

The University of Notre Dame Australia

Christine de Matos

Fictorians: Historians who ‘lie’ about the past, and like it

Abstract:

Debates about history and fiction tend to pitch novelist against historian in a battle over who owns or best represents the past. This article posits that things are not quite so dichotomous: novelists write non-fiction histories, and historians even sometimes write novels. In fact, these latter seem, anecdotally, to be increasing in number in recent decades. The author approached some of these historians to find out why they have turned to writing fictionalised versions of the past to complement, or sometimes replace, their non-fiction publications. For the sake of clarity, in the article I have playfully dubbed the historians who write historical fiction as ‘fictorians’. The article considers their responses within wider discussions about history and fiction, and reflects briefly upon the meaning of this ‘fictional turn’ for the future of the history discipline.

Biographical note:

Christine de Matos is a lecturer in History at The University of Notre Dame Australia in Sydney. Her book *Imposing peace and prosperity: Australia, social justice and labour reform in occupied Japan* (2008) examines the policies of the Australian government towards the Japanese labour movement, while *Love under occupation* (2010) relates the memoir of Noel Huggett and his Japanese bride Reiko/Ruth in post-WWII Australia. She has also co-edited, with Robin Gerster, a collection of essays titled *Occupying the ‘Other’: Australia and military occupations from Japan to Iraq* (2009) and, with Rowena Ward, *Gender, power, and military occupations: Asia Pacific to the Middle East since 1945* (2012). Her forthcoming book (2015), *Japan as the occupier and occupied*, co-edited with Mark E Caprio, analyses the transition of Japan and its empire across the moment of defeat in 1945. She often wishes that she was writing novels instead.

Keywords:

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In creating good historical fiction, it is essential to tell lies (Forrester 2010a).

Some time ago I watched an episode of *Q&A* on Australia's ABC TV, a program that, according to its publicity, 'puts punters, pollies and pundits together in the studio to thrash out the hot issues of the week' (ABCTV 2014). One of the panellists that week was Thomas Keneally, introduced by Tony Jones, the presenter, as a writer and an historian, amongst many other things. As an historian, my boundary-maintenance antennae immediately pricked up. *Historian? Thomas Keneally? No, no, he is a writer, a novelist. Maybe he has written non-fiction history books, but as a writer, not an historian.* It may have been my own reaction transposed onto Keneally's face, but it certainly appeared that he too was a little surprised by the label. I immediately jumped online. Did Keneally describe himself as an historian? I gained some self-satisfaction from his Wikipedia page, which states he is a 'novelist, playwright and author of non-fiction' (Wikipedia 2014). *Yes, that is the way I would put it. Non-fiction writing.* Relieved that no borders had been violated by anyone but Tony Jones, though he had now obviously misled his entire audience, I returned to watch the program. But the whole scenario, and in particular my own reaction, continued to haunt me.¹

Why do we feel the need to police, or at least explain and interrogate, the borders between historians and novelists, between history and fiction?

The question, for now, is rhetorical. From the point of view of an historian, there are currently two main threads of discussion about history and fiction writing. The first is the 'Kate Grenville effect', where many historians enact boundary maintenance strategies against historical fiction written by novelists in order to reassert themselves as the primary guardians of so-called 'truths' about the past. As Inga Clendinnen wrote with great passion for her craft,

I want non-historians to understand historians' apparent churlishness when faced with Grenville's insouciant exploitation of fragments of the past. Historians have a *professional obligation* to preserve documented moments surviving from the past as entirely as we are able because such moments are precious, and fragile. They must somehow make their way into the written record, and then be preserved long enough for a *practised intelligence* to mine them for meanings (2007: 77, emphasis added).

Trained historians, then, have an obligation to peoples past to represent their experiences from the whole of the available evidence rather than plundering bits of the archive for their own narrative purposes. They also have an obligation to readers present. An oft-used term is 'public trust', the faith a reader of history has that the historian is 'getting things right'. Mark McKenna seems to lament that '[t]here is such a proliferation of historical narrative – film, documentary, television, internet, theatre, novels, biography, popular military history, that we no longer know which history to trust or believe' (2008: 7). If the boundaries are so uncertain, then according to this view surely it is the role of historians to remind us where they do lie. The second discussion thread is about the use of fictive and imaginative tools in the writing of non-fiction history. History writing retains the literary characteristics of fiction, including use of emplotment, character development and tropes (White 2007: 149).

This ongoing and fraught relationship between history and fiction is explored in Ann Curthoys and John Docker's well-cited book *Is history fiction?* (2006).²

But I do hope to add another thread to this ongoing debate. There are also the 'Keneallys', the novelists who turn their hand to writing non-fiction histories. And then there is an even more neglected group, the trained historians who move beyond using 'fictive tools' in non-fiction histories to write novels about the past – the historians who lie, intentionally, openly and with purpose, for whom I have coined the term 'fictorians' and who will be the focus of this article.³ This term allows for differentiation between *writers* who write historical novels, *historians* who write only non-fiction history, and historians who write both (the *fictorians*). What are we to make of those historians who are increasingly turning to the novel, or other forms of popular media, to represent the past? The division between novelists and historians, it seems, is even murkier than a first glance may reveal.⁴ As part of the research for this article, a number of Australian and international fictorians were approached and provided with a questionnaire concerning their personal views on, and experiences with, writing historical fiction. Consistent themes that emerged from these responses related to imagination, emotion, subjectivity, morality, mythology and writing skills. Using both published sources and the questionnaire responses, this article will attempt to discover why some historians choose to intentionally tell lies about the past, and contemplate what this 'fictional turn' might actually mean for the discipline of history.

Historians and the 'fictional turn'

If reading a work of history is like being guided round an old house by an expert, reading a good historical novel offers the illusion that we have stepped back in time to inhabit that house with its original residents (Wilson 2010).

The relationship between novels and history is a long one and can be traced at least, in the modern western context, to Sir Walter Scott in the early 19th century. In fact Scott embodies the symbiotic beginnings of modern history and the modern novel – he also wrote non-fiction histories such as *The life of Napoleon Buonaparte, Emperor of the French* (1827) (Southgate 2009b: 56).⁵ Usually, though, historical novels are created by writers rather than historians. In the Australian case, historical novels by writers, as Susan Sheridan (2011) reminds us, were often set as school history texts in the absence of non-fiction options in a nation that privileged a British past and preferred to evade the complexities of colonisation. Marcus Clarke's *His natural life* (1870s) and Eleanor Dark's *The timeless land* (1941) are examples of early critical analyses of the colonial past, and the latter inspired historian Manning Clark to write his own non-fiction multi-volume history of Australia (Sheridan 2011: 1-2; Griffiths 2009: 74.4). Sheridan points out that Dark's 1941 publication was met with popular rejection as it undermined the 'heroic white pioneer myth' yet welcomed by historians like Clark, while in 2005 Kate Grenville's *The secret river* was publicly and critically popular yet received often acrimonious charges of boundary violation by historians. The relationship between the historical novel, history, and 'ownership' of the past has changed in 60-odd years with the emergence of a more definitive history profession in

Australia (Sheridan 2011: 4). It seems that with the arrival of *The Historians*, the novelists are now being told to keep their hands off, even if they had, in a way, ‘got there first’.

In more recent times some trained Australian and international historians have crossed to the other side to purposefully experiment with historical fiction. For example, Anna Haebich published her multi-perspective fictionalised/factionalised exploration of the 1909 hanging of Martha Rendall, *Murdering stepmothers*, in 2010.⁶ Former University of New England academic Geoff Quaipe has a popular historical adventure series based on the fictional character of Luke Tremayne and set in the (primarily English) world of the mid-1600s. Military and social historian, and once head historian of the Australian War Memorial, Peter Stanley has published his first adult novel set in the 1845 Anglo-Sikh War in India, *The cunning man* (2014a). Australia, though, has only just begun to catch up with other places such as America and Britain, where fictorians like Alison Weir, an historian who has authored novels about Elizabeth I, and James Forrester, who writes novels set in the sixteenth century, have achieved an almost celebrity status.

Like the novelist, the fictorian writes about events in the past with the deliberate intent to ‘make stuff up’ in order to tell a larger story – or a more intimate one. However, they often maintain that historical training gives their narrative greater authority. Historian Peter Cochrane (2014a) has written a novella presented as the journal of Mary Putland, daughter of early Governor of the colony of New South Wales William (‘Bounty’) Bligh. The fictionalised entries are directed to her sister, Harriet, and ‘record’ the journey out to the colony of New South Wales with her father. Cochrane states that ‘as a fiction writer, I find I am frequently doing that [writing fiction] with an historical inquiry in mind’.⁷ Historian and writer Rebecca Stott, author of a biography of Charles Darwin (2003) and the fictional *The coral thief* (2009), sees a strong relationship between the forms:

[i]t’s a question of finding the story in the historical records and reconstructing characters and personalities from the records that have been left us. I think of my fiction and non-fiction writing as a spectrum – my fiction usually contains non-fiction and my non-fiction contains fiction (2014).

Cross-fertilisation between genres often occurs for the fictorians. As Ian McArthur, who is currently writing a fictional version of his non-fiction publication on Henry Black (2013), discovered,

[w]ith fictional historical writing I take greater liberties in the search for material as I can make unexpected connections which can lead to speculative writing. For example if I know what the weather was, what plants were in flower, or what historical events were taking place on a particular day in the life of my historical subject, I can speculate on the emotional life of my subject at that time or his/her motive for acting in a particular way. I can look for seemingly unrelated minutiae which could have affected the subject’s attitudes. These speculations can then influence the writing of a character’s dialogue, which would not be possible with pure history. The reverse is also possible. I have found that the search for material in fictional historical writing has

occasionally inspired insight into unexpected links between historical facts which had previously appeared unrelated (2014).

The key difference between forms lies within the Wilson epigraph: ‘illusion’. Fiction gives a greater license to deceive the reader into thinking they are experiencing the environmental and psychological world of the (fictional or real) historical actor, rather than leading the reader with the authority of an expert on a virtual tour of the past, or ‘history as seen, not as history lived’.⁸ One way to think about this is through Hayden White’s (and Michel de Certeau’s) distinction between the attempt to convey what is ‘true’ (non-fiction history) and what is ‘real’ or ‘possible’ or ‘imaginable’ (fiction) (2005: 147). Alternatively, through novelist Pat Barker’s voice, fiction has the ability to show events in slow motion so the reader can ‘think about it as it happened’ (Griffiths 2009: 74.6), rather than non-fiction which looks back towards a more detached past.

The mix of fiction and fact – popularly called ‘faction’ – can cause as many headaches in the world of historical fiction as it can for non-fiction. In a debate over historical authenticity in the historical novel, writer Hilary Mantel asserted that novelists have as much responsibility to remain truthful to the past as historians (Forrester 2012), whereas James Forrester, a fictorian, claimed: ‘If every supposed “fact” is given a context which is at least partly fictitious, the whole work becomes fiction ... a few “facts” underpinning a story does not make it “true”’ (2012). Cochrane, however, rejects the label of historical fiction altogether: ‘the minute you depart from the rules of history you are not in any sense recovering the past ... In fact I reject the concept of historical fiction. There is only fiction and non-fiction’ (2014a). It is thus interesting to note that even within the genre of historical fiction, writers and fictorians debate the meaning and authority of their work, with fictorians continuing to draw a distinct line between what they consider to be their non-fiction and fiction outputs, even while one is perhaps informing and influencing the other.

What is driving this move towards historical fiction, and how do these fictorians distinguish their non- and fictional histories? To return to Forrester,

I step aside from all pretences of accuracy and authenticity. If I want to write about the real past, I will write a history book. If I want to tell a story that is meaningful and draws on my own experiences, I write fiction. That my novels are set in the sixteenth century does not mean I am trying to describe that century accurately; it means I am searching for meanings in human experience that are common to both times, and thus timeless, and have resonance in all our lives (2012).

It is this mixing of personal experience and the official records, the past and the present, fact and fiction that seems to be as attractive to the fictorians as it does to novelists. But ... isn’t that what historians are doing quite a bit of anyway? What can fiction promise historians, then, that non-fiction cannot?

(Re)Invigorating the imagination

I constantly had to amend my statements with ‘one can imagine’ or ‘it seems likely’. All that thwarted imagining finally became too much to bear (Smith 2014).

Imagination and history are not enemies, though they may have become a little estranged. Clendinnen has defended the place of history as an ‘imagination-training genre’ (1996), while Tom Griffiths, following Greg Denning, rails against the label of ‘non-fiction’ for the denial of ‘its creative, imaginative dimensions’ (2009: 74.8). Sheridan argues that ‘[s]ome ideal combination of fact and imagination is one common ground between historian and historical novelist’ (2011: 6). Many historians have indeed found ways to incorporate the imaginative into their non-fiction histories. Yet the imaginative component and the ‘true historical’ one have boundaries drawn between them within the text, the imaginative often confined to an extended epigraph or anecdote. Alternatively the reader is provided with cues – the old ‘one can imagine that’. Stott incorporated ‘plausible internal dialogues’ based on real letters into her 2003 non-fiction biography *Darwin and the barnacle*: ‘I put these sections in the first person so as to signal to the reader that these were speculations’ (2014). Historians argue that this keeps the authority of the text, remains truthful to the available sources, and does not mislead or confuse the reader.

The separation of the ‘true’ from the ‘imaginative’, or what Beverley Southgate refers to as the ‘head from the heart’, has not always been so for historians (2009a: 5; 2009b: 53). As Southgate argues, the

breach between history and imaginative literature became deepest and at its most acrimonious after the former’s redefinition as a modern ‘science’ in the nineteenth century. For ‘science’, with its ideal of ‘mechanical’ explanations based on the detached study of empirical facts, seemed to deny the validity of just those qualities and characteristics that are most prized in the humanities, including the expression of subjective experience, imagination, feeling, and a sense of wonder (2009a: 4-5).

The trail from The Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution to the western Industrial Revolutions (along with Scientific Socialism, or Marxism) to the rise of the nation-state and historical notions of progress, then, seem to be highly responsible for, if not the removal, then the dilution or ‘disciplining’ (Pinto 2010: 192) of imagination in the writing of history by historians. Southgate goes further to say that the best histories of the past were a mixture of ‘reason and imagination, philosophy and poetry’, but with the rejection of these latter elements they have been ‘appropriated by historical novelists’ (2009a: 6). White refers to today’s ‘crisis’ in history as a manifestation of history’s failure ‘to become the kind of “science” they hoped to become in the nineteenth century’ (2005: 149).

No matter when the break occurred and to what extent, some historians clearly feel their imagination is being suffocated by the scholarly demands of source verification, or constrained in their desire to explore the past with greater depth and empathy. ‘The imagination,’ writes Cochrane, ‘works in an entirely different, much freer way in fiction’ (2014a). Katy Simpson Smith, whose imagination was thwarted as stated in the epigraph, published her first non-fiction history, *We have raised all of you: Motherhood in the South* in 2013, but soon switched to fiction with her 2014 *The story of land and sea*. When researching her history of motherhood in the US South, Smith felt frustrated by the dominance of the white female record; *The story of land and sea* is her poetic attempt to fill that void through the inclusion of a character who

is a mother and an African slave. Imagination allowed her to give voice to the silences in the archive, and to take the ‘great imaginative leap’ in order to inhabit ‘someone else’s life for a while’ (Smith 2014). Likewise, Richard Slotkin found fictional writing about the American Civil War a way of engaging ‘my imagination in a more concrete way’, of ‘remembering that “history as lived” is different from “history as written”’ (2014). Like Smith, imagination allowed him to move beyond the slim availability of sources to tell a story of a battle in the Siege of Petersburg, Virginia (July 1864) in *The crater* ‘that for some reason I could not tell as a historian ... I felt I understood more about these stories than I could prove by the canonical methods of evidence and argument’. He tells this story using multiple migrant and classed voices – Irish, German; former slave, worker – that transcends a singular national narrative and forefronts the racialised tensions and actions of that era, on both sides of the battle, in confronting ways (Khalid 2013; Slotkin 1996).

The fictorians, it seems, are engaging with their imaginations for personal fulfilment, to give voice to the silences in the archive, or to extend the story beyond the available sources. It is also a demonstration that, by moving beyond the verifiably factual, ‘historians themselves may yet come to be perceived and represented as something more than dryasdust’ (Southgate 2009a: 7) – or rather, be able to do so again.

Getting emotional about history

[Fictional histories] can speculate on the way people must have felt. When people read fictional histories through the eyes of fictional characters or characters based on real persons, it helps readers empathise with those characters and thus to better imagine what such people felt and experienced (McArthur 2014).

Attention to the history of the emotions has recently gained favour amongst historians, but emotion within the writing of history remains far from respectable. It can be seen as another element of history’s ‘heart’ that has been minimised along with imagination. Hegel thought emotion needed to be conquered, that feelings were the ‘lowest form in which any mental content can exist’ (Southgate 2009b: 44). However, ‘poetry and history’, believes Aaron Sachs, ‘or art and science, or emotion and reason – are not as far apart as we tend to think’ (2010: 24-5). Readers do not just want to know what happened in the past, but to ‘know’ how people experienced that past, how they felt, and why they reacted as they did. Novelists, of course, are well aware of the power of emotional storytelling. ‘Readers of fiction,’ says Smith, ‘tend to embrace characters and eras very different from ones with which they’re familiar as long as the writing is undergirded with universal emotional resonance, something non-fiction historical writing cannot always claim’ (2014). It appears some historians are becoming ‘frustrated at not being able to dig into the emotions of the historical actors’ that they are writing about (Smith 2014). Embracing the imaginative and drawing on personal emotional experiences would be critiqued as presentism in history writing, but in historical fiction creates a past-present alchemy that minimises the presence of time itself.

As part of this subjective positioning, an historian or fictorian who wants their readers to care about their historical actors or characters needs to engage with the emotions of

each, both character and reader. As Sachs writes, ‘no such emotional investment in history, on the part of either writer or reader, is ever possible when history is addressed only to analytic and explicatory concerns, and only to experts in the field’ (2010: 25). Historical fiction becomes attractive, then, in giving greater permission to explore the emotional taboo: ‘one of the things about fiction that’s so appealing to me is that, from modernists to postmodernists, readers still want an emotional connection to a well-told story, and those stories are always and necessarily subjective’ (Smith 2014). For Stott, whose mystery novel *The coral thief* explores gender and science in post-Napoleonic Paris, emotion in fictional histories ‘can help us to see how it might have been to live at a particular moment in time and to see through a particular politics/world-view/belief system that is different to our own’ (2014). Further, Stott points out that this conflation of past-present through emotional engagement can show that people in the past faced many of the same moral dilemmas and issues as those in the contemporary world: ‘[i]t extends our imaginative and empathetic range and challenges our tendency to think of history as progress’ (2014).

This relationship between emotion, empathy and morality is most interesting. While historians like Clendinnen and Griffiths claim historians have a moral contract with their readers, subjects and each other (that is, honouring the collaborative nature of historical research) to represent the past accurately, many historians rather feel constrained in their ability to claim a moral or ethical grounding for their work and instead find an outlet through historical fiction. As Smith states, referring to her work on slavery for *The story of land and sea*, an emotional dimension helps with both empathising and realising the moral imperatives of understanding the past:

It’s one thing to say that many slave-owners genuinely believed that slavery was a moral and justifiable practice, but how can we interpret that with anything like an open mind unless we know such a slaveholder? And while we suppose that many slaves worked in various ways to advance their freedom, can we picture an enslaved person who was resigned to her condition? These people don’t live with us anymore, and it’s easy to draw quick conclusions about what such people were like or how they must have felt. But only by exploring the emotions behind the evidence left in the historical record can we begin to form a rounded picture of life in a world to which, otherwise, we can no longer fully relate (2014).

Answering a call from *Rethinking History* about creative approaches to writing history, Stephen Chambers chose to contribute a short story, also based on slavery, in order to ‘attempt to restore emotion and morality to the practice of history’ (2010: 151). It is in these difficult and abusive stories of the past – slavery, the Holocaust, the impact of colonisation on Indigenous Australians being cases in point – that questions about morality and emotionality in the writing of history are sharpened. This is reminiscent of Rousseau, who asserted that history was bad for children due to its elevation of ‘facts’ over ‘a moral dimension’ (Southgate 2009b: 137). Minas Gerais writes that

[p]erhaps, however, this is somewhat inevitable in any discussion in which moral abuses are at the heart of the history itself. After all, for the purposes of historical enquiry, what more can be expected of the historian than that he/she acknowledge

relevant systemic injustices and continue with the intellectual questions-at-hand? ... Just as the historian pursuing objectivity may lay the groundwork for increased understanding, it is the role of emotive fiction and progressive history to comprehend the individuals involved and allow for *moral cognition* (afterword in Chambers 2010: 157, emphasis added).

Fictorians, then, wish to move beyond the available historical evidence to be able to expose the injustices of the past, and understand those who contributed to those injustices by giving an emotional component to historical actors, real or fictionally representative, and by establishing an emotional connection to their reader as part of their own moral or ethical comprehending of that past. This means moving from describing an external world to recovering an internal one.

McKenna is often cited as a key critic of Grenville's *The secret river*, and yet he has also written that '[u]nrestrained by fidelity to historical evidence, fiction moves us closer to autobiographical truth, to the emotional and intellectual truth of the author's individual perspective: on the self, on others, on experience, on the life of the present and the life of the past' (2013). Clendinnen has warned of the dangers of excessive empathy and the need for historians to 'keep their emotions in restrained by intellect' (Griffiths 2009: 74.12), but she has also said, based on her experiences researching the Spanish Inquisition, that she is 'not free to refuse the painful engagement of emotions and imagination, because I have entered into a moral relationship with the persons enclosed in the documents – which means, of course, not only the victims, but the torturers, too' (Clendinnen 1996). There seems to be some confusion throughout these discussions and assertions: empathy and emotion can risk a false reading of history by imposing our presentist views on the past, or we can only get an inkling of what it might have been like living in a different time through empathy and emotion. Are these mixed messages driving historians towards fiction? Through linking autobiographical emotional experiences with the historical evidence, fictorians feel they can better represent historical *and* emotional 'truths', and 'leave readers not just intellectually impressed but also aroused, moved, transformed' (Sachs 2010: 24), and, perhaps, more morally engaged with their present.

Challenging historical myths

[A]s a scholar I was a historian and critic of the myth-fictions of American nationality; as a novelist I was rewriting the myths themselves (Slotkin 2014).

One of the culprits in getting history to this contested place is the nation-state, and the conscription of history to the services to the nation and concepts of national identity – the so-called grand narratives of the past. Despite the rise of areas such as social histories, indigenous histories, women's histories, migration histories and the move in recent decades towards transnational histories, the label of 'handmaiden to the state' has persevered especially outside of the discipline, aided not least by the 'good citizen' role of history, as pushed by politicians and *not* usually historians, within the schooling system. Writers, as we have already seen, have long used the medium of the novel to dissect and dismantle national mythologies, and Sheridan shows that 'then and now, critical novelists share with historians the impulse – for some it is a moral

imperative – to own the past, whatever injustices were perpetrated there and to *question the accretions of legend and obfuscation around past events*’ (2011: 14, emphasis added). But critiquing the national myths that have emerged to sustain the fiction of ‘one people and one past’ via non-fiction still seems limiting to some historians, thus the fictional turn allows one not only to critique but, as Slotkin states above, to actually rewrite the myths themselves. For the fictorians, then, is historical fiction more than just an escape from the impositions of academe, more than a desire to delve into emotions and engage with an otherwise inhibited imagination? In other words, does historical fiction have the capacity to say something more meaningful about the past than non-fiction can deliver?

Slotkin is a great proponent of this role for historian fiction, as written by historians and based on the historical record. In fact it drove his desire towards the genre: ‘Non-fiction writing taught me how to engage and use the materials that constitute evidence, without which the fiction would lack authenticity – and fail to serve my aim of *using fiction to correct Americans’ historical memory*’ (2014, emphasis added). The public memory that Slotkin was especially concerned about was that of the American Civil War:

The Civil War has always seemed to me to be central to an understanding of US history; but our cultural memory of the war (embodied in myths) was then [1970-80s] still limited and poisoned by a view that downplayed the role of race and slavery ... I wanted to write an anti-*Gone with the wind* epic novel of the war, with its central theme a battle that ended in a racial massacre – a sort of anti-Gettysburg, symbolizing the real issues and horror of that history (2014).

It might seem rather odd to be suggesting that fiction, rather than fact, could be used to ‘correct historical memory’.⁹ But Slotkin has a point. To foster a national consciousness, selected pieces of the historical record are woven together to tell an uncomplicated and sanitised story that fulfils the needs of a contemporary identity. Slotkin is also chipping off bits of the past to manufacture a contrasting story, one that may be fictionalised but that ‘symbolizes the real issues’ rather than serve a narrow and convenient national narrative. What are the ‘real issues’? In this case, they are very contemporary ones about the residual challenges of social and institutional racism and racial tensions that the Civil War was supposedly meant to address. The similar forms of discursive presentation may allow the consumers of one myth to relate to the other. In this way, the challenging of national mythologies through historical fiction is not really about saying something new about the past as much as exposing the historical fallacies of the present.

Including and beyond national myths, writing fiction allows fictorians to more readily make an unapologetic political statement on the present. Quaipe notes that fictional histories

can be related to the issues and interests of today as well as emphasising some of the curious and interesting aspects of the past[. T]he amalgam is a better conduit of the past than academic history which is often blocked by inconvenient evidence and the inability to push a partisan line (2014).

Fictorians/historians and novelists may aspire to ‘illuminate contemporary culture, to explore the presence of the past. They [share] an urgent concern to question the basis of legends and to listen for the stories that [have] been suppressed’ (Sheridan 2011: 7). Unlike the historians, however, fictorians are more willing to invent a few things about the past in order to make their very contemporary point.

Writing history better

After all, fiction writers write histories better ... We might get a good movie out of a good novel, but not good history (McGrath 2009).

Ann McGrath, an historian, was writing about novelists rather than fictorians in the above quotation. But can writing historical fiction improve the writing of non-fiction histories, as some like Ian Mortimer (2011b) have claimed? Historians were once renowned for their literary skills; they practically invented creative non-fiction, ‘no more than a new label for a kind of writing which has been around for millennia, starting with Herodotus and Thucydides’ (Rosenstone 2010: 57), and books of quotations are ‘peppered with the aphorisms of historians like Burke and Macaulay’ (Mortimer 2007). Greg Dening has defined history as ‘the past transformed into words or paint or dance or music or play’ (cited in Southgate 2009b: 39).¹⁰ And yet, as Philippa Martyr has pointed out, currently the highest praise that a work of history can receive is that it is “‘as richly detailed as a work of fiction’” (2009: 76).¹¹

Yet does it have to be this way for historians? Cassandra Pybus, for one, does not think so:

Why should historians not be as imaginative and innovative in their use of language and form as the novelists? After all, both fiction and history have the same roots in narrative storytelling, so it follows, I believe, that historians should be prepared to create a world as rich and resonant of that of the novelist and not be inhibited by the rigours of professionalism, or the primacy of source material, into creating the prosaic and excruciatingly dull prose which is the norm for historical writing (c.1996).

History writing has transitioned over the centuries from creative non-fiction to ‘non-creative by definition, and historians are presented as analysts, not creators, and certainly not creative artists’ (Mortimer 2007). There are many ideas from historians themselves about why this is so. Cochrane writes that ‘there is not the same weight of expectation on the prose’ in academe (2014a). Martyr believes historical writing is ‘constrained by the weight of “scholarly merit”’ (2009: 77). Mortimer blames research funding and assessment procedures that require historians to

write in a narrow, constrained way, eliminate ... everything that is innovative in form and expression, and den[y] them the possibility of writing dramatically or with sympathy for the subject. The result is that almost all academics are neutered in terms of influence on the public’s views of history – unless they can find an outlet in a non-academic forum, such as TV, popular history or radio (2011a).

Historical works, then are judged ‘by their success as research projects rather than their literary accomplishments’ (Rosenstone 2010: 56). Yet the problems arise earlier

and continue to remanifest along the course of a career. Few universities teach good historical, or more general creative non-fiction, writing skills beyond the required academic essay or thesis for assessment purposes (Forrester 2010b), and secondary sources are read in a superficial manner as ‘containers of information’ rather than appreciated as whole literary texts (Sachs 2010: 23). The result has been the dislocation of history from its literary foundations. While Sachs states that ‘[e]very writer is an historian; and every historian is also a writer, whether he [or she] likes it or not’ (2010: 33), that does not necessarily mean they write well and in a way that engages a reader. Indeed historians invite accusations from their peers of being scholarly light if they dare to step outside the normal formulas of academic rigor and jargon. ‘In the first decade of the twenty-first century,’ wrote Mortimer in 2007, it seems that ‘you cannot be both a great historian and a great writer.’ This has not substantially changed in the second.

So the fictional turn may provide an avenue for frustrated historians to ‘play with words’ and escape the harsh critique of their academic peers. But just how well can the historian adjust to the ways of fictional writing? Quaife noted the modifications he had to make to assertions: ‘As an academic historian I was trained to write in the style “given the available evidence it is reasonable to assume that ABC may have ordered the killing of XYZ”. As a novelist I had to adjust to “ABC killed XYZ”’ (2014). While ‘freedom from the footnote’ may be an attractive notion, it can be hard to resist academic training, to be more subtle with the evidence on which a fictionalised version of the past is based. McArthur finds that ‘academic writing can intrude into my fiction. Where my fiction has relied on verbatim extracts from my PhD thesis, I have needed to go back over my fiction and prune the academic prose out (or back) and remind myself that the audience is very different’ (2014). Slotkin reminds readers of the academic rigor that underpins *The crater* by embedding (mostly) real military dispatches throughout the text (1996: *passim*).

The experience of writing for a ‘different audience’ is argued by some historians as the very remedy needed for the problem of the dryasdust-type of history – or, to put it another way, to move from writing ‘writer’s books’ to ‘reader’s books’ (Sachs 2010: 34). For Mortimer, ‘being a historian by training, I found [writing two novels] rejuvenating to rethink what I do in entering into the past, and taking the reader there’ (2011a). Cochrane states that ‘[p]articularly for historians, the strict rules of evidence and other requirements that make up the moral contract between historian and writer are not easy to set aside. But setting them aside is, in its own way, quite liberating’ (2014a). Slotkin found that

[w]riting fiction improved my historical writing, and vice versa. The discipline of creating the subjectivity of a historical actor – what he/she could possibly know, see, act on in a given place/time – sharpened my understanding of history-as-lived, and especially aided in the writing of narrative history ... it’s an antidote to excessive use of historian-hindsight when assessing historical action (2014).

The most difficulty a historian can have, according to Forrester (2010b), is convincing others that they can write fiction at all. For our fictorians, then, fiction can be a valuable task in itself, but also a way forward for writing non-fiction history as many

think it could, and should, be done: ‘why pitch archival research against narrative history or creative history? ... The point is to conduct deep archival research ... *and to write beautifully*’ (Hodes 2010: 50, original emphasis).

The power to change history

Fiction gives you power, control and freedom that is lacking in academic history ... Academic historians are placed in a straightjacket by evidence. Writing fiction you can alter the evidence to suit the story (Quaife 2014).

Historians are meant to write about what happened in the past. But sometimes they want to know what might have happened should a different decision have been made, a different path taken. The notion of asking ‘what if’ questions in the discipline of history is a contestable one. There are those who argue that such questions help to better understand what *did* happen; that ‘[i]f we change our frame of reference; if we simply ask the question posed by all fiction, *what if?*’ (Barber 2010: 180, original emphasis) then new ways of seeing the past can emerge. Others see this type of speculation as simply a waste of time and effort, that the historian’s only role is to focus on understanding and illuminating the choices that actually were made by historical actors, the paths indeed trodden. The novel thus opens up a new world that thrives on such historical speculation: fiction gives ‘license to construct alternative narratives’ (166), and the ‘power to alter “facts”, change dates, and insert and remove characters, events and incidents at will’ (Pinto 2010: 192). It not only gives the power to change the past, but to create alternative futures. It is easy for academic historians to dismiss ‘what ifs’ in historical fiction as novelty at best and irresponsible at worst, but can they actually contribute something to our understanding of the past?

Many novelists are astute in imagining alternative pasts and futures and conveying these in exquisite and minimalist ways to their readers. In his multi-award winning novel *That deadman dance*, Kim Scott shows that spending “more time on imagining people’s motivations is a worthwhile activity; we see possibilities and choices rather than inevitabilities ... [Scott’s] concern is “not what was, but what might have been, and what might yet be” (cited in Sheridan 2011: 6). Tony Hughes-D’Aeth concurs, stating that Scott’s novel shows that ‘absolute guarantee of cultural supremacy was not fully assured for the coloniser’, and that it is ‘[a] moral accomplishment that shows a way forward through focus on a moment of cultural accommodation’ (2014). Surely good history should be able to do this too – to ‘show a way forward’ for contemporary readers by considering ‘what might have been’? Even further, Pinto argues that ‘[t]aking the “alternative” representations of the historical novel as historically significant entities ... has the potential ... to pose new questions of the production of historical knowledge and understanding’ (2010: 201). It is perhaps too soon to ascertain whether the fictorians have had any impact in this realm of possibilities, but Weir makes no apologies for going ‘against all my instincts as a historian’ in *Elizabeth: A novel* (2008: 485). Here she turns rumours of a pregnant young Elizabeth I into textual actuality: ‘I am not, as a historian, saying that it could of happened; but as a novelist, I enjoy the heady freedom to ask: what if it had?’ (485).

But with power, as they say, comes responsibility. In the end, just how much can a fictorian lie about the past in order to tell their tales? How much can and should an historian ‘tamper with the evidence’ (Alun Howkins and Rosemary Conely in Lee 2010: 93), to ‘stop the facts getting in the way of the story’ (Forrester 2010a)? While some fictorians draw a sharp line between their fiction and non-fiction and thus feel little obligation to historical ‘facts’, others see that affiliation to the evidence still has an important place in historical fiction. McArthur says that his inner historian still ‘wants to get to the facts and base my own narrative on the facts’ (2004), while Stanley thinks that historians/fictorians and novelists

are under the same obligation to be faithful to the language, ideas, mores etc of the chosen period. But historians ought to get it right, and ought to be sensitive to how we see and record history; more fully aware of the nature of evidence, say, than non-historians. There’s no excuse for an historian [writing fiction] to get it wrong (2004c).

Here Stanley is articulating an important difference between ‘lies’ for the purposes of narration – for example the creation of dialogue – and historical mistakes, which remain as unforgivable for the fictorian as the historian. It becomes even more complex when it is others asking the fictorian to change the evidence for the sake of the story – or even potential sales. Quaife had just such an experience:

The hero of my novels is a Cromwellian colonel. Many of my readers do not warm to him as he is a sexist womanising brutal man as were most of the professional soldiers of the mid seventeenth century. To turn Luke Tremayne into a modern new age guy who treated women with respect etc would be historically an anachronism that the historian in me could never do. Yet in terms of the acceptance of Luke by many women readers such a change according to those in the trade would greatly increase sales. In essence is an academic historian at a disadvantage in writing historical fiction because they will not falsify history? (2014)

Quaife managed to keep his version of Luke Tremayne. Thus it appears that there are some limits to the degree or type of falsification that fictorians are willing to engage in, their historical training, consciously or unconsciously, acting to restrain their imaginative power to change the past and create alternative futures, and keeping at least some fidelity to the archival evidence. But then, is this not similar for novelists?¹²

Putting the humanity back into history

‘Look here, Mansergh,’ Gully appealed to him. ‘You’ve read Thucydides, man.’

Mansergh demurred, but Gully continued regardless, reading from a worn Greek copy of *The Peloponnesian War*, waving it about for emphasis and translating as he went.

‘Listen. This is the Corinthian delegate speaking at the Congress at Sparta. “War gives peace its security, but no one is safe if, for the sake of a quiet life, he refuses to fight.” D’ye see, the ancients were able to express eternal truths with elegance. Yon Scott and Thackeray write novels of interest to ladies and parlour dilett-anties.’

‘Balderdash!’ O’Shane countered (Stanley 2014a: 129-30).

The above exchange is between a group of men in the East India Company's military in mid-19th century British India – characters in an historical novel written by an Australian historian, Peter Stanley. It is interesting that Stanley utilises these characters to debate the merits of historical fiction à la Walter Scott vis-à-vis the histories of old, and their abilities to express something meaningful and serious about human existence. Despite 'Gully's' opinions, historical novelists like recent Man Booker Award-winning Richard Flanagan have long known that “[e]very good book”, historical or otherwise, “ought to have the universe implicit in it” (cited in Pinto 2010: 192). Many other contemporary historians have acknowledged this, as did Alan Atkinson when he declared that ‘writing history, or presenting it any form, is a social activity. It depends on an assumption of shared humanity’ (2004: 23). However it seems that the fictorians feel this can be even better accomplished with fiction, or rather via a dialogue between their fiction and non-fiction work, what Griffiths (2009: 74.5) has referred to in a different context as a ‘tag team’ between historians and novelists: ‘We may be able to use history and fiction in conjunction to say things about the vast sweep of mankind’s [sic] experience across time’ (Forrester 2010b).

If the drive towards a scientific and/or academic history has stifled the use of imagination and replaced the beauty of language with jargon and theory, thus narrowing its potential audience, then has history lost the place established by the likes of Thucydides to say something larger about the human condition? Has the focus on analysis of the available evidence hindered the historian's ability to offer broader philosophical perspectives on the past? History is, after all, part of the humanities, and plays a role with other humanities disciplines in contributing to our understanding of what it is to be *human*. Novels, though, have become better vehicles for exploring these larger human and social issues, of making not just connections between past and present but (momentarily) demolishing the notion of time itself. Historical novels may be able to respond to questions like ‘what were we like?, and why?, what have we inherited?’, but more so ‘what makes this or that novel lasting is that it transcends the historical setting in the service of literature’ (Jaumandreu 2014) – and, perhaps, human understanding.

Of course history writing can do and has done this, encouraging a reader to relate profound insights on the past to their present. As some historians argue, ‘A more indirect, poetic mode of writing can force readers to question their deepest assumptions’ (Sachs 2010: 10), and can ‘open the reader's eyes to new ways of viewing their own worlds ... show your reader through your examples that the world they inhabit does not have to be the way it is’ (Hollow 2010: 133). ‘Truths’, however, as they pertain to historical fiction, at least according to Forrester, are different and more subtle. These are not based on ‘facts’ but ‘life experiences’ (Forrester 2010b). One such master was Shakespeare:

In his entanglement of the old and the new, the interweaving of past and present – with no [pretence] at accuracy or authenticity – Shakespeare is the more complete historical storyteller. He touches on truths that are not purely of the past but true for all times (Forrester 2012).

Shakespeare is perhaps the most obvious example of the enormous impact fictionalised histories can have on attempting to understand the human condition across time. While Sam Wineburg may warn of ‘the seduction of coming to know people in the past by relying on the dimensions of our “lived experience”’ (cited in Griffiths 2009: 74.12), it is fiction that is more likely to have a life-changing or life-affirming impact than non-fiction history.

Many of the fictorians thus seem to be searching for a way to say something more meaningful, to ‘express eternal truths with elegance’, about the past via fiction than they are able to do in non-fiction. In other words, they want not just to put people back into history, but the humanity. As Mortimer (2007) muses, ‘I for one cannot help but wonder, when I see how much research is churned through the academic press each year, to what purpose is all this knowledge being produced if we do not gain a little wisdom at the same time?’

The promiscuous past

[T]he past is anyway promiscuous, and the fact that it will go with anyone in general calls into question its usefulness for anyone in particular (Beverley Southgate cited in Barber 2010: 166).

Southgate’s judgement above may seem a bit harsh but is a reminder in the History-versus-Fiction wars that the past belongs to no one in particular at all. That it ‘goes’ with novelists, historians (academic, public, amateur), genealogists, biographers, teachers, politicians, journalists, librarians or the general public does not in itself matter, despite that fact each may approach, interpret and use the past in different ways, for different agendas, and produce different outcomes. Southgate may question how useful thus can this promiscuous past actually be, but the fictorians who cross borders are amongst those who recognise, quite contrarily, that it can have multiple possibilities of usefulness.

Crossing borders can be rewarding, but also comes with challenges. Those academic historians who dare to write historical fiction may attract the suspicion, even loathing, of their peers; their work can be seen as light, not to be taken seriously, and even cause their legitimacy as scholars to be questioned. How do the fictorians deal with their perceived ‘split personalities’, one the ‘serious’ historian, the other the historical novelist in this seemingly either/or world? Throughout this article I have included quotes from James Forrester and Ian Mortimer; they are, in fact, the same person. Ian Mortimer is a respected British Medieval historian, while his alter-ego James Forrester writes historical novels set in Elizabethan England. Each side of his ‘personality’ has been allocated a name, acting to signal the reader as to which role he is playing at any given time (Historian writing History or novelist rewriting history). Quaipe felt the antagonism of his university peers when they suggested he should publish his fiction under a different name – the distinction he gave between Geoff Quaipe for his fiction and GR Quaipe for his non-fiction was not considered adequate, the former tainting the reputation of the latter (2014). Others entirely reject the need for different names – for Stanley, he is ‘the same person’ whether he is writing fiction or non-fiction (2014b). And while Cochrane did not change his name for his novella,

he utterly refuses the idea that he is still playing the role of historian when writing fiction: ‘that’s impossible ... Moving into fiction ... is shifting to another planet’ (2014a). But does keeping one’s fiction and non-fiction as discrete entities really matter?

Much of the debate about history and fiction focusses on either the input – fidelity or infidelity to the evidence – or the output, the writing that is produced, the meaning it contains, the creativity or imagination or ‘truths’ within. But I think it is also about something else: one’s identity. It is the label we place on ourselves, and the authority that label ostensibly gives us in the eyes of the public, that is the main source of contention in this policing of boundaries. When a novelist writes historical fiction they are seen to be trampling on and challenging the identity of the historian, the right of the trained expert to interpret the past. It was my personal and professional identity as an historian that was initially offended by Tony Jones’ introduction of Thomas Keneally, and nothing to do with the person or writings of Keneally himself. We historians should take heed, for as the fictorians with shifting identities show, boundary crossing, just like travelling to a new country, can be an enriching experience.

Historians who turn to writing fiction do so for multiple reasons, and gain various personal and professional outcomes from the experience, from rejuvenating their imagination and writing skills, to giving voice to the silences of the archive. Whether historians taking the ‘fictional turn’ to ‘lie’ about the past demonstrates that there is something wrong with contemporary non-fiction history writing, or whether history and fiction are two complementary sides that both historians and novelists have a right to pursue, is a topic for continued discussion rather than conclusion here. Perhaps, for historians, the fictorians are a signal that we are heading towards a happy family reunion between history, imagination, humanity and literature; the reunification of heart and head. Yet one thing is for certain: I am yet to hear a novelist complaining that the fictorians are straying into *their* territory.¹³

Endnotes

1. A similar scenario occurred at a recent book launch I attended. Thomas Keneally was again referred to as an historian by the interviewer – this time by an historian, albeit one who also writes fiction. Keneally appeared to graciously dismiss the label. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and insights, and the historians/fictorians who generously responded to my questionnaire (see a list of their published novels at the end of this article).
2. Another could be the use of fiction as a primary source, but as that is not necessarily historical fiction, I will leave it out of this discussion.
3. I wish to make it clear that a) my use of the term ‘lie’ is not making some form of judgement about fiction (as I hope the rest of the article makes clear), and b) that these ‘lies’ – the embellishments that all writers of historical fiction make to progress the purposes of their narrative – are quite deliberate and distinct from errors of fact.
4. See also Tom Griffiths’ article in this issue.
5. This is, as Jerome de Groot (2010: 13) reminds us, a very Eurocentric view of the history of the novel. He cites as evidence Luo Guangzhou’s novel, mixing history, myth and fiction, *Romance of the three kingdoms*, published in China in the 14th century.

6. See Anna Haebich's article in this issue for reflections on her experience.
7. Unlike other fictorians discussed in this article, Peter Cochrane did not turn to fiction due to 'something missing' in non-fiction history, but in response to a novella writing competition in the *Griffith Review*.
8. This quotation is from a letter written by the German Philosopher Count Paul Yorck von Wartenburg to his friend Wilhelm Dilthey as his contemporary comment on Ranke's style of writing history (cited in Southgate 2009b: 55).
9. Hayden White (2005: 154) respectfully rejects Slotkin's approach, arguing 'that one cannot change the content and above all the values of a given discourse without changing the form.'
10. See Ann Curthoys' article in this issue – EP Thompson also compared history to painting and poetry.
11. Interestingly and apparently, the highest praise for an historical novel is to be included on a history book club list, as happened with Slotkin's *The crater* (1996: xv).
12. See for instance writer Christopher Kremmer's article in this issue, where he discusses the potential impact finding new evidence had on his fictionalised narrative.
13. The following novels are by the 'fictorians' who responded to the questionnaire as part of the research for this article:

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Quaife, GA 'The Luke Tremayne adventures' including *The Spanish relation: Murder in Cromwellian England* (2008); *The Irish fiasco: Stolen silver in seventeenth century Ireland* (2008); *Chesapeake chaos: Malevolence and betrayal in colonial Maryland* (2009); and *The black thistle: A Scottish conspiracy 1651* (2010), all Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing

Slotkin, Richard 1996 [1980] *The crater: A novel*, New York: Henry Holt and Company

Smith, Katy Simpson 2014 *The story of land and sea: A novel*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers

Stanley, Peter 2014 *The cunning man*, Manuka ACT: Bobby Graham Publishers

Stott, Rebecca 2007 *Ghostwalk*, New York: Spiegel & Grau; 2010 *The coral thief: A novel*, London: Phoenix

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