Voicing the past

For many historical novelists, authenticity is a Holy Grail. Advice on how to achieve it abounds. One author helpfully offers the example of a novel set in medieval France: 'There is no way you will have them converse in French in your story... In your novel, they will be speaking English. Although this aspect is not technically accurate as far as a book set in the past goes, it is necessary to engage readers in a meaningful way. Yet, you must be mindful of the historical time-frame in which your characters exist. They would speak formal English.' [1]

The technical term for this is, as Henry James put it, 'humbug'.[2] An authentic story originally was one told by someone involved, or at least a witness - a contemporary, at a stretch. Authenticity can't be created.

What many writers and possibly readers mean by the term 'authenticity' in voice and setting is in fact a mirage created by detailed references to objects of daily life, and a BBC-approved accent, with contemporary terms (or something that sounds a bit like them) tossed on top of the text like garnish. Lavish historical detail may have worked for Georgette Heyer, but done poorly is what Rosemary Sutcliff called 'gadzookery.' [3]

I suggest that while factual accuracy is critical, 'authenticity' of voice simply doesn't and cannot exist in historical fiction set in the distant past. What we aim

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[1] Proach, Deanna *How to Write Historical Fiction*, blog post, March 23, 2011, http://theadventurouswriter.com/blogwriting/writing-historical-fiction-how-to-write-a-book-set-in-the-past/

[2] James, Henry, Henry James Letters, Volume 4, Henry James, Jr., Leon Edel (eds), Harvard University Press, 1974. In a letter to Sarah Orne Jewett in 1901, he wrote: "You may multiply the little facts that can be got from pictures & documents, relics & prints, as much as you like — the real thing is almost impossible to do, & in its essence the whole effect is as nought. . . You have to *think* with your modern apparatus a man, a woman, — or rather fifty — whose own thinking was intensely-otherwise conditioned, you have to simplify back by an amazing tour de force — & even then it's all humbug."

[3] Sutcliff, Rosemary, 'History is People', *Children and Literature: Views and Reviews,* 1971, p 305.

for is something different altogether.

The historical novel as we know it began with Sir Walter Scott, whose Waverley books were a sensation and who created imagined characters - some based on real figures - set against a well-researched political, social and economic background.

In the preface to *Ivanhoe*, Scott wrote: 'I neither can, nor do pretend, to the observation of complete accuracy, even in matters of outward costume, much less in the more important points of language and manners … It is necessary, for exciting interest of any kind, that the subject assumed should be, as it were, translated into the manners as well as the language of the age we live in.' [4]

What writers now mean by authenticity, and what readers usually expect, is exactly what Walter Scott outlined in 1820. It is not authenticity, but an accepted form of the novel. To approach the task of writing historical fiction without that understanding is to risk great harm at worst, bad art at least.

Modernists argued it became impossible to describe the unspeakable after the horrors of the 20th century except through personal testimony, but it was in this era that historical fiction boomed. Again.

It should no longer have been possible to write the kind of books that made Scott a rich man, and yet the great post-war generation of writers for children and young people, in particular, were instrumental in redefining historical fiction. The most obvious examples are Sutcliff's meticulously researched and recreated early Britain, Geoffrey Trease's marvellous adventures in which young protagonists speak in voices familiar to 20th century readers, and Leon Garfield, whose evocative prose recalls Dickens but somehow isn't.

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[4] Scott, Sir Walter, *Ivanhoe*, Macmillan & Co, London, 1922

Perhaps it was, as were Shakespeare's plays, a means to safely view the present through the binoculars of the past. Sutcliff's post-Roman Britain, for example, speaks of invasion and destruction, of refugees, of harsh winters and near-starvation, of violence and fear and death; a world familiar to many of her readers.

While Sutcliff created speech patterns that appeared to suit early Britons, Trease, amongst others, refined the model of a voice almost invisible to the reader but with no glaring anachronisms in dialogue or setting.

Characters must be sited in the contemporary world view, pre-Freudian, pre-Darwin, pre-feminist, possibly pre-nationalist, even if this is uncomfortable for the reader.

Trease defined the 'costume novel' as one in which 'the greatest possible accuracy of isolated detail can still add up to a total effect of psychological falsehood,' while the 'true historical novel' is one in which 'a faithful recreation of minds and motives' is achieved. [5]

Scott's omniscient narrator, looking down on history from afar, was gradually replaced by either a closer third-person narration or what has more recently become a favoured approach in historical fiction, first person.

Postmodernism and metafiction made it possible again, even in the bleak light of modern history, to explore the issues raised by the 20th century wars and the Holocaust - even, in the case of Ian McEwan or Bernard Schlink, to address ideas of guilt and the desire for redemption. Issues of accuracy and 'authenticity', fact and fiction, become more fraught when dealing with events in recent memory.

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[5] Trease, Geoffrey, 'The historical novelist at work', *Children's Literature in Education*, March 1972, Volume 3, Issue 1, pp 5-16

‘A certain freedom is suddenly compromised,’ wrote McEwan of *Atonement.* ‘As one crosses and re-crosses the lines between fantasy and the historical record, one feels a weighty obligation to strict accuracy.’ [6]

In *Night Watch*, Sarah Waters performs an act of ventriloquism born of months of immersion in World War 2 diaries and letters, and a proximity to the times means she is able to recall the sound of those voices - in elderly relatives, from contemporary films and radio, from oral history recordings and such unique phenomena as the Mass Observation diaries.

On the other hand, the neo-Victorian pastiche of her first novel, *Tipping the Velvet*, reads like *Rubyfruit Jungle* in dress-ups, the well-rendered voices of vaudeville colliding uncomfortably with 1990s sexual politics and feminism.

But even Waters rejects the idea of an authenticity of voice: ‘It can’t be authentic,’ she once said. ‘It can’t be right. It just has to be right enough - for us.’ [7]

I suggest that the expectation of voice in historical fiction is not that it will be genuinely ‘authentic’ but instead that it will be familiar to us from the tradition of the genre; that what we mean by authenticity is a construct originally based on the language of the great nineteenth century novelists such as Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson.

I am the spoilsport who, on Talk Like A Pirate Day, insists that pirates didn’t really sound like that. And they didn’t, until Robert Louis Stevenson wrote *Treasure Island*. So now we think that an ‘authentic’ Caribbean pirate voice is the one dreamed up centuries later and half a world away by a young Scotsman.

But the truth is that in many cases and in most languages, we don’t really know

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[6] McEwan, Ian, 'An inspiration, yes. Did I copy from another author? No.' *Guardian*, 27 Nov. 2006, p. 1

how people spoke at particular times in history. The further back in time you go, the harder it is to hear the voices, and the less likely it is that any modern reader would be able to, or want to, read an exact recreation of, say, Tudor-era English.

Instead we read Hillary Mantel's beautifully crafted voice of Thomas Cromwell in *Wolf Hall*, which we hear slipping seamlessly between direct speech and a third person so close we might, as Geraldine Brooks said, 'crawl into his skin'. [8]

Mantel has noted: 'There's a question that confronts a writer of historical fiction on her first page: How did the dead talk? … I use modern English but shift it sideways a little, so that there are some unusual words, some Tudor rhythms, a suggestion of otherness… If the words of real people have come down to us, I try to work them in among my inventions so that you can't see where they join.' [9]

Readers are clearly more interested in new ways of perceiving history and character than the advocates of gadzookery would have us believe. Specifically, what Linda Hutcheon called historiographic metafiction [10] is now embedded in our understanding: after all, the best-selling historical novel of the modern era is *The Name of the Rose*.

At least since Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, we have permission to acknowledge, subvert and play with ideas of modernity as well as history. The layering of knowing and not-knowing/truth and untruth evident in the work of Calvino or Eco, the ironic hindsight of Doctorow or the in-your-face see-what-I-did-there prima donna turns of Winterson are equally subversive and popular. The ventriloquism of A S Byatt or the extrapolation of Peter Carey, while truer to contemporary diction, are conscious of the tensions inherent in rendering historical voices.

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[7] Waters, Sarah, in response to a question from this author, Hares & Hyenas event, 2010

[8] Brooks, Geraldine, 'Cromwell gets ahead', *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 12, 2012

[9] Mantel, Hillary, 'The Elusive Art of Making the Dead Speak' , *Wall Street Journal*, April 27, 2012

[10] Hutcheon, Linda, *A poetics of postmodernism : history, theory, fiction*, 2004, Taylor & Francis, Oxford

If the past is indeed a foreign country, characters in stories set in the past are always Other. When we write them, when we give them voice, we impersonate people from an imagined past, not a historical past.

Knowing that makes writing and reading much more interesting - in any era.

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