they are] motivated and made operative by a notion of history as a shaping force” (4, 9–10, 23, 113).

Historical fiction as a genre has always borrowed freely from other genres. It shares some characteristics with each of the mass-culture genres—the romance, the western, fantasy, detective fiction—but generally lacks the pronounced formulas and predictable conventions of those genres. Often, historical fictions have masqueraded as exemplars of other literary forms, such as the memoir, the biography, the autobiography, the epistolary novel. In contrast to those historical novelists who employ the conventions of the panoramic realistic novel, with its large cast of characters and detailed descriptions of place and the accoutrements of daily life, the more innovative writers tend to blur the boundaries between “research” and imaginative extrapolation to produce fantastic and disorienting transformations of the

past. The playing out of alternative scenarios associated with counterfactual science fiction is another recurring strain in nontraditional historical fiction, reflecting both the writer's and the reader's desire to return to and change the past, to challenge the finality of accomplished action, to question the authority of history as we know it.

In 1971 Avrom Fleishman sensed that the genre of historical fiction was evolving. He noted that "with the passing of the sense not only of progress but even of comprehensible relationships among historical events" plot becomes more difficult and artificial. He predicted that historical novels would either join the ranks of experimental fiction or "retire from the province of serious literature" (207, 255). Many of the most interesting novels published since *The English Historical Novel* appeared implicitly acknowledge the indeterminacy that qualifies and undermines any effort to locate the "comprehensible" causal relationships on which conventional historical narrative relies. Their authors resort to experimental fictional strategies in order to reimagine those relationships, and so offer readers a more disrupted, fragmented version of "history," requiring them—us—to work harder. Readers of innovative historical fiction often find themselves going back through the novel to fit the pieces together and reconstruct chronology, while confronted with arcane vocabulary, unfamiliar diction, and allusions to period texts—generally without the footnotes or glossaries that accompany editions of past literatures. In effect, they participate in constructing the fictional world, bringing their own knowledge of history to the process. These are the "new readers" of whom Eco spoke in his *Postscript*, and they are responsible for the critical and commercial success of what I will be calling the New Historical Fiction.

The distinction between "new" and "old" historical fiction is hardly as absolute as these antithetical labels suggest, however. Contemporary genre theorists acknowledge that genres are more like families than like classes, families in which the members are related in a variety of ways without sharing any necessary or defining single feature. And because they are constantly changing, the critical language for identifying and describing genres is similarly imprecise and in flux. In *Kinds of Literature*, Alistair Fowler asks, "How can traditional genre theory have anything to say about forms so new and so various as those of 'the novel'?" In principle, he continues, "any form that can be invented can be identified, just as any definition of it can be disproved by subsequent literature. No doubt most fictional genres have still to be identified." By identifying "new," or innovative and experimental, historical fiction as a subgenre which shares characteristics generally (though not always, or always in the same way) absent from "old," or conventional, historical fiction—itself a fluid and imprecise category—I am following Fowler's injunction "to explore new groupings" that "have taken their departure from earlier groupings" (33–35).

Let us begin with the kind of history innovative historical writers have chosen to reconstruct and reinterpret. Whereas much traditional historical fiction is based upon political, military, and dynastic history, the New Historical Fiction has moved on (just as recent historical scholarship has done) to less familiar aspects of the past. For example, the technology of making watches and other elaborate mechanical constructions during the Enlightenment, along with that period's passion for collecting, is the subject of Allen Kurzweil's *A Case of Curiosities* (1992), while Andrew Miller's *Ingenious Pain* (1997) is based on extensive research into eighteenth-century surgical and medical practices. Both are highly original first novels that combine magic realist strategies with esoteric detail. So does Umberto Eco's *The Island of the Day Before* (1994), a very densely written novel set in 1643 in which the charting of longitudes is the principal character's obsession; the seventeenth-century vocabulary of shipbuilding, sieges, and fortifications posed a particular challenge to Eco's translator, William Weaver (Weaver 17).² In each case, the precision associated with science and mechanics is juxtaposed with a contrasting freedom from the rules of conventional fiction.

Like *The Name of the Rose*, these "difficult" and atypical novels are reaching surprisingly large audiences; witness Patrick Suskind's bestseller *Perfume* (1985), a grotesque excursion into the world of scent manufacturing in eighteenth-century France, and Steven Millhauser's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Martin Dressler* (1997), a surreal fantasy about a self-made entrepreneur who builds impossibly elaborate luxury hotels in turn-of-the-century New York. *Angels and Insects* (1992), a pair of novellas by A. S. Byatt that brings together nineteenth-century parapsychology with Darwinian science, was the basis for a film of the same name. These and other recent historical fictions employ unconventional narrative strategies; one particularly interesting example is the Canadian novelist John Steffler's *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* (1993), which is based on an actual journal kept by a gentleman explorer at one of the first fishing and trapping stations on the coast of Labrador. Steffler imagines Cartwright trapped eternally in time on the day of his death, May 19, 1819, reliving his past in recollections adapted from the journal along with letters and other narratives. Time progresses, however, so that the novel's setting is simultaneously the "past" of Cartwright's earlier life, the moment of his death, and the 170 years that follow. All of these novels stretch the limits of fictional realism, while at the same time they initiate the reader into the material, scientific, and technological cultures of the past from oblique perspectives.

When Frances Sherwood sent her first novel, *Vindication*, to Jonathan Galassi at Farrar Straus and Giroux in 1992, he immediately recognized its appeal and planned a large first edition of thirty thousand copies. This "passionate and surprising vision of life and love," as the jacket copy describes it, reinvents Mary Wollstonecraft with, as Sherwood's author's note acknowledges, "many deviations . . . from the actual history of the eighteenth-century

author of ‘Vindication of the Rights of Women’ and her contemporaries” (n.p.). Galassi identified Sherwood with “a new breed of historical novelists whose work is unapologetically suffused with twentieth-century attitudes, even as it delights in the foreign textures of everyday life in the past” (Talbot 19). Publishers are seeking out New Historical Fictions because of their ability to attract readings. *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, by Tracy Chevalier (2001) was a *New York Times* bestseller; its popularity coincided with major exhibits of the seventeenth-century Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer’s works. Another recent historical fiction that takes its title from a Vermeer painting, *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* by Susan Vreeland (1999), approaches the past longitudinally; like Adam Thorpe’s *Ulverton* (1992) or Eva Figes’s *The Seven Ages* (1986), Vreeland’s novel leads the reader through successive moments in history, as the painting is passed from one owner to the next. This approach to historical fiction writing, popularized by Edward Rutherfurd’s bestselling *Sarum* and *London*, charts the topographical, sociological, and linguistic changes a culture undergoes through a series of linked episodes.



Although the success of *The Name of the Rose* in the early 1980s brought the New Historical Fiction to the attention of a large reading public, it was certainly not the first historical novel to begin transforming the genre. William Golding and John Banville both anticipated some of Eco’s fictional strategies in the way they constructed the worlds of fourteenth-century architecture and sixteenth-century science. Golding’s *The Spire* (1964), a strange and disturbing novel that chronicles the building of the spire atop Salisbury Cathedral, never mentions Salisbury Cathedral by name or provides explanatory historical details to orient the reader, as most conventional historical fiction does. This is the kind of novel that sends you to the history books, since much of its suspense turns on whether the foundations of the cathedral will in fact support the unprecedented four hundred-foot spire.³ *The Spire* evokes the enormous faith that sustains Jocelin, the dean of the cathedral, in the face of his fellow clerics’ resistance, the townspeople’s fears, and the skepticism of the masterbuilder Roger Mason. Like other historical fictions about medieval church architecture, such as Edith Pargeter’s *The Heaven Tree* (1960) and Henri Vincenot’s *The Prophet of Compostela* (1982), *The Spire* translates spatial, mathematical, and visual concepts into complex imaginative language. Moreover, all three novels dramatize the relationship between building and theology, religious mysticism and stonemasonry, while drawing the reader into a narrative that is shaped by the linear process of construction. *The Spire* also looks forward to other New Historical Fictions I will be discussing (as well as backward to modernist novels) in its use of diction and syntax to reflect abnormal states of mind. As the novel draws to a close, the increasing madness of the two central characters infects the narration and culminates in Jocelin’s vivid hallucinations just before his death.

John Banville's *Doctor Copernicus* (1976) is the first of three novels inspired by Arthur Koestler's *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe* (1959), itself a rethinking of the way early modern science developed. In an essay on the novel, the historian Wini Warren observes that Banville sought "to provide a psychological explanation of Copernicus's . . . penchant for secretiveness," a question that has "plagued historians for centuries" (388). She argues that Banville's novel is in many ways more "true" to Copernicus's life than the accounts of historians who mythologize him as the progenitor of the new science, imposing on his life both their own need to see him as a devoted astronomer and a "presentism" that views scientists as dedicated professionals (397, 394). Banville evokes Copernicus's cantankerous personality through shifting narration, as when Rheticus, the historical figure who published an account of some of Copernicus's ideas during his lifetime, is introduced as the speaker of the long third section of the novel. Rheticus may or may not be a reliable narrator: as he proceeds to defend himself against Copernicus's accusations in his testimony, the reader begins to wonder how much to credit his depiction of the aging Copernicus as crafty and sinister, living in sin with his housekeeper and resisting publication of *De Revolutionibus Orbium Mundi*. When the point of view shifts for the last twenty-two pages, in a mix of first- and third-person narration culminating in an interior dialogue between Copernicus and his brother Andreas, Banville evokes the experience of reviewing one's life just before death, slipping in and out of lucidity, much as Golding had done in *The Spire*. Resisting the "philosophy of happy ignorance" voiced by the ghost-Andreas, the dying Copernicus wants desperately to believe that "we can know" (239). Like many other New Historical Fictions set in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, this one dramatizes the perplexities surrounding faith, and the radical doubts and skepticism that beset so many in those eras.

The New Historical Fiction published throughout Britain, North and South America, and Europe during the 1980s and 1990s complemented a corresponding development in historical writing. As the distinguished historian John Demos (an early practitioner of the new social history) observes, it had become evident by 1990 that "there were two trends approaching convergence: that of novelists drawn to historical fiction and that of scholars attempting a seminovelistic brand of history." After confessing his initial resistance to the notion that historical fiction could provide a way into the past, Demos says he found that fiction writers were paying

scrupulously close attention to significant human detail. [Margaret] Atwood's Bronfinan Lecture describes her experience of "wrestling not only with who said what about Grace Marks [in *Alias Grace*], but also with how to clean a chamber pot, what footwear would have been worn in winter, the origins of quilt pattern names, and how to store parsnips."

To a man and woman, the historical novelists have addressed precisely this challenge, and their “wrestling” process has taken them into the tiniest minutiae of evidence. (Another novel to mention, after all: Charles Frazier’s acclaimed *Cold Mountain*, in which the minutiae are so dense as to become almost suffocating. Still, to follow Frazier’s central character on his journey home from Civil War soldiering is to know the life of that time and place in a wholly immediate way.) (1528–29)

The “tiny minutiae of evidence” Demos speaks of is uncovered by a new kind of research on the part of the novelist; whereas the “old” historical fiction often includes large chunks of textbook history presented in a transparently didactic way, the New Historical Fiction constructs the world of the past through little-known, sometimes bizarre details drawn from unlikely historical sources.

Just as novelists were increasing their use of the research methods of historians, so historians discovered that “a focus on the story is both intellectually innovative *and* rhetorically appealing,” in the words of Sara Maza. Maza’s wide-ranging 1996 review essay in the *American Historical Review* charts the “turn to ‘narrativity’” and the attendant use of fictional strategies in “the new cultural history” and related fields like anthropology and legal studies (1494–95). This “turn” is both new and old. Until the early nineteenth century historiography was regarded as a literary art, a point made repeatedly by the philosopher of history Hayden White, who observed that the great historians of the past both recognized and accepted “the inevitability of a recourse to fictive techniques” in the writing of history (123). White’s work on historiography in the 1970s coincided with other theoretical developments in the overlapping fields of linguistics, anthropology, cultural history, and literary theory. Building on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, he argued that “[o]ur *explanations* of historical structures and processes are thus determined more by what we leave out of our representations than by what we put in” (90). Hence historical narratives are “not only models of past events and processes, but also metaphorical statements which suggest a relation of similitude between such events and processes and the story types that we conventionally use to endow the events of our lives with culturally sanctioned meanings” (88). For White, the similarities between histories and novels are in many ways greater than their differences; history, he proclaimed, “is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation” (122).⁴

By the early 1990s, a new generation of cultural historians had emerged who employed strategies very similar to those of New Historicists like Stephen Greenblatt. As Dale H. Porter notes, these historians

argue that historical documents are, in their own ways, prose texts created in response to historical circumstances. They represent human

experience, which is not determined *a priori* by circumstances but “constructed” by each of us, applying models and meanings available in our locality. The cultural historians “interrogate” or “deconstruct” particular texts, using a single document or a unique collection as an entry into a particular cultural milieu or *mentalité*. (334–35)

Porter wonders whether such works have crossed the line between nonfiction and fiction. The answer, he suggests, is that “hybrids” are appearing in both realms, and he offers examples of fiction-histories like Alex Haley’s *Roots* which deal with “groups of people whose historical experience was not typically recorded in standard public documents” (343). These accounts contrast with the traditionally accepted “guaranteed” past—like the gold in Fort Knox—that people could depend on” (342).

This book will address some of the ways in which the New Historical Fiction has unsettled the assumptions of conventional literary history—the gold in Fort Knox, if you will—that have been cherished by so many devotees of Shakespeare’s England. The phrase “Shakespeare’s England” encompasses not only the life and times and contemporaries of that most written-about of playwrights, but also of the characters who appear in the English history plays. This period is a frequent subject of popular formula-fiction romances due to its distinctive, easily replicated “atmosphere,” but it has also inspired much serious, traditional historical fiction and fiction-biography, as well. The recent flourishing of the New Historical Fiction has, not surprisingly, produced some remarkable revisioning of Shakespeare’s England. Novelists have sought out this period in history, possibly for the same reasons the New Historicists have, because it offers instances of divided and destabilized societies, characterized by political and religious tensions, high ambitions, and rapid social and cultural change. Adjacent stretches of English history will make occasional appearances in this book as well.

The novels I discuss are frequently metafictional and metahistorical in the questions they implicitly or explicitly raise about the nature of history and the relationship between what we call history and fiction. As Brenda Marshall observes in *Teaching the Postmodern*, the reader of such novels becomes an active participant:

We not only watch the postmodern narrator-author write; we are also made aware that the writer is writing quite consciously for us. The narrator-author challenges the reader to participate in creating the picture. And the reader must comply, if only in the attempt to make sense of the text. (153)

In a discussion that invokes such contemporary theorists as Foucault and Lyotard, Marshall adds that postmodern historical fiction “fragments what was thought unified” (169). This skewing, rearranging, and falsifying of his-

torical details reveals the “caprice of recorded history” and inculcates “an incredulity toward metanarratives” (170, 175). The novelist “teaches” the past by dismantling conventional historical truths, while the reader, in turn, “learns” to think in terms of multiple, contradictory histories rather than a single internally coherent one.



Although *The Name of the Rose* and the year 1980 serve as a logical starting point for discussing the New Historical Fiction, some notably innovative historical novels were way ahead of their time. John Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) seemed a curiosity when it first appeared, but it in fact anticipated later developments in historical fiction with its remarkably authentic-looking mock seventeenth-century orthography. Demos calls this “an early masterwork of the historical fiction genre” and regards Barth as “simply too far ahead of things to get the credit he surely deserves” (1527). Several years later, in an essay “about Aboutness,” Barth acknowledges that his comical treatment of early colonial Maryland is, “not finally about tidewater Maryland and its history” just as Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* is “not about the French Revolution in the way that Carlyle’s *History of the French Revolution*” is, for “great literature is almost always about itself” (181, 188, 191).

Not surprisingly, the novelists themselves recognize and celebrate their innovative predecessors: in a new edition of Ford Maddox Ford’s long-neglected trilogy *The Fifth Queen* (which was originally published in 1908 and which takes its title from Henry VIII’s fifth wife, Katherine Howard), A. S. Byatt praises Ford’s “highly visual, scrupulous rendering of the Tudor world.” William Gass describes *The Fifth Queen* as

slow, intense, pictorial, and operatic. Plot is both its subject and its method. Execution is its upshot and its art. *The Fifth Queen* is like Verdi’s *Otello*: made of miscalculation, mismaneuver, and mistake. Motive is a metaphor with its meaning sheathed like a dagger. It is one of Shakespeare’s doubtful mystery plays. . . . For prose, it is the recovery of poetry itself. (27)

Mary Renault, preëminent chronicler of the ancient world in historical novels of enduring popularity among scholars and general readers alike, pays homage to Rose Macaulay’s *They Were Defeated* (1932), a novel, she says, “whose smell of authenticity goes quite to one’s head.” Set in Cambridge in 1640 with fictional renderings of Herrick, Cleveland, Milton, and Cowley, *They Were Defeated* proves that “the actual speech” of that day can indeed be made understandable without resorting to “phony archaism” (Renault 86). The avid reader of serious historical fiction can no doubt think of other

novels about other periods in history that anticipated many of the fictional strategies I will be discussing in the following chapters.

George Garrett's *Death of the Fox* (1971) is a more recent harbinger of the New Historical Fiction. It is an encyclopedic novel reminiscent of nineteenth-century fiction in its enormous scope. In an essay published shortly before *Death of the Fox* appeared, Garrett explains that he began his research in the 1950s, intending to write a biography of Sir Walter Raleigh; he gradually shifted direction in the 1960s, partly because so many biographies of Raleigh were appearing. Struck by the "blank spaces and mysteries in Raleigh's life," he realized that "where the biographer and historian must go on tiptoes," the traditional historical novelist would choose "to fill in these blank spaces with imagined detail, to stand boldly, attributing one motive or another for the seemingly inexplicable action, siding, then, with one historian or another by turning his careful surmise into a definite stance." (*Dreaming With Adam* 26) Garrett found himself resisting this time-honored method, however, "because the blank spaces and the dark corners seemed so much a part of [Raleigh] and his character." (26) So he chose to "accept them as inherent mysteries and . . . find another way of using them in fiction." (26) The "mysteries" that Garrett wanted to evoke fictionally transcended the known and unknown facts of Raleigh's life; hence Garrett's project became nothing less than getting at the "essential mystery" that was "larger than the man," belonging as it did to the age—what Garrett calls "the renaissance imagination" (27). The new historical novelist's role, paradoxically, is "not to *understand* a piece of history and to make it live again," as a traditional historical fiction writer might claim to do, but rather, to "imagine" the lives of other human beings "without assaulting their essential and, anyway, ineffable mystery" (33–34). In other words, the past must remain a foreign country even when the reader's journey has been completed.

Garrett's vision of historical fiction writing anticipates Linda Hutcheon's description of historiographic metafiction in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*: this self-reflexive postmodern form of historical fiction, she observes, "does not mirror reality; nor does it reproduce it. It cannot. There is no pretense of simplistic mimesis in historiographic metafiction. Instead, fiction is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality . . ." (40). Or, as Patricia Waugh explains, "Any text that draws the reader's attention to its process of construction by frustrating his or her conventional expectations of meaning and closure" is metafictional in the way it "problematizes . . . the ways in which narrative codes—whether 'literary' or 'social'—artificially construct apparently 'real' and imaginary worlds . . ." (22). The history that emerges from contemporary metafiction

is provisional: “no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures”(7).

Because I have tried to limit myself more or less to Shakespeare's England, much of the innovative historical fiction that has been published since 1980 can be mentioned only in passing. Here are some novels set in other times and places from which my inferences about the generic characteristics of the New Historical Fiction are derived; most of them deal with British or European history from the medieval period to the eighteenth century. For lack of a better organizing principle, I list them in order of original publication except where two novels by the same author are included: Frederick Buechner, *Godric* (1980); John Banville, *Kepler* (1981); Peter Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor* (1985) and *Chatterton* (1987); Homer Aridjis, *1492* (1985) and *The Lord of the Last Days* (1994); Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion* (1987); Sebastian Vassalli, *The Chimera* (1990); Evan S. Connell, *The Alchemist's Journal* (1991); Sebastien Japrisot, *A Very Long Engagement* (1991); Thomas Norfolk, *Lempriere's Dictionary* (1991); Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover* (1992); Adam Thorpe, *Ulverton* (1992); Barry Unsworth, *Sacred Hunger* (1992); Frances Sherwood, *Vindication* (1993); Andrzej Szczypiorski, *Mass for Arras* (1993); Louis de Bernieres, *Corelli's Mandolin* (1994); Jill Paton Walsh, *Knowledge of Angels* (1994); Madison Smartt Bell, *All Souls' Rising* (1995); Penelope Fitzgerald, *The Blue Flower* (1995); Douglas Glover, *The Life and Times of Captain N.* (1995); Kathryn Harrison, *Poison* (1995); Michael Pye, *The Drowning Room* (1995); Robert Begiebing, *The Strange Death of Mistress Coffin* (1996) and *The Adventures of Allegra Fullerton* (1999); Sheri Holman, *A Stolen Tongue* (1997) and *The Dress Lodger* (2000); Iain Pears, *An Instance of the Fingerpost* (1998); and A. S. Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale* (2000). A longer list would include some earlier, relatively unknown novels that exhibit certain characteristics of the New Historical Fiction, like Sylvia Townsend Warner's *The Corner That Held Them* (1948) and the Dutch novelist Hella S. Haasse's *In a Dark Wood Wandering* (1949), *The Scarlet City* (1954); and *Threshold of Fire* (1964).

Some of the novelists on my list (and others I have not included) appear on the lists of other scholars who see common characteristics among innovative historical novels. For example, Susan Onega is particularly interested in novelists for whom

the attempt to recreate a concrete historical period in traditional terms is only a pretext for a much more interesting and disturbing aim, which is to enter the tunnel of time in order to recover the other, suppressed, half of Western civilization and history: the mythical, esoteric, gnostic and cabalistic elements which once formed an inextricable unity with reason

and logic, and which have been progressively repressed and muffled since the Middle Ages by the mainstream of rationalism. (57)

Monika Fludernik's essay on history and metafiction contains a list that includes novels about nineteenth- and twentieth-century American history, conspicuously absent from my list. She notes that recent historical novels

straddle the fiction/history boundary in triple and quadruple manner, radicalizing the hybridization which was already the keynote of the historical novel and gleefully subverting any genre features of traditional fiction or historiography.

In contrast to the satirical metafiction of the 1960s and 1970s, Fludernik observed that we are seeing "a new, more serious mode of historiographic metafiction . . . one that is less playful, more specifically concerned with 'history' (in different ways) and less simplistically and dichotomously mythological. . . ." She ends by saying that we can call this evolving genre "the new historical novel" (101).

In her collection of essays *On Histories and Stories*, A. S. Byatt speculates about why the past is the subject of so much modern fiction. When she began writing novels in the 1960s, Byatt recounts, "we were being lectured by C. P. Snow and Kingsley Amis about how good fiction *ought* to describe the serious social concerns of contemporary society. It seemed perfectly adequate to dismiss historical fiction as 'escapism'. . . ." Now, however, historical fiction is being written "for complex aesthetic and intellectual reasons. Some of it is sober and some of it is fantastic, some of it is knowing and postmodernist, some of it is feminist or post-colonial rewritings of official history, some of it is past prehistory, some of it is very recent" (93). Her list includes authors whose work I will be discussing, such as Anthony Burgess, Jeanette Winterson, and Barry Unsworth, along with others like Julian Barnes, Graham Swift, Angela Carter, Marina Warner, Caryl Phillips, and J. M. Coetzee. The many forms of current historical fiction, she observes, include "parodic and pastiche forms, forms which fake documents or incorporate real ones, mixtures of past and present, hauntings and ventriloquism, historical versions of genre fictions. . . ." The writers' purposes are similarly various: "incantatory, analytic, romantic, or stylistic. Or playful, or extravagant, or allegorical . . . [but] even the ones apparently innocently realist . . . do not choose realism unthinkingly, but almost as an act of shocking rebellion against current orthodoxies" (38–39). Byatt speculates that postmodern writers are returning to historical fiction because they are attracted to the idea that there is no such thing as "an organic, discoverable single self. We are perhaps no more than a series of disjunct sense-impressions, remembered incidents, shifting bits of knowledge, opinion, ideology and stock responses"

(31). Speaking of her own most well-known novel, *Possession*, she recalls playing

serious games with the variety of possible forms of narrating the past—the detective story, the biography, the mediaeval verse Romance, the modern romantic novel, and Hawthorne’s fantastic historical Romance in between, the campus novel, the Victorian third-person narration, the epistolary novel, the forged manuscript novel, and the primitive fairy tale of the three women, filtered through Freud’s account of the theme in his paper on the Three Caskets. (48)

Some of the generic traits Byatt mentions in passing appear in Seymour Menton’s study of recent Latin American fiction. Menton attempts to describe the postmodern historical novel through a sample of 367 novels divided into mostly post-1979 “New Historical Novels” and more traditional “Not-So-New Historical Novels 1949–1992” that are useful for contrast. He identifies six characteristics of New Historical Novels, not all of which can be found in each novel:

1. The subordination . . . of the mimetic recreation of a given historical period to the illustration of three historical ideas . . . (a) the impossibility of ascertaining the true nature of reality or history; (b) the cyclical nature of history; and (c) the unpredictability of history. . . .
2. The conscious distortion of history through omissions, exaggerations, and anachronisms.
3. The utilization of famous historical characters as protagonists, which differs markedly from the Walter Scott formula . . . of fictitious protagonists.
4. *Metafiction*, or the narrator’s referring to the creative process of his own text [and] questioning of his own discourse. . . .
5. *Intertextuality*: “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” [Menton is quoting Julia Kristeva].
6. The Bakhtinian concepts of the *dialogic*, the *carnavalesque*, parody, and *heteroglossia*. [The dialogic] contain[s] two or more often conflicting presentations of events, characters, and world views . . . [while the carnivalesque employs] humorous exaggerations and . . . emphasis on bodily functions . . . [and heteroglossia is] the multiplicity of discourses, or the conscious use of different types of speech. (22–25)

To these characteristics Menton adds six “modalities” that distinguish the New Historical Novel from the traditional romantic historical novel. They are “the fanciful and pseudo-historical . . . and totally apocryphal”; “the alternation between two rather widely separated time periods”; “unabashed

anachronism”; the way “the representation of the past masks comments on the present”; “historical detective stories”; and “apocryphal autobiographical novels” (25). Every novel I will be discussing in the following chapters displays several of the characteristics Menton lists. As his typology suggests, the New Historical Fiction exhibits the most interesting developments in contemporary fiction.

When scholars like Fludernik and Menton use the term “the New Historical Novel” they may not realize that the term is actually over a century old. In *The Historical Novel from Scott to Sabatini*, Harold Orel notes that the historical novel’s popularity waned after the enormous success of Walter Scott’s fiction in the early nineteenth century, but revived in the 1880s, so much so that “within thirty years more than five hundred such novels were issued by publishers,” and the phenomenon “came to be known by the phrase ‘The New Historical Novel’” (1). The vogue of historical fiction had a “long run,” but within months after the end of the First World War, its moment had passed (15).



Apart from some scholarly studies of Scott’s fiction, remarkably little has been written about the historical novel as a genre, considering its longevity, popularity, and variety. The PN 3400 section on genre in a typical large university library contains dozens of books on science fiction, romance, and detective fiction, but only a bare half-dozen on historical fiction. While it is not my intent to survey the existing critical literature on historical fiction here, a few texts deserve mention, if only because of the way they articulate the contradictions and perceived shortcomings that have been repeatedly associated with the genre. Two European treatises on the historical novel have been recently reissued by the University of Nebraska Press, a sign, perhaps, of renewed critical interest: Georg Lukacs’s *The Historical Novel* (1955), and Alessandro Manzoni’s *On the Historical Novel* (begun in 1828 but not published until 1850). The latter has been newly translated by Sandra Bermann, with a long introduction putting the two works in perspective; both, she notes, were influenced by continental philosophy and in different ways were concerned with the ethical and didactic function of fiction (58). Despite the fact that their books were written a century apart, Bermann adds, “both Lukacs and Manzoni view the novel itself as a form that is peculiarly split, dichotomous, and therefore problematic” (54).

Although he was ostensibly defending the historical novel against critics whose arguments he paraphrases in *On the Historical Novel*, Manzoni reluctantly concluded that

the historical novel is a work in which the necessary turns out to be impossible, and in which two essential conditions cannot be reconciled,

or even one fulfilled. It inevitably calls for a combination that is contrary to its subject matter and a division contrary to its form. Though we know it is a work in which history and fable must figure, we cannot determine or even estimate their proper measure or relation. (72)

Manzoni's resistance to the hybrid nature of historical fiction was in effect a rejection of his earlier novel *I Promessi Sposi* (*The Betrothed*), written between 1821 and 1827. Eco praised this novel in his *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* for its departure from nineteenth-century historical fiction conventions: instead of

a celebration of Italian glories from a period when Italy was a land of the strong . . . [Manzoni] chooses the seventeenth century, a period of servitude [and] tells of no battles, and dares to weigh his story down with documents and proclamations. (523–24).

As a recent study of innovative Italian historical fiction points out, the revisionist “critical historical novels” written by Eco and others transcend the generic boundaries understood by Manzoni, with his “prescriptive and censoring” paradigm (Coletta 14). Contemporary novelists acknowledge, rather than try to conceal, the confrontation between fiction and history as they seek to interpret the past, although they also follow Manzoni's example in “tell[ing] the stories of those who did not have a voice in the historical world” (Coletta 15). Looking ahead from Manzoni to the historical fiction of the present, Bermann articulates one difference between the old historical fiction and the new:

How could Manzoni know that a reader might eventually become less interested in the reaffirmation of positive facts than in a demonstration of man's conscious—or even unconscious—fictional transformation of them? (59)

Lukacs takes a Marxist view of the historical novel, seeing the fiction of Scott and his successors as “a perfect coincidence between the short career of the historical novel and the early nineteenth century, a period of alliance between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat” (Bermann 55). Although he arrives at his conclusions differently from Manzoni, he likewise has doubts about the future of the historical novel due to the difficulties inherent in fusing empirical history and imaginative fiction.

Manzoni's and Lukacs's skepticism about historical fiction as an enduring and multifaceted genre reflects a larger anxiety about the pitfalls that confront the historian. In *The Use and Abuse of History* Nietzsche inveighs against the “‘monumental’ contemplation of the past” that causes “the individuality of the past [to be] forced into a general formula and all the sharp angles broken off for the sake of correspondence.” As long as the past

is principally used as a model for imitation, it is always in danger of being a little altered and touched up and brought nearer to fiction. Sometimes there is no possible distinction between a “monumental” past and a mythical romance. . . . (15)

In a sentence that anticipates the New Historicists, Nietzsche proclaims: “For the things of the past are never viewed in their true perspective or receive their just value; but value and perspective change with the individual or the nation that is looking back on its past” (19).

Much of the New Historical Fiction serves as a corrective to what Nietzsche calls “monumental history” by creating oblique, revisionist micro-histories from overlooked historical archives. Mario Vargas Llosa, the Peruvian novelist whose fiction belongs to the Latin American “boom” in magic-realist historical fiction, explains that

The reconstruction of the past in literature is almost always false in terms of historical objectivity. Literary truth is one thing, historical truth another. But although it is full of lies—rather, because of this fact—literature recounts the history that the history written by the historians would not know how, or be able, to write, because the deceptions, tricks, and exaggerations of narrative literature are used to express profound and unsettling truths which can only see the light of day in this oblique way.” (Parini B4–B5)⁵

Peter Ackroyd addresses this conundrum in *Chatterton* (1987), a novel about the poet Thomas Chatterton, who died mysteriously at the age of eighteen in 1770. Ackroyd juxtaposes his subject’s brief life, Henry Wallis’s painting *The Death of Chatterton*, (for which the nineteenth-century poet George Meredith posed as the poet), and the researches of a fictional twentieth-century character named Charles Wychwood in an elaborately layered postmodern fiction. Adapting detective fiction conventions, he uses Wychwood’s discovery of a portrait and papers to trigger some ingenious speculation regarding Chatterton’s life and death. One of the documents Wychwood discovers contains an observation that sounds very like Nietzsche’s, recast in remarkably convincing period diction and orthography:

I reproduc’d the Past and filled it with such Details that it was as if I were observing it in front of me: so the Language of ancient Dayes awoke the Reality itself for, tho’ I knew that it was I who composed these Histories, I knew also that they were true ones. (85)

Here Chatterton is speaking of his poetry, which was inspired by Shakespeare and other sixteenth-century poets. Ackroyd plays with the idea, developed throughout the novel, that an invented history can be “true” to the time it recreates even if it is methodologically “false.” Reading the biogra-

phies of Chatterton, each of which “described a different poet . . . so that nothing seemed certain,” Wychwood concludes that “If there were no truth, everything was true” (127). Or, as Meredith asks Wallis, “so the greatest realism is also the greatest fakery?” (139).

The resistance to distinctions between the “true” and the “false” in historical fiction can be alarming to writers of nonfiction. The biographer Margaret Forster offers another perspective on this and other instances of the new historical fiction in the *New York Times Book Review*. Forster begins her review of Sherwood’s *Vindication* with the pronouncement:

Novels based on the lives of real people, even long dead people, are always dangerous enterprises. Dangerous because they tamper with received truth, dangerous because their avowed aim is to lie, all in the name of satisfying unsatisfied curiosity. Is this sort of distortion right, is it fair?

She goes on to ask whether the “many deviations” Sherwood acknowledges in the author’s note are “important or not?” Her answer, clearly, is yes, as she describes the “distinct queasiness” she felt when confronted with invented episodes “that never happened and that are alien to the spirit of Wollstonecraft.” She ends her review by urging the reader to seek out the “necessary corrective” of a standard biography immediately after finishing the novel (21). Three weeks later, the *Book Review* published a long letter from novelist Russell Banks. The letter chides Forster—who, after all, is the biographer of Daphne du Maurier, an historian and historical novelist. Forster “ought to know,” says Banks, that

Whereas a novelist is primarily concerned with creating in language a morally coherent universe, a biographer or historian seems to be concerned instead with establishing Ms. Forster’s “received truth”—a dignified and valuable task, to be sure, but no more the job of a novelist than that of a poet, painter, film maker or musician.

He concludes, aphoristically, that “Novels are not versions of history; they are visions of life” (27).

Many readers would argue that historical novels *are* versions of history, although not in the same way that biographies are. If fiction writers can be accused of filling in the gaps in “history,” they do so because biographers allow those gaps to occur when they decide what to include and what to omit. Both fiction writers and biographers are also guilty of imposing a shape, or narrative, on the disparate events of a life, as they seek for explanatory structures of cause and effect.⁶ “Every inclusion is also an exclusion, every temporal structure, however minutely described, remains a generalization,” observes Richard Humphrey in *The Historical Novel as Philosophy of History*. But the historical novel, he argues, fleshes out generalizations, replacing the

“generalization[s] characteristic of narrative history with [a] more discriminating kind of generalization” (18).

In one of the best contemporary essays about historical fiction, Cleo Kearns approaches the genre’s paradoxical nature from a somewhat different perspective, using as her starting point the “dubious pleasures” of reading the novels of Dorothy Dunnett (a very popular and prolific contemporary British writer). Kearns perceives an uneasiness at the heart of historical fiction due to its “essentially hybrid nature, dependent for power on a destabilising of the boundaries both between ‘reality’ and ‘fiction’ and ‘high’ and ‘popular’ cultures” (38). This uneasiness, she continues, is deeply unsettling [to] certain bourgeois and scientific modes of thought. In its respect for convention and historicity, however, it can be deeply consolidating of these modes as well” (39). Historical fiction is an inherently postmodern form, says Kearns:

Instead of tackling history’s power straight on, it subverts it from within. While these other forms, narrative history, the realist novel, the documentary, etc., are busy constructing the reality effect, the historical novel is busy deconstructing it, though not without, in classic deconstructive fashion, first establishing a certain complicity with its task. The historical novel, in other words, is saying something like “let us *imagine* that *this happened*, let us fill in the gaps that discomfit the historians, but fill them in so convincingly that *our* reality effect, based as it were on nothing but air, will seem more substantial than *their* reality effect which claims the security of ‘fact.’” (40)

The power Kearns ascribes to “history” is in many instances a patriarchal power, the power an essentially conservative tradition appropriates to uphold a particular version of the past. And yet, as Kearns points out at the beginning of her essay, reading historical fiction is a typically female activity. So is writing historical fiction: women writers have long been laying claim to the gaps in recorded history, often by choosing women as their subjects.

In *The House of Desdemona*, the historical novelist Lion Feuchtwanger offers an explanation for women’s prominence as creators and consumers of historical fiction, although he does so in language that would infuriate contemporary readers. Feuchtwanger begins from the assumption that “the author is not re-creating history for its own sake but uses the costume or disguise of history as the simplest stylistic means for achieving the illusion of reality” (14). By “removing himself from his own time and by regarding it as something foreign,” the author can “make the audience or reader feel the peculiar and the essential quality of his own time” (140–41). *The House of Desdemona* was left unfinished at the author’s death in 1958; it breaks off just at the point at which Feuchtwanger was starting to address the “extent of the participation of women in the production of historical narrative, both the genuine and the trash varieties” (194). He takes a long look back through

history, starting with attributions of biblical narratives and the *Odyssey* to women writers, and on into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Generalizing freely, Feuchtwanger observes that “women take more seriously than men the preliminary work requisite to writing an historical novel,” a process that takes “much diligence and patience . . . [for] one must wade through many long historiographical studies in the hope of discovering some small utilizable fact. . . .”(195). Although his depiction of the *Hausfrau* novelist engaged in “the same tiring work . . . over and over again” to produce “neat and shining results” (196) makes us cringe (remember that this was, after all, an unfinished draft!), he was in fact writing during a period in which women writers were producing an abundance of historical fictions, some of them about women who had been overlooked or misconstrued by male historians.⁷ As the following chapters will demonstrate, some of the most innovative and some of the most conventional historical novels continue to be written by and about women.

Perhaps the subversive power Kearns speaks of explains why so much that has been written about historical fiction dwells upon its shortcomings. In retrospect, Manzoni’s assessment of historical fiction as “a work impossible to achieve satisfactorily because its premises are inherently contradictory” (72) sounds quite contemporary; it brings to mind deconstruction’s appropriation of the rhetorical term “aporia” to signify a point of impasse at which the text’s self-contradictory meanings can no longer be resolved (Baldick 15). This note has been sounded again and again as the genre’s perceived contradictions, often called “problems,” persist in troubling critics.

For example, an early essay on the genre written in 1897 by Brander Matthews infers from novels like Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* and *Henry Esmond* that “fidelity [is] simply impossible to the story-teller who deals with the past . . . the more he labors, the less life is there likely to be in the tale he is telling: humanity is choked by archeology” (21). Of the “ordinary historical novel” (what Feuchtwanger calls “trash”), he declares:

it provides the drug [readers seeking escape] desire, while they can salve their conscience during this dissipation with the belief that they are, at the same time, improving their minds. The historical novel is aureoled with a pseudosanctity, in that it purports to be more instructive than a mere story; it claims—or at least the claim is made in its behalf—that it is teaching history. There are those who think that it thus adds hypocrisy to its other faults. (26)

And, he adds in the next paragraph, the historical novel also falsifies the past, representing it inaccurately as a “better” world than the reader’s own (27).⁸

Three decades later, Ernest Bernbaum attempted to explain why the historical novel had fallen into disrepute among critics. This, he says, is a genre “without its Aristotle” to provide “an explicit statement of its real

nature, a defense of its being" (428). Created "in an age which presupposed an idealistic aesthetics, the historical novel had flourished in peace." But with the rise of empiricism in the second half of the nineteenth century, the "past" became "an objectively existing reality which scientific historians could copy" (429). "Predictions of the death of the genre," Bernbaum concludes, "have been made at least once a decade for a hundred years," (439) and yet the historical novel continues to be a remarkable anomaly: "a genre flourishing in the world of literary experience, and despised in the world of literary thought" (440).

When the more recent "world of literary thought" does turn its attention to historical fiction, the discussions again revert to the "problems" associated with the genre. Harry E. Shaw begins his book *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and His Successors* by observing that historical fiction is a form that "suffers from neglect, even contempt" (9). Later, in a section entitled "The Problem with Historical Novels," he notes that "standard," or mainstream historical novels "cannot enact all levels of human experience with equal success"; that is, they cannot be analytical and descriptive and at the same time "particularize" through "imaginative excursions into groups and individuals" (48). Another "problem" is that when "characters become translucent to allow historical processes to shine through them more clearly they also tend to become thinner as representations of 'inwardly complex' human beings" (48).

Mary Lascelles identifies still another "problem" confronting the historical novelist, "the two-fold necessity of involving his fictitious characters with the persons and events of history at the outset, and extricating them at the close" (41). Edith Pargeter, the author of *The Heaven Tree Trilogy* and other historical novels and historical detective fiction (under the name of Ellis Peters), addresses a variant of this concern when she explains that

when writing history, even in the form of fiction, every documented and ascertainable fact must be respected, and an effort made to present events and locations as truly as possible . . . the castle that never existed I could place where I chose, provided I took care to account for its absence at the end. (Peters and Morgan 160)

Many writers of the New Historical Fiction ignore these "problems"; or, in characteristically postmodern fashion, they invest their fictional worlds with the impossibilities and contradictions that earlier novelists sought to avoid. In a 1979 essay that offers a classification of the kinds of historical fiction, Joseph W. Turner reflects the shift to a postmodern sensibility when he suggests that the "conflicting commitments" the novelist makes to history and fiction can "never be simply (nor even finally) resolved" (342). An inevitable "tension exist[s] within the terms of the genre" and in the case of