AGAINST HISTORICAL FICTION

Toby Litt

A contract-in-bad-faith.

Historical fiction depends for its existence upon a pair of bad faiths – a reciprocal pair of bad faiths – the bad faith of the writer and the bad faith of the reader.

By "bad" I don’t really mean "bad" – not in the sense of malevolent, evil. I’m using the term in something like the way Jean-Paul Sartre did; which means that although I may think historical fiction is deeply bogus, I don’t think it’s essentially reprehensible. To give historical fiction a serious kicking is a bit like berating cuddly old Stephen Fry for not having pursued an obscure and second-rate academic career writing on A. E. Housman. Historical fiction exists, gives pleasure to many, and will continue to do so whatever I say. It wouldn’t be worth the effort, trying to persuade devotees to stop reading it. But I would like to spend some time examining how it is consumed and how it was produced.

It’s not hard to demonstrate that historical fiction is written in bad faith. All you have to do is, for a moment, forget about bad faith and think about the purest good faith.

First, imagine an entirely naïve reader who picks up a novel by Philippa Gregory because they want to learn the truth about Anne Boleyn. Let’s call this reader Alex. Alex completely trusts the writer not to mislead her (or him – Alex could be either) in any way about the past.

Philippa Gregory goes to a literary festival near where Alex lives and, because Alex feels s/he learnt so much about Anne Boleyn from Philippa Gregory’s book, s/he goes along to say thank you. Alex stands in line with all the other Philippa Gregory fans – and when s/he gets to speak to her, and have his or her copy of The Other Boleyn Girl signed, Alex says something like this, “Dear Philippa, thank you for telling me the truth about the past. I believe Anne Boleyn was exactly as you described her. Having read your novel, I feel no need to read any other books about Anne Boleyn or her minx of a sister”.

On hearing this, how does Philippa Gregory feel? What does she say? Does she feel, “Ah, I’ve done my job?” Or does she feel, “Look, here is my
And does she say, "You're quite right — there's no need to read any other books about Anne Boleyn — mine is the only true one because I am the only person who really understands the past?"

No, clearly she does not.

The relationship between the writer of historical fiction and the reader of it is much more complicated, much more implicated, than this. I'll come back to this later, and try to describe the relationship in detail.

But, if my first example of the innate bad faith of historical fiction didn't convince you, maybe my second will.

How would you feel if you knew that the history teacher teaching your child about the Tudor period — call them Terry — how would you feel if Terry had read nothing about that period but historical fiction?

You would, I think, feel that Terry wasn't qualified to be a history teacher — because what Terry knew couldn't in any way be described as history. Yet if all Terry's reading material had, in fact, been written in good faith, why would you have any doubts about Terry's competence?

I'd go further — if I found out that my child's history teacher preferred reading historical novels to history books, I would instantly lose a great deal of trust in them. If, on the other hand, they confessed to reading — only the once, on holiday — a single Philippa Gregory novel (just to see what they were like), but with a constant queasy feeling of self-disgust, I would immediately trust them more as a history teacher.

So, I think, if you're honest, would you.

And the reason for this? The reason is that I believe most history books are written in good faith — which is to say, they are written in the honest hope of saying something useful and truthful about the past.

If this truth turns out to be less picturesque, dramatic, romantic or readable than the evidence previously suggested, or than the less reliable sources put forward, then the history book will still assert this dull truth. The same can't be said of historical fiction. In fact, it is inevitably drawn to the more speculative areas of the past — hidden love lives, disguised conspiracies.

A history textbook will not establish itself on the territory of pseudo-subjects — such as, to take one example, the secret sexual relationship between Queen Elizabeth the First and the Earl of Essex.

So, how does the contract between the historical fiction writer and the historical fiction reader work? And why am I describing it as being, at both
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ends, in bad faith?

Here, I’ll have to try to define bad faith. As it takes Sartre about thirty dense pages of Being and Nothingness to do this, you’ll understand that a certain amount of simplification will be required.

Here’s part of the definition from the glossary at the back of the book, supplied by the translator. Bad faith is, “A lie to oneself within the unity of a single consciousness. Through bad faith a person seeks to escape the responsible freedom of Being-for-itself. Bad faith rests on a vacillation between transcendence and facticity which refuses to recognize either one for what it really is or to synthesize them” (Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, translated by Hazel Barnes, 2001: italics mine.)

Now, you’ll see that I’m not talking about “the unity of a single consciousness” – I’m talking about a duality of two consciousnesses, writer and reader. But I think, in each case, the second part of the definition holds true.

This is clear even in the term “historical fiction”. The first word is the element of facticity, the what was of the world; the second element is the transcendence, the what might have been of the world. To yoke the two words together is to create an oxymoron. (Historical fiction is neither historical nor fictional.)

Those who would defend historical fiction inevitably start to do as Sartre says, to “vacillate between transcendence and facticity”.

Transcendence, in my argument, can be taken to mean anything that begins to rise above the available historical facts. So, when a defender of historical fiction says, “It’s all just a bit of a romp – why can’t you take it for what it is?” that’s the transcendence. The romp, the energy of narrative arising out of a supposed historical basis, is a transcendent value.

Similarly, when a defender says, “There are imaginative leaps that the historical novelist can make which the plain historian wouldn’t dare, but which may come closer to the truth than facts could ever tell” – that’s the transcendence.

But the real proof of my argument comes when the defenders of historical fiction switch, or rather vacillate, from transcendence to facticity. At this point, they say something like, “A lot of historical novelists put a great deal of time and effort into making sure that they get the details of their historical period right”. And that’s the facticity. Or they say, “Even if you don’t agree historical fiction is a reliable source of information about
the past, you’ll surely admit that a person who reads *The Other Boleyn Girl* knows more about Anne Boleyn after finishing the novel than they did before starting it*. That’s the facticity.

And I would answer, extremely austerely, by saying that No, I believe that the reader would *know* less about Anne Boleyn for having read the novel. Because they would have entirely corrupted their criteria of *knowing* anything about the past. In starting to read the novel, they would have accepted a woozy melding of fact with fiction — of accurate fripperies of dress and inaccurate motivations of the heart. And so they would have no basis for saying what they did or did not know to be true. What the reader will do is *feel* they know more about the past. They may even feel they know more about *how the past felt*, or *how the past felt itself to be as a passing present*. This kind of knowledge is as bogus as any writer saying, “This is what I think Queen Elizabeth felt she felt about the Earl of Essex”.

These two sentences from Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* are, for me, the killer. They precisely anatomize the mental slippages required in order to produce and consume historical fiction.

For the writer, “Bad faith apprehends evidence but it is resigned in advance to not being fulfilled by this evidence, to not being persuaded and transformed into good faith. It makes itself humble and modest; it is not ignorant, it says, that faith is decision and that after each intuition, it must decide and will what is” (ibid).

For the reader, “... bad faith in its primitive project and in its coming into the world decides on the exact nature of its requirements. It stands forth in the firm resolution *not to demand too much*, to count itself satisfied when it is barely persuaded, to force itself in decisions to adhere to uncertain truths” (ibid).

To conclude, I’d like to try to state the terms of the contract-in-bad-faith between the writer and the reader of historical fiction. Remember, this isn’t a contract that Alex, our naïve reader at the literary festival, would subscribe to. Alex is after the past in good faith. Neither is it a contract that any decent historian would go anywhere near. They, too, are after the past in good faith — even to the extent of spending most of their time questioning and analyzing the amount of bad faith this may involve.

The writer of historical fiction says to the reader: *It wasn’t like this, but this is how I’m going to say it was.*

The reader of historical fiction says to the writer: *You say it wasn’t like this,*
but we're going to read it as if it was.

In other words, they mutually establish the ground upon which they are going to meet — a bracketed ground in which their pleasure will derive entirely from a vacillation between facticity and transcendence, between what may very well have been true and what can be proven to be bogus, between — in other words — the historical and the fictional.

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Toby Litt was born in Bedford in 1968. He read English at Worcester College, Oxford and studied Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. He is the author of two collections of short stories and eight novels, most recently I Played the Drums in a Band Called OK (Penguin, 2008) and Journey into Space (Penguin, 2009). He lives in London.