

University of New South Wales

Christopher Kremmer

From dialectics to dialogue: Bakhtin, White and the ‘moorings’ of fiction and history

Abstract:

Scholars have noted the ‘remarkable proliferation’ of historical fiction in the postmodern period, and Hayden White has described the neo-historical novel as ‘the dominant genre and mode of postmodernist writing’. This recent acknowledgment of the status of neo-historical fiction raises questions about the long estrangement between the discourses of history and the historical novel since 19th century historians began defining their discipline as a social science. Historians remain preoccupied with time-space specific ‘observable or perceivable’ events, while imaginative writers also engage hypothetical and invented ones, however, this article argues that the theoretical grounds for a vigorous interdisciplinary dialogue between fictional and non-fictional historiography are apparent in the work of White and Mikhail Bakhtin, whose theory of the novel and concepts of dialogism and polyphony are now much discussed in scholarly discourse. By remaining open to the historical referent, rejecting structuralism’s closure in the text, and acknowledging the subjective tendencies in all forms of historiography, White and Bakhtin make new and exciting conversations possible in an environment in which history and fiction can be defined as competing but complimentary discourses.

Biographical note:

Christopher Kremmer teaches in the School of the Arts & Media at UNSW. Distinguished alumnus of the University of Canberra, he is author of four non-fiction books and a novel, *The chase* (2011). His doctoral research – conducted at the Writing & Society Research Centre at UWS – explored truth claims in historical fiction. He has taught previously at the Centre for Advancing Journalism, and is a Fellow at the Australia India Institute, both based at the University of Melbourne.

Keywords:

Historical novel – Mikhail Bakhtin – Hayden White – Dialogism – Polyphony – Jean Kimble



Fig. 1. Jean Kimble, Official Analyst, Sydney Racing Laboratory, 1947-54. Source: Herald & Weekly Times Portrait Collection, State Library of Victoria

History is not imaginary, but it is imagined. Real things really happened, but the ways in which we represent them – literally, *re-present* them – in narrative form, using a combination of facts and our historical imaginations, can only ever achieve a partial, incomplete and distorted version of the past. Our histories – fictional and non-fictional – are hybrid creations comprising evidence, speculation and invention. In situations of information poverty, we recognise these truths instantly; but archival abundance masks them. An illusion of completeness can induce a kind of intellectual arrogance leading to exaggerated truth claims. As the old saying goes, a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, and knowing a lot is not the same as knowing everything.

Some years ago, researching a historical novel set in the world of horseracing in Australia in the 1940s and 1950s, I learnt of a woman whose career inspired the creation of one of my characters (Kremmer 2011). Jean Kimble had been a qualified chemist whose efforts to end rampant horse doping in Sydney horseracing exposed rich and powerful figures in sport and society to public shaming and penalties. For seven long years, the conflict between Kimble's laboratory and the racing fraternity made headlines. Then, in August 1954, it was announced that the Jockey Club had appointed a young man just out of university to take over leadership of the lab. Things quieted down, and a few months later Jean Kimble resigned her position and moved on to a less exciting, less visible job elsewhere.

In her book *Women in Science*, Vivian Gornick writes that many women in the early to mid-20th century, having taken 'that initial, single giant leap inside the male domain that was science, remained where they had arrived ... frozen in position, watching generation after generation of bright young men move swiftly past them'

(1983: 20). It is a description that accords closely with Jean Kimble's fate. She had been a highly controversial figure of national, and burgeoning international standing at the time of her demotion and departure, yet her exit in April 1955 occasioned an extraordinary silence. Her once prominent name and photograph disappeared from public view. It was as if she had never existed (Kremmer 2013).

The problem of research and the historical novel is not one of paucity – it is one of riches. Today's novelist can, at the click of a mouse, access a free digitised library that includes searchable copies of many newspapers published in Australia since the early nineteenth century. Just type in a name, address, event or a date and a plenitude of sources – articles, book references and even classified advertisements published over the past two hundred years – flash up on your computer screen. The digital archive is fertile and seductive, which explains in part why writers increasingly are turning to the past for new material.

Interesting Women In The News

Racing Dopers Beaten By Three Scientists

REPORTS of racehorse doping have put three young Sydney women chemists very much in the news. The trio, who form the staff of the Australian Jockey Club's laboratory at Randwick are engaged in a continuous battle in an anti-doping campaign which extends over four States.

Leading the work is the A.J.C. chief analyst, Miss Jean Kimble, who began her work in December, 1947. Working under her are the assistant analyst, Miss Jean Millar, a Science graduate of Sydney University, who has been on the job for 18 months, and Miss Lesley Bancroft, a graduate in Agricultural Science, who joined the staff a few months ago.

Equipment

Miss Kimble has attended two international conferences in America of the Association of Official Racing Chemists. There she was able to study up-to-date methods and equipment and to adapt them to Australian conditions. She is now satisfied that as a result of the ideas she brought back that her new, completely equipped & 20,000 laboratory at Randwick would compare favourably with any in the world.

In this laboratory, with its blue-grey walls, polished marble benches, and its brand new spectrophotometer, purchased as a result of Miss Kimble's absence, was responsible for the first three positive results taken from every winning, and some losing, racehorses.

They do similar work, for they work at their analysis. South Australia, West Australia and Tasmanian clubs, the horse from which the swab is positive is subjected to means which is only a number to the laboratory to do.

25 "Positives"

Nearly 1,200 swabs have been tested since Miss Kimble began her work, and 25 positive results have been obtained. This has cut short the careers of several racing men, but the fact that until a few weeks ago there had not been a positive swab on a Sydney racehorse for 18 months is proof that the work of the three young women is achieving its aim.

"If those employed in the doping game thought they

Miss Kimble, chief analyst with the A.J.C.

MISS LESLEY BANCROFT, assistant analyst with the A.J.C.

MISS JEAN MILLAR, assistant analyst with the A.J.C.

Waterproof Mascara For Beach Beauty

WATERPROOF mascara will soon be available for Australian women, who are named by a beauty expert that they must not get too sun-baked this summer, even if they do wear eye make-up in the sun.

Mrs. Marie Valdes, who returned to Sydney by Pan-American Clipper during the week, says that Australian girls must develop a light golden colour and wear blue golden red lipstick; make-up must not be worn too heavily.

During her six months' tour abroad, Mrs. Valdes, who is Helena Rubinstein's direct representative in Australia, studied new fashion trends as well as the latest developments in cosmetics.

"THE DERRIERE"

Christmas fashion designers are now experimenting the back line, which they usually try to obscure," Mrs. Valdes said. "They call it 'highlighting the derriere.' This new silhouette is gained by frocks that fit the hips, come in tightly at the back of the knees, then flare out. The frocks require very close waists and an upright posture.

"You can't walk in them, you can't sit in them, you can't stand in them," said Mrs. Valdes. "They are quite impractical."

Understudy Who Replaced The Star

THIS favourite plot used in so many novels about the theatre—the leading lady falls ill and the understudy gets her big chance, never to look back in her career—came true in the case of English actress, Miss Marjorie Weston, who will play the title role of Sister Mary Bouverie in "Boulevard" which opens at the Theatre Royal on October 14.

Miss Weston was under-make an appearance," said

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Fig. 2. Interesting women in the news, 1950. Source: *The Sunday Herald*, National Library of Australia

In the case of Jean Kimble, there was an abundance of contemporaneous accounts of her role as the Jockey Club's first 'official analyst'. The novelty of a woman being a scientist, let alone one capable of imperiling the fortunes and careers of famous racing personalities, seems to have excited journalists. In fact, all three members of the lab's original scientific staff were women, and news reports framed them as representing the wider modernisation that was taking place in Australian society at the time

(*Sunday Herald* 1950: 13). The online archive *Trove*, maintained by the National Library of Australia, also contained an enormous amount of material of use to a novelist attempting to reconstruct the place and period in which the events occurred, including the 1947 classified advertisement calling for applications for the position of Official Analyst, to which Jean had responded, despite it appearing only in the 'Men and Boys' section of the classifieds. The archive was rich in evocative details of post-war rationing of basic commodities, frequent blackouts caused by industrial disputes, and the bootlegging, illegal gambling and forging of ration coupons that were rampant in a post-war economy of paucity and restrictions. Jean's personal effects, including photographs and mementos of her overseas trips to study forensic drug testing shared with me by members of her family, filled out the portrait.

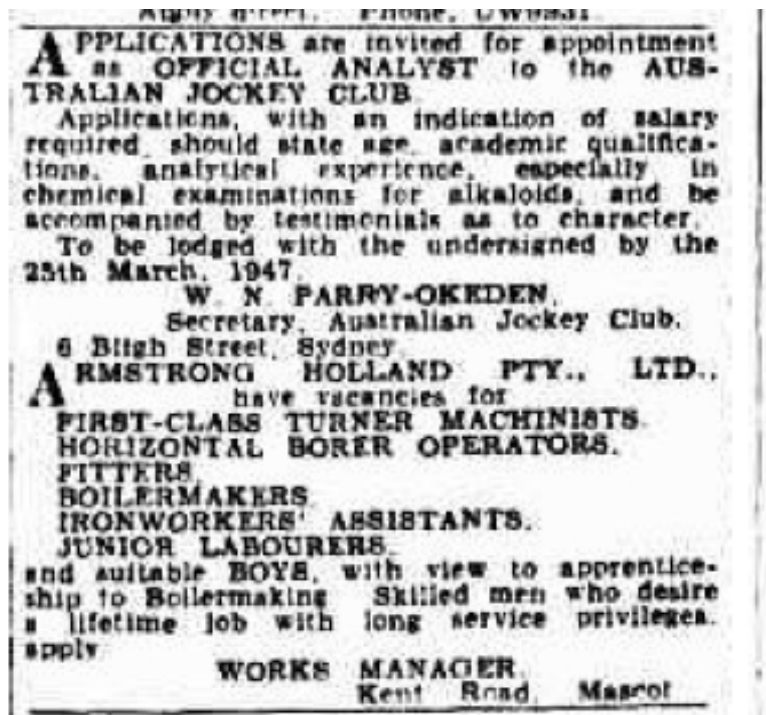


Fig. 3. Advertisement, 1947. Source: *Sydney Morning Herald*, National Library of Australia

The past was speaking, and the present was listening. Australian society had changed greatly since the 1950s, but both women's struggle for equality and the problem of drugs in sport were still subjects of intense interest. Brief mentions of Jean Kimble's story had begun appearing in television documentaries and feature articles in the sporting pages (Chapman, Cordell, Pitt & Greenaway 2000). In these accounts the Jockey Club was portrayed as a stuffy, male-dominated bastion of power and privilege, uncomfortable with the controversies surrounding the lab. Had I tried to imagine her, it seemed, I could not have invented a better character for my novel than the one inspired by the star-crossed woman scientist, who had died unmarried and unsung in 1988. She was, to use chemical parlance, a catalyst that set off a chain of plot, character and period reactions that fueled the artistic process.

Early in the project I had met a former colleague of Jean Kimble's. Lesley Bancroft – who later became Lesley Jacob after wedding her husband Ted – had for five years worked as one of Kimble's assistant analysts. She generously shared her knowledge of the personalities and scientific procedures at the lab in that period, and the staff's high stakes legal battles with racing stakeholders accused of doping horses. In the course of our conversations, Lesley mentioned that she had kept diaries during her years at the lab. I expressed my interest in reading them, but did not press the point, as she was in poor health and I did not wish to place undue pressure on our relationship. Then, one day in the spring of 2010, almost three years into the project and with the manuscript of the novel being edited, I arrived at Lesley's home in the Sydney suburb of Lane Cove to find a stack of yellowing, cardboard-covered notebooks on the dining table. She had decided to let me read them.

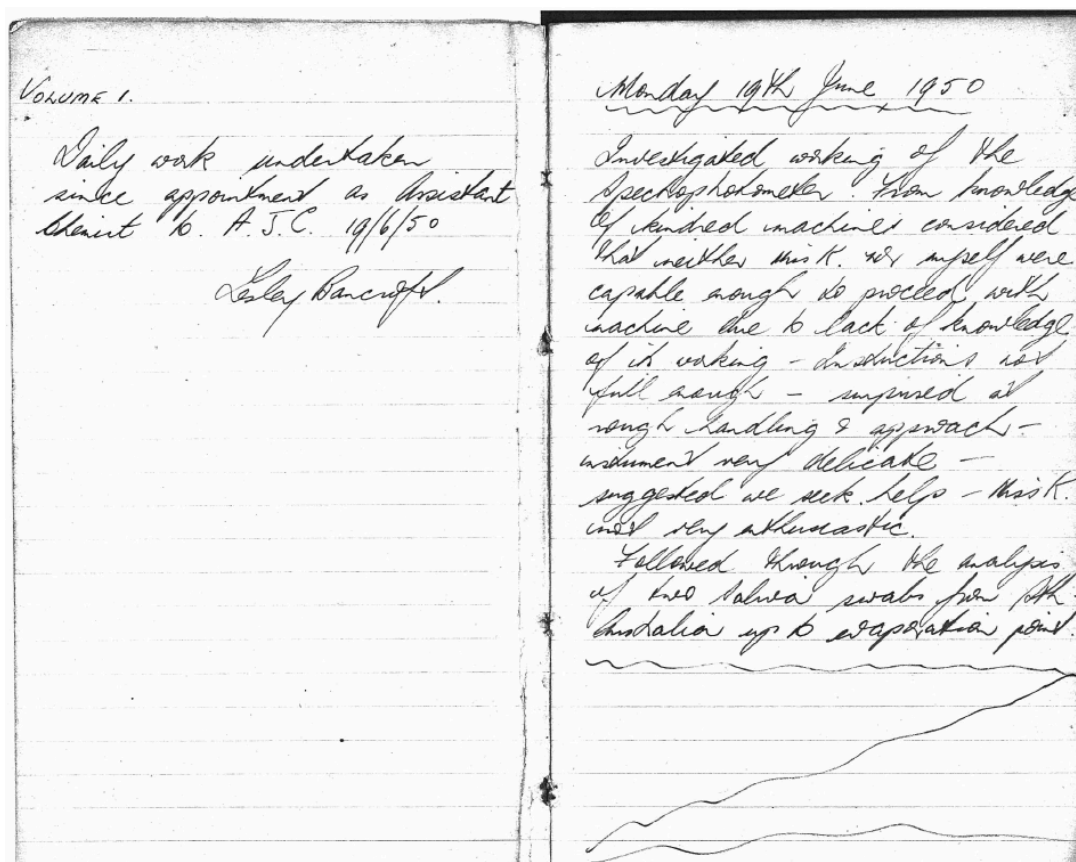


Fig. 4. The opening page of Lesley Bancroft's diaries: Bancroft kept extensive detailed notes of her work and experiences at the Sydney Racing Laboratory in the period 1950-1959. Source: Courtesy of Ted Jacob

In her flowing cursive hand, the young chemist had methodically documented the birth of drug testing in Australian sport, the methods of analysis at that time, the technical and resource hurdles, and scientific blind spots. The media sensations and political tensions that erupted every time a leading racehorse trainer got busted were vividly portrayed. It was all there, from the tedium and toxicity of working with

chemicals, to the arduous hours mastering methods and equipment still in their infancy. The diaries revealed that Lesley had been an exceptionally talented and hardworking professional, devoted to furthering her own skills and to the advancement of her branch of applied science. However, she felt frustrated at every turn by a fellow employee whose knowledge of chemistry was rudimentary, and who was so fearful of stirring up trouble that they had regularly poured swab test samples containing traces of performance drugs down the drain, leaving numerous horse dopers to continue plying their nefarious trade. And who was this unreliable colleague?

It was Jean Kimble. Jean was a bad scientist! Not bad in the sense of being corrupt – although we cannot know that with any certainty – but definitely incompetent. She was out of her depth, terrified of declaring positives for fear that her inadequacies as a chemist would be exposed, and unable or unwilling to keep up with a fast-evolving area of science. That was what the diaries said – day in, day out – for the five years the two women worked together.

What should I do? Change the novel, even at this late stage in the writing and editing process? Or ignore the scientist's testimony? More importantly, what possible practical or theoretical framework could be relied upon in order to arrive at such a decision?

The facts in fiction

Scholars have noted the 'remarkable proliferation' of historical fiction since the Second World War (Wesseling 1991: 1). Hayden White has described the neo-historical novel as 'the dominant genre and mode of postmodernist writing' (White 2011: 18). The term neo-historical novel is itself a neologism, one so recent that it has yet to appear in the main reference dictionaries. Its precise meaning is further clouded by the multiplicity of meanings ascribed to its root term, 'historical novel'. In his survey of Australian examples of the genre, Peter Pierce wrote of neo-historical fiction as a literary form that seeks 'to reanimate the national past in the present' (Pierce 1992: 304-12). Examples cited by Pierce engaged in debates and polemics that challenged pre-existing notions of history and identity. Although not comprehensive, Pierce captures something of the spirit of a diverse literary genre. To this I would add that the neo-historical novel may be understood as a book-length work of fiction written in the postmodern period after the Second World War and at least fifty years after the period it describes, with a self-consciousness sense of the relationship between the literary work and the events it narrates. It may include what Linda Hutcheon (1989) calls 'historiographic metafiction', but also accommodates texts in which self-reflexive tendencies are more subtly apparent. But how are readers to discern between fact and invention in neo-historical fiction? What is the status of the facts deployed in these texts?

Lennard Davis (1983) described the novel as a framed work whose attitude towards both fact and fiction is constitutively ambivalent. In *The tin drum* the novel's central

character, Oscar, is a mirror reflecting the horrors of Nazi Germany. But his creator, Günther Grass has said that this ‘mirror’ was intended to be ‘concave’ (BBC 2009). In another novel, *The sorrows of young Werther*, Goethe inserts a detailed non-fictional report he was given about the suicide of an acquaintance, but the novel is no less fictional for that. Within the ‘unified field of fiction’, Lange maintains, validity lies not in accord with the past, but in the creation of a ‘virtual present’. Facts there may be, but ‘the specific aesthetic and logical uses’ to which they are put are fictional. ‘The quality of the fact itself, whether it is related to any presumed actuality or is fanciful and non-realistic, is of little concern for the determination of the fictional mode’, Lange writes. Equally, in non-fictional historiography, the invented speeches created by the Roman historian Tacitus are ‘clearly part of a non-fictional intention’. And again, in fiction, ‘the actual letter which Rilke incorporated in *Malte Laurids Brigge* assumes, within the purposes of the novel, a distinctly fictional character’ (Lange 1969: 253-61).

In his study of Wallace Stegner’s *Angle of repose*, John Demos asserts that it is the novelist’s job to betray the particulars of the historical record in order to imagine its deeper meaning. Stegner’s novel about a wheelchair-bound historian incorporates the correspondence of a real historical figure, Mary Hallock Foote, attributed to the fictional character, Susan Burling Ward. *Repose* is a deeply historical text, inspired and shaped by the course of an actual life, but as Demos writes, ‘the underlying frame and meaning of the work – the whole complex theme of past shadowing present, and present refracting past – came straight from Stegner’s imagination’ (Demos 2001: 135).

Demos’ critique puts into sharp relief a basic structural difference in the work of novelists and historians. For novelists, the past – whether well-known or indeterminate – provides useful materials for the creation of literary works of art. The problem to be solved is the creation of an artwork, in this case, an artwork inspired by history. Traditional humanist historians also aspire to telling stories well, and most of them use techniques that are familiar to novelists. However, the essential problem for them is not how the story is written, but what really happened. This fault line has in recent years seen some historians lash out at what they consider to be irresponsible claims made by novelists regarding the historical veracity and significance of their work. Historians such as Inga Clendinnen (2003) fear that the scrambling of fact and fiction that often occurs in historical novels may contribute to the proliferation of dangerous myths and politically-inspired ‘histories’ that might, in some circumstances, fuel and justify wars, pogroms and even genocide. The only vaccination against such disease, they argue, is a methodology that confines the text’s claims to those for which sources can be cited. Yet this blunt instrument guarantees neither factual accuracy nor ‘what *really* happened’; to cite a source does not necessarily endorse its veracity. The historical method does, however, provide a useful beachhead on the shore of truth, and grounds for testing and negotiating rival claims. But it has also served to construct a wall of separation between history and fiction.

As Curthoys and Docker have pointed out, opposition between history and literature is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the period 1660-1830, ‘Historians recognised the affinity of their writings with other, openly fictional, forms of writing ... The same thinker might write biographies, histories, texts with imaginary philosophical conversations ... reports on scientific experiments, and books in letter form directly addressing a particular reader (a friend, a patron) on a remarkable range of topics, from the classical to the contemporary’ (2006: 50-1). Moreover, White has sought to remind contemporary historians that ‘the discourse of the historian and that of the imaginative writer overlap, resemble, or correspond with each other’. In his essay ‘The fictions of factual representation’, White (1976) argues that historians’ reliance on narrative to tell their stories – poetising, as he puts it –

represents a mode of praxis which serves as the immediate base of all cultural activity ... even of science itself. We are no longer compelled, therefore, to believe – as historians in the post-Romantic period had to believe – that fiction is the antithesis of fact (in the way that superstition or magic is the antithesis of science) (126).

The facts do not speak for themselves. If, as in narrative histories and historical novels, they are embedded in narratives, then ‘the crucial consideration for him who would represent them faithfully are the notions he brings to this representation of the ways parts relate to the whole they comprise’ (125). These ‘notions’ are a product of the abundance, lacunae, and assumptions that all writers deal with and inherit. The archive is vast – no researcher can absorb it whole – yet it is also incomplete. The quality of what is there varies. Witness accounts, for example, are usually localised, and often lack important context. Even when we can access relatively comprehensive sources, we bring to the process the cultural, ideological, national and other biases that every human being possesses. The veracity of our histories, including fictional ones, suffers from these and other distortions.

Postmodernist philosophers and critics have complicated these already complex issues in ways that are both constructive and destructive. Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and others graphically exposed the shortcomings of the social sciences, including history. However, in David Lodge’s words, the so-called poststructuralist critique led some of its exponents towards ‘an antihumanist scepticism about meaning, communications and the value of the western cultural tradition’ (1990: 4). White dramatically declares of Foucault that he wrote history ‘in order to destroy it as a discipline, as a mode of consciousness, and as a mode of (social) existence’ (1978: 234). Polemics aside, and having written much about what historians and novelists have in common, White fashions a workable definition of what differentiates their work:

Historians are concerned with events which can be assigned to specific time-space locations, events which are (or were) in principle observable or perceivable, whereas imaginative writers – poets, novelists and playwrights – are concerned with both these kinds of events and imagined, hypothetical, or invented ones (1976: 121).

History and historical fiction, then, can be seen as hybrid, though distinctively different literary genres. The hybridity of formal historiography is expressed in its reliance upon a type of narration commonly associated with fiction. Fiction's hybridity is displayed in its reliance on historical referents, including places, people, events and other phenomena. Historians and historical novelists alike must imagine, interpret and speculate about the past in order to construct their narratives. The defining difference is that the historical novelist is permitted to invent historical 'facts' – particularly dialogue – in order to animate their mimetic representations of human consciousness in fiction. But the historical novelist's freedom is not without limits. Invent too much and you breach the boundaries of the genre, narrowly defined, and tip over into fantasy or parody. Invent nothing and the narrative ceases to be fiction.

Some novelists, challenged to defend their versions of history, have struck a passive-aggressive pose – 'I made it up!' (Carey cited in Clendinnen 2006: 32). This might constitute a credible defense of a fantasy novel set in the future; but when the fictional narrative is constitutively indebted to historical referents, and intended to recreate the particularities of a specific historical period and its people, then to say 'I made it up' seems at best irresponsible, and at worst disingenuous. 'Exactly which parts are invented, and what was left out?' a reader might ask. It was this last question that came to the fore when, after years of dogged research and writing, I came across a transgressive and unsympathetic view of the real woman who had inspired the creation of the heroine in my novel. So what does a novelist owe to his or her historical referents and their contemporary readers?

According to the historian Inga Clendinnen, the novelist's – even the historical novelist's – 'only binding contract is with their readers, and that ultimately is not to instruct or to reform, but to delight' (2006: 31). This is a fundamental misrepresentation of the actual position on two grounds. Firstly, the 'contracts' that historical novelists and their readers enter into will vary greatly between writers and readers. They are, in this sense, separate and unique contracts between the author and every individual who reads his or her book. In the case of a best-selling book, there could be millions of contracts based partly on the unique expectations of each individual reader. There is no 'one size fits all' contract between the historical novelist and readers *en masse*.

Secondly, individual authors also will have their own unique approach to determining the precise relationship between truth and text. Across authors, this approach will vary, from fastidious attention to detail to a cavalier disregard for the historical record. Where each novel sits on that spectrum depends largely upon the author's purposes in writing the text. A parody will delight in exaggerating and distorting to an extreme degree; a serious novel, say for example, one set during the Holocaust, might display extraordinary fidelity to the known facts of that event. This plasticity of the novel as a genre – its infinite capacity to inhabit the human condition, in all its shades, forms and individuality, and to transcend genre and speak to audiences in the unique voice of the author and their characters – is the genius of the novel. This is the power

of fiction, a power that only under the most extraordinary circumstances should ever be surrendered.

The revelation that Jean Kimble's principal collaborator in the war against horse dopers in Australia in the 1940s and '50s had a low opinion of her competence was certainly a shock to me. It was so counter-intuitive. The two women worked closely in a hot house environment in which their common enemy – corrupt racehorse trainers and owners, and their highly paid legal counsel – were doing everything in their power to discredit the laboratory and its staff. The all-female scientific staff worked at a time when women were not even permitted to be members of the Jockey Club that administered racing. Both Lesley and Jean were both alumni of the University of Sydney, and were widely viewed as trendsetting young professionals whose work showed that women could be trusted with responsibilities of a very high order. They shared a love of science and a faith in its potential power as a force for the betterment of humankind. Both were single and enjoyed the company of the opposite sex. On humid Sydney days, when samples tested with reagents on glass slides took longer than usual to dry, they would skip work and go see a movie together. Yet, apparently, no amount of pressure, no number of things in common could create genuine fellow feeling and respect between them. So why didn't I write about that? Was I not duty bound by my 'contract' with readers to give them a novel that showed what really went on? Or am I one of those novelists who, when his fictional version of history is challenged, just throws up his hands and cries 'I made it up'?

In Davis' description of the novel as a 'framed work', lies the primary explanation for why the transgressive testimony of Lesley Bancroft is elided in *The chase*. Painters and photographers choose their subjects and perspectives; a novelist frames their story to encompass particular characters and events. The frame focuses the story, which in my case concerned Jean Kimble's struggle with the racing establishment in Sydney in the 1940s and '50s. In this narrative, the novel's main character, a scientist, is confronted by a ruthless culture of secrecy, avarice, official collusion and rule bending that is the antithesis of her own. Her determination to see science prevail inspires her junior female colleagues and creates solidarity among the staff. The fictional Jean Campbell inspires her protégés in a way that the real Jean Kimble did not. She needs their support to meet the onslaught she faces. Granted, a rebellion among her junior staff would have intensified her plight. It might even have made for a decent sub-plot. But I could not risk it, for three reasons. Firstly, if doubt was to be cast on Jean Campbell's competence, it must be *serious* doubt. To treat it lightly, in a tokenistic fashion, would mean sewing suspicion without resolving it, thereby confusing readers. Secondly, doing so would shift the focus away from the novel's core conflict, the struggle between tradition and modernity that pits men against women, vested interests against science, and lawful accountability against previously autonomous, loosely regulated social institutions such as the Jockey Club. Instead, the story would address the nature of professional authority and the politics not of gender, but of the workplace. No doubt, these are important issues, worthy of being teased out in fiction, but doing so would have required writing a new and entirely different novel

than the one I wished to write. Thirdly, and finally, there were and still are unresolved issues regarding the quality of the evidence in the Bancroft Diaries, which pass a stern judgement upon the quality and character of Jean Kimble's work as Official Analyst.



Fig. 5. T.J. 'Tommy' Smith with horse, 1960. Source: Ern McQuillan, National Library of Australia

Whilst The Jockey Club clearly had reservations about Jean, they stood by the quality of her findings. After a gruelling months-long legal battle in a doping case involving the prominent Sydney trainer, TJ 'Tommy' Smith, the club committee stated that 'Miss Kimble proved to be an expert in her branch of science' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1953: 4). Indeed, despite extensive research, I could find no single case in the seven years in which she served as Official Analyst in which evidence tendered by her to the racing tribunals was ever rejected as flawed. Bancroft's testimony does raise valid questions about Kimble ignoring 'suspect' samples containing traces of drugs, but this was, in fact, a grey area for analysis during the early years of dope detection in horseracing, and given the political pressures the laboratory faced, its boss could be excused for having erred on the side of caution. The prospect of destroying the livelihood of a racehorse trainer based on flawed evidence was a real one; to actually do so would have had catastrophic consequences, not just for Jean, but for the club as well. Nor would it do much for the status of women scientists, or science in general. As Vivian Gornick wrote, referring to the 1950s, 'What if a woman in science feels she must prove herself many times more often than a man does? ... There was, clearly, a certain amount of tumult over the matter of professional survival' (1983: 11-13). Reading between the lines of Bancroft's account, I gained an impression of a young woman of great conviction, but relatively little life experience, one who was quick and harsh in her judgements. Her early impressions of her boss were set in concrete from day one, and stayed that way, with little apparent desire to give Kimble the benefit of the doubt. Her low estimation of Kimble's professionalism also seems

to have been tinged with a degree of personal discomfort or dislike. In the absence of a thorough investigation of the quality of science performed at the lab in the period 1947-1954, I could not, in all conscience, endorse Bancroft's estimation of Jean Kimble's competence.

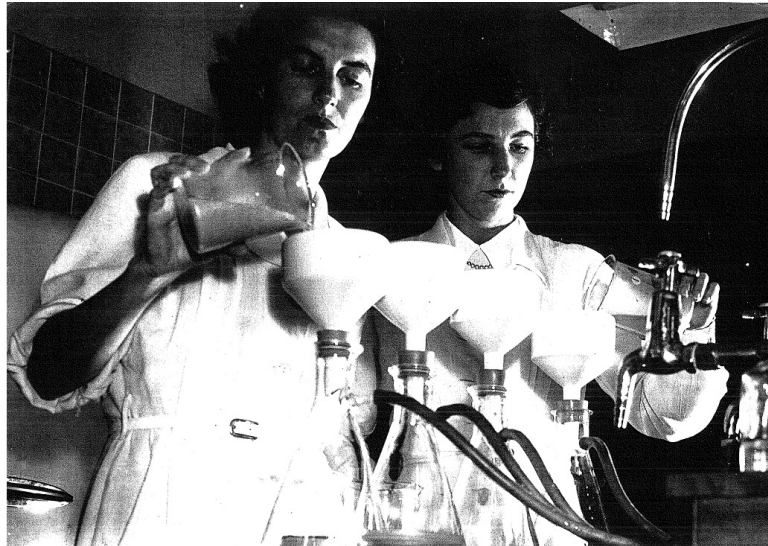


Fig. 6. Lesley Bancroft (left). Source: *Sporting Life*

There is no definitive guide to successful novel writing, and even if there were, no self-respecting novelist or sensible trainee would follow it. The decisions involved are too many and too specific to the scenario, style and premise of the artistic work for any general guide to be adequate. It is a grand, preposterous act of ventriloquism, a conversation between reality and fantasy, imagination and experience – and, in its historical form, past and present – that has no equivalent in any other literary genre. It is a balancing act known only to plate-twirlers and tightrope walkers, a battle royal against unruly forces that constantly threaten to screw the whole thing up. And often do.

It is not my intention here to ignore or downplay the very real responsibility historical novelists bear for the decisions they take in how they represent history; quite the opposite. Even if I did, society itself would not allow me such a liberty. This has never been truer than in the Digital Age, when authors no longer sit isolated and aloof upon literary mountaintops, but are inextricably enmeshed in contestation over the meaning of their words. History *is* contested terrain. Writers who venture there *must* fend for themselves. Being a novelist – even one who makes it all up – doesn't buy impunity, but it does, at least, allow you to pick your fights, and the forms in which you write. My novel, which contains imagined elements, was inspired by Jean Kimble's story: this essay, which does not, was inspired by Lesley Bancroft's diaries. Neither version of the story is complete in every respect.

The fictional Jean's career closely resembles the original, but her inner life is free, unshackled from reality. It was a blessing in disguise that Jean Kimble left no record

of her feelings about her time at the racing laboratory. If she ever had confidantes in this regard, they eluded my efforts to find them, and I'm glad that I didn't. The relationship I developed with my fictional muse was one of the deepest and most satisfying entanglements of my life. Jean has a little bit of everyone in her, including me. At times, even I – her creator – felt I could not control her decisions, her thoughts, or even her destiny. On this many-sided anvil, her character was forged.

A new conversation?

Hayden White's explicit acknowledgment of the status of neo-historical fiction ('the dominant genre and mode of postmodernist writing') has nurtured scholarly interest and engagement with a previously under-acknowledged literary oeuvre of startling inventiveness and diversity. It has also licensed contemporary writers and critics to look beyond deconstruction and associated poststructuralist theory, without necessarily ignoring their more valuable insights, and to re-imagine notions of authorship and the historical referent in ways that recognise the essential role they play in the writing of history and fiction. For both novelists and historians, these are positive trends that may constitute grounds for a more constructive relationship between two hybrid, overlapping and potentially complimentary discourses.

A productive theoretical framework through which to explore this relationship is available in the late Russian literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin's theory of the novel, and his twinned concepts of dialogism and polyphony. 'If we are looking for a theory of the novel that will transcend the opposition of humanist and post-structuralist viewpoints,' wrote David Lodge in the late 1980s, 'the most likely candidate is the work of Mikhail Bakhtin' (1990: 21). Born in 1895 in Oryol, Russia, Bakhtin was 21 when his country was plunged into revolution and Soviet communism. Arrested in Leningrad following the publication of his first book, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* (1929), he was unable to publish another article, let alone another book, until the 1960s, disseminating his ideas in the meantime under the names of colleagues and supporters. His work emphasises language as a social activity or 'dialogue', rather than as a system of signification of the kind theorised by the father of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure. Bakhtin's theory of the novel highlights the defining role of dialogue and differing points of view in literature's trajectory away from the 'monological' forms like poetry, and especially the epic – that anachronistic mode with its 'single and unified world view, obligatory and indubitably true for heroes as well as for authors and audiences' – in favour of a more open discourse with its roots in 'carnival', the medieval European tradition of festive jesting in which the ruled mocked their rulers (Bakhtin 2005: 43-60). For Bakhtin, Lodge writes, dialogue refers not merely to the 'quoted verbal speech of characters' (1990: 22). It also includes the relationship between the characters' discourses and the author's discourse (if represented in the text) and between all discourses and other discourses outside the text, which are imitated or evoked or alluded to by means of doubly-orientated speech. It is of course true that everything in a novel is put there by the novelist – in this sense the literary text is not, like a real conversation, a totally

open system. But it is Bakhtin's point that the variety of discourses in the novel prevents the novelist from imposing a single worldview upon his readers, even if he wanted to. To allow characters to speak in their own dialects, or to privilege their point of view by allowing them to narrate, either alone or with others via the agency of free indirect narration 'is to make interpretative closure in the absolute sense impossible' (23).

Bakhtin's ideas anticipated, in certain respects, postmodernist literary criticism. Unlike Hegel, who dismissed the novel *per se* as a degraded literary form that was lower than poetry and epic, Bakhtin celebrates it as '*happily* fragmented; only multiplicity and open-ended surplus could guarantee a vigorous and socially informed whole that was flexible, outward-looking and optimistic' (Emerson 1997: 110, original emphasis). All truths, in Bakhtin's analysis – not merely in the novel, but in all writing – are ultimately provisional. Yet, while Bakhtin influenced such postmodernist intellectuals as Julie Kristeva, he resists poststructuralist theory by acknowledging the author's role in the construction of texts, and the existence of the extra-literary referent. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* he writes:

Dialogic relationships are absolutely impossible without logical relationships or relationships orientated toward a referential object, but they are not reducible to them, and they have their own specific character ... Logical and semantically referential relationships, in order to become dialogic, must be embodied, that is, they must enter another sphere of existence: they must become *discourse*, that is, an utterance, and receive an *author*, that is, a creator of the given utterance whose position it expresses (1984: 184, original emphasis) .

As Simon Dentith observed, 'Bakhtin has not abandoned altogether the notion of representation; the novel has not been cut loose from its moorings in history, as more formalist stresses on the *activity* of language and literature tend to do' (2005: 59, original emphasis). Dentith continues,

For Kristeva and Barthes, textuality and intertextuality provide opportunities for a peculiar notion of liberation, in which the deadening certainties of bourgeois culture, tying books to authors, words to their singular meanings, subjects to their unitary subjectivities, can be at least momentarily lifted, in favour of the joyful deferments of sense made possible by the endless switching from one code to another ... (but) the unfinishedness which acts as a value in (Bakhtin's) writing is ultimately historical; it is a window onto the future. The historical process is never finished or completed, and as a result he does not need to imagine a version of liberation which takes you out of the historical process altogether (94).

In Bakhtin's theory of the novel, narrative prose showcases the dialogic character of language itself. Bakhtin emphasised the leading role of prose fiction in this regard, but as we know, most historians also work in a narrative form adapted from fiction. History and fiction, we might therefore say, speak the same language, though their perspectives tend to differ. No two disciplines have more common ground for dialogue about stories of the past, and the way such stories are told than the literary

siblings we call history and historical fiction. Bakhtin's work encourages us to imagine that, whilst they remain distinct writing genres, history and historical fiction can and to a large extent do enjoy a dialogical or polyphonic relationship. There is always a dialogue between them. Competitive rivalries and antagonisms will occasionally be part of their conversation. But the conversation itself will continue for as long as history and historical novels are written. Tzvetan Todorov once wrote, referring to Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, that 'The first voice must be heard before the dialogue can begin' (1984: xiii). Or, as one Russian scholar put it, Bakhtin's main methodological innovation is to have propelled 'a transition from dialectics to dialogue', a transition that requires re-learning an old skill – the ability not merely argue, write or speak – but also, to listen (Prozorski cited in Emerson 1997: 16). To suggest, as Clendinnen and others have done, that an insurmountable wall of deafness, distrust and difference must always separate history from historical fiction is both counterproductive and unnecessary. It may also blind us to the larger questions of epistemology and philosophy that Bakhtin's thought poses, and will continue to pose in the 21st century.

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