HISTORICAL FRICTIONS: HISTORY, ART AND PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the following questions: What is the relationship between history and art? To what extent are historians artists? To what extent are artists historians? What are the implications for using art in the teaching of history? The authors point out that in the same way that contemporary history education pulls back the curtain on how historians work, teachers can open up for examination the way fiction writers work. They contend that this is critical because artistic representations of history can be so appealing and so well constructed that they pull people in, inhibiting interrogation and critical thought.

In the mid-eighteenth century, Aminata Diallo, a West African girl of about 11, was kidnapped and taken from her family. After enduring days of forced march to the coast and months of a horrific voyage on a slave ship, she arrived in the colony of South Carolina, where she was sold into slavery. Years of misery followed, including forced labour on a plantation, rape, and permanent separation from her husband and child. Eventually, Aminata managed to escape slavery and make her way to Nova Scotia as part of the Loyalist migration of the mid-1780s.

Elijah Weesageechak was a Cree hunter from Northern Ontario who paddled several days from home to enlist in the Canadian Expeditionary Force heading for Europe early in World War 1. Along with the overt racism common for the time, Elijah endured the unspeakable horrors of the "Great War." As a sniper he spent hours lying absolutely still in no man's land, sometimes behind the rotting carcases of horses or,

worse, those of his fellow soldiers. Elijah rose to become one of the best snipers on the Allied side but also descended into the twin hells of morphine addiction and an obsession with killing other men.

Vikram Lall was born in the 1950s in central Kenya and came of age during the Mau Mau Uprising and the tumultuous years of the making of an independent state. As an Indian in East Africa he lived the ultimate in-between life, neither colonizer nor native, used by both sides, trusted by neither. Falling into corruption and eventually getting caught, Vikram fled for a relatively safe but tortured life in southern Ontario. Again, as an immigrant forced from the only home he knew, he is in-between and unsure of who he really is or what his life means.

Aminata, Elijah and Vikram are compelling historical characters and as history teachers and educators of history teachers, we see all kinds of ways to use their stories with students. They are all quite ordinary folk, not the "great men" who so often dominate the textbooks. They are people our students can relate to. Furthermore, substantial parts of their stories take place when they are young and this, too, provides a potential connection with students. While they are quite ordinary in many ways, their lives touch on great historical events and themes: slavery, the Loyalist migration to Canada, the Great War, and the processes of colonization and decolonization. Finally, their stories deal with aspects of Canadian history and particular populations that are often left out of school history courses. They open up important parts of the history of African-Canadians, Aboriginal Peoples, and more recent immigrants.

While all of this is true, the problem for us as history teachers is that Aminata, Elijah, and Virkram are not real historical actors at all but fictional products of the imaginations of Canadian novelists Lawrence Hill, Joseph Boyden, and M.G. Vassanji.[1] Their fictional status raises several questions for us: What is the relationship between history and art? To what extent are historians artists? To what extent are artists historians? What are implications for using art in the teaching of history?

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HISTORY AND ART

History and art are clearly connected in a range of complex ways and space here does not allow for a thorough examination of all of them. Most obviously, for writers of historical fiction, history is a source of inspiration and material for their art. Annabel Lyon, for example, found in the world of the Ancient Greeks characters and situations that were both compelling and with contemporary relevance.[2] She worked hard to construct stories that were historically accurate but also spoke of enduring human themes.

Hilary Mantel found inspiration for her Man Booker Prize-winning characterization of Henry VIII's advisor Thomas Cromwell not only in the history of the period but in historiography as well. In her research she became very aware of the contested interpretations of Cromwell presented by historians over the years and quite consciously developed her work to fit with some of the revisionist work on the man.[3]

While history is a source and inspiration for both these authors, it also raises challenges for their writing. Both felt obligated to make their stories as historically accurate as possible and, while free to fill in the gaps, they felt bound not to distort facts to make for more compelling art. Mantel says it most strongly:

I cannot describe to you what revulsion it inspires in me when people play around with the facts. If I were to distort something just to make it more convenient or dramatic, I would feel I'd failed as a writer. If you understand what you're talking about, you should be drawing the drama out of real life, not putting it there, like icing on a cake.[4]

For historians art is often an important source for developing their accounts of particular eras or individuals. In her recent book on the lead up to World War 1 Margaret MacMillan includes a chapter titled, "What Were They Thinking? Hopes, Fears, Ideas, and Unspoken Assumptions," which attempts to immerse the reader in the ideas and assumptions that permeated European societies in the early years of the twentieth century; to provide a deep sense of historical perspective.[5] In that chapter MacMillan draws heavily on artists, particularly fiction writers, as key sources for understanding the time.

A more comprehensive example of a historian drawing on art as a source is the book *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* by UBC professor Timothy Brook. Brook uses six paintings by the seventeenth century Dutch painter

Johannes Vermeer as jumping off points to discuss profound changes taking place in the world at that time. Art is the central source and frame for his work.[6]

These are just some of the ways in which history and art are connected. It seems to us that teachers of history – or art for that matter – should not ignore this relationship but rather find creative ways to engage students in considering its complexities.

HISTORIANS AS ARTISTS

We contend that the historian is no less an artist than is a novelist, or a poet for that matter. There seems to be a common belief that writing fiction or poetry is a creative endeavor whereas writing history is a routine, unimaginative series of tasks which involve ferreting out the necessary historical sources in dusty archives, selecting relevant information, and then compiling the facts into a coherent narrative, with causes and effects clearly identified. However, it is much more than that. Historian Hayden White calls the production of an historical account a discursive process. He says:

> *The facts do not speak for themselves [...] the historian speaks for them, speaks on their behalf, and fashions the fragments of the past into a whole whose integrity is—in its representation—a purely discursive one. Novelists might be dealing only with imaginary events whereas historians are dealing with real ones, but the process of fusing events, whether imaginary or real, into a comprehensible totality capable of serving as the object of a representation, is a poetic process.*[7]

He refers to "the unprocessed historical record [where] the facts exist only as a congeries of contiguously related fragments"[8] until the historian selects and combines them in ways that create new wholes just as novelists put together figments of their imaginations to create coherent fictitious narratives.

Historian Barbara Tuchman, following on from George Macaulay Trevelyan, points out that effective historians must exercise sympathy and imagination in order to understand the evidence. She says, "Without sympathy and imagination the historian can copy figures from a tax roll forever [...] but he will never know or be able to portray the people who paid the taxes."[9] The historian has to "exercis[e] the artist's privilege of selection"[10] by asking thoughtful questions of sources in order to make meaning from the disparate pieces of information she is able to collect. Two historians using the same sources will write two very different narratives because they will have different views about the importance of ideas, people, and events and therefore give them differing degrees of prominence in the narrative. Finally, the historian exercises creativity by conveying meaning through clear and compelling language that will draw readers into the narrative. The difference between the academic historian and the historical fiction author lies squarely in the historian's responsibility to avoid straying from what the available evidence can support rather than in a lack of creativity.

Perhaps leaning more towards art is what is sometimes called literary history, "a term that suggests a hybrid of historiography and literary journalism that requires factual honesty, intellectual exploration and engagement but allows for a wider range of narrative styles."[11] It is not fiction, but rather history accompanied by a degree of transparency typically lacking in historical accounts. This hybrid history allows the author to insert herself into the narrative and reveal her own motives, doubts and uncertainties. Julie Wheelwright's biography, *Esther: The Remarkable True Story of Esther Wheelwright*[12] is an example of this form. The author provides an account drawn from available primary sources, but reveals choices made about interpretations, decisions about privileging one source over another, and as Wheelwright puts it, dealing with instances where "the black hole of documentation gapes wide."[13] She goes on to say, "Perhaps the limitations can become part of the story and force readers to understand and appreciate the complexities of history."[14] It is generally accepted that historians interpret the evidence in the sources available to them, rather than discover the "truth." But, such an approach makes this interpretive process clearly evident to the reader. As Wheelwright points out, this approach "allows for reflection on the porous relationship between fiction and non-fiction as equally constructed texts."[15]

ARTISTS AS HISTORIANS

Although it is possible for an artist to be a historian, they are usually not because they possess a "license" to invent. Historians are not eligible for this license

because they have a scholarly obligation to ground their interpretations in the extant evidence. The relationship between a historical fiction writer and their evidence varies considerably from one writer to another and it can be a troubled one. Some authors wrestle with decisions to alter the historical record for the sake of the story. Margaret Sweatman, author of *Fox* (Winnipeg General Strike), has commented, "It is always kind of creepy when you do depart and steal and lie when you're working with the public domain. So I am an embezzler, you know, in public property, the history."[16] For Charles Frazier, author of *Cold Mountain* (American Civil War), this is not an issue. When asked which was more important, his response was, "Let the fiction drive and the history ride."[17] That pretty much puts history in its place.

Writers of historical fiction are ranged along a lengthy continuum when it comes to their responses to the dilemma of how much license they have to "invent" history. We would place Thomas Wharton, author of *Icefields* (Jasper, Alberta and the Columbia Icefield) at one end based on his admission that he falsified some of the sources he acknowledges in his novels. His explanation is that, "[W]hen I finish a book, I feel like I'm not finished playing fictionally. Somehow I like to have the fiction bleed over into the real world in some small way. […] I guess it seals the book off with a buried statement: don't believe everything you read. I don't know."[18] Michael Crummy, author of *River Thieves* (the extinct Beothuk of Newfoundland) takes a stance that could be placed somewhere in the middle of the continuum, "You can't write it exactly as it was, because as a novel that would fail. So there were many places where I had to make decisions that collapsed characters into one another changed the historical record slightly, to deal with aesthetic writerly questions like, 'How do I speed this up? How do I hold these things together?'"[19] Margaret Atwood is close to the other end. She talks about the challenge of unearthing information about mundane quotidian details that have not been recorded because they were simply so taken for granted. She cites "how to clean a chamber pot, what footgear would have been worn in winter, the origins of quilt-pattern names, and how to store parsnips"[20] as examples of information which had to be researched for her novel *Alias Grace*, which took place in Canada West during the 1840s.

According to one fiction writer, "Historians can't invent in the gaps, so they wind up just building the structure all full of holes."[21] Artists, on the other hand, invent in the gaps all the time. Atwood says:

> *I devised the following set of guidelines for myself: when there was a solid fact, I could not alter it; long as I might to have Grace witness McDermott's execution, it could not be done, because, worse luck, she was already in the Penitentiary on that day. […] but in the parts left unexplained—the gaps left unfilled—I was free to invent. Since there were a lot of gaps, there is a lot of invention. Alias Grace is very much a novel rather than a documentary.*[22]

Historians cannot invent in the gaps in the way that artists are free to do. However, what they can do is to form educated inferences based on the information that they do have to work with. They can also be transparent about the limitations of the sources available to them and how they formed inferences.

IMPLICATIONS FOR USING ART IN THE TEACHING OF HISTORY

There has been a resurgence of interest in public history recently. In addition to documentaries and docudramas, commemorations, museum exhibitions, a new emphasis on historic sites, and nonfiction of various kinds, there has been a proliferation of historical fiction about Canadian topics. In a telephone survey involving lengthy interviews of 3419 Canadians, over half of the respondents indicated that they had read books (including historical fiction) about the past in the previous year.[23]

This public interest coincides with continuing reports that students find school history boring and irrelevant.[24] We see considerable potential for history educators to take advantage of the widespread public interest in the past as a part of a process of reinvigorating school history. Art, particularly historical fiction, is often a gateway to interest in history and more disciplined study of it. Characters and situations like the ones with which we began this article have the potential to captivate the imaginations of students and lead them to engagement with important historical content, concepts, and processes. This will require careful planning and teaching. We can only begin the discussion of what that might involve here but two broad areas of approach

might be pulling back the curtain on the work of artists and engaging students in the production of their own fictional accounts.

Current reforms in history education around the world are focused on introducing students to the disciplinary processes of history. It is no longer considered enough that students learn historical information. They are also expected to become conversant with the ways in which historical accounts are created. Students are being taken behind the curtain to see how historians work and, indeed, being asked to do some of that work themselves.

It seems to us that the same should be true for historical fiction when it is used in the history classroom. As demonstrated here, fiction writers write and talk about the ways in which they do their work, the sources they use, and the decisions they make in shaping their stories. In the same way that contemporary history education pulls back the curtain on how historians work, teachers can open up for examination the way fiction writers work. In fact, this is critical. Fictional accounts and characters like the ones discussed in this chapter are compelling. They captivate readers and take them on a journey that seems right – presenting the past the way it was, so to speak. As Darren Bryant and Penney Clark point out, artistic representations of history can be so well constructed that they pull people in, inhibiting interrogation and critical thought.[25] That may be fine in some contexts, but it is not fine in the history classroom. Students need to understand that fictional accounts, while potentially very valuable for understanding aspects of the past, are constructed by particular people, drawing on particular sources, for particular purposes, and they are neither unassailable records of the past nor made up stories with no relevance for understanding history.

A key aspect of contemporary approaches to teaching history is to engage students not only in the analysis of historical sources and accounts, but also to engage them in using historical processes in constructing their own accounts. In doing this, they engage with a range of sources, make decisions about what is or is not significant, develop a plot line to show history as progress or decline, and make judgements about historical events and actors. It is held that involving students in the production of historical accounts can make them more sophisticated historical thinkers.

Assigning students to write their own fictional accounts rooted in history has the potential to extend and deepen their facility with historical thinking. It can involve virtually every one of the six historical thinking processes described by Peter Seixas and Tom Morton and embedded in social studies curricula across the country.[26] In particular, it can foster a richer understanding of historical sources and a deeper sense of historical perspective as students attempt to develop characters that speak, act, and think in ways consistent with their historical contexts.

CONCLUSION

Aminata Diallo, Elijah Weesageechak, and Vikram Lall never walked the earth. They did not experience agonizing months on a slave ship, the paralyzing fear of enemy snipers, or the cultural dislocation of living in someone else's land. People like them did all of these things, however, and through them Lawrence Hill, Joseph Boyden, and M.G. Vassanji provide a window on the past that is sometimes missing in historical accounts. It is a window our students deserve a look through, but we shouldn't stop at the window. We need to open the door and bring our students inside to understand the relationship between history and art more critically, where they are symbiotic and where they are not, and why.

NOTES

A For the purposes of this article we mainly limit our discussion of art to historical fiction.

1 Lawrence Hill, *The Book of Negroes* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2007); Joseph Boyden, *Three Day Road* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006); M.G. Vassanji, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2003).

2 Annabel Lyon, "Making It Up: Annabel Lyon on the Challenge of Writing Historical Fiction," *Globe and Mail*, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/making-it-up-annabel-lyon-on-the-challenge-of-writing-historical-fiction/article4558458/.

3 MacFarquhar, Larissa, "The Dead Are Real: Hilary Mantel's Imagination," *The New Yorker*, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/15/the-dead-are-real.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2013).

6 Timothy Brook, *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2008).

[7] Hayden White, "The Fictions of Factual Representation," In *The Literature of Fact: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, edited by Angus Fletcher (English Institute, 1976), 28.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Barbara Tuchman, "The Historian As Artist," In *Practicing History: Selected Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 47.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Julie Wheelwright, *Writing in the Borderlands: A Critical Review of Literary Journalism and Historiography, 1989-2011*, Unpublished doctoral thesis, City University, London, 2014, 74.

[12] Julie Wheelwright, *Esther: The Remarkable True Story of Esther Wheelwright, Puritan Child, Native Daughter, Mother Superior* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2011).

[13] Wheelwright, *Writing in the Borderands*, 75.

[14] *Ibid.*, 87.

[15] *Ibid.*, 75.

[16] Herb Wyile, "Ghosts Are Our Allies: Margaret Sweatman," *Speaking in the Past Tense: Canadian Novelists on Writing Historical Fiction* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), 171.

[17] Charles Frazier, "Some Remarks on History and Fiction," *Historians and Novelists Confront America's Past (and Each Other)*, edited by Mark C. Carnes (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001): 313.

[18] Wyile, "The Living Haunt the Dead: Michael Crummey," *Speaking in the Past Tense*, 301.

[19] Margaret Atwood, *In Search of* Alias Grace: *On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction*, Charles R. Bronfman Lecture in Canadian Studies, November 21, 1996, University of Ottawa Press, 1997, 32-33.

[20] Wyile, "The Iceman Cometh Across: Thomas Wharton," *Speaking in the Past Tense*, 293.

[21] Wyile, "History 'from the Workingman's End of the Telescope: Fred Stenson,' " *Speaking in the Past Tense*, 201.

[22] Atwood, *In Search of* Alias Grace, 35.

[23] The Pasts Collective, *Canadians and Their Pasts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

[24] Pour un exemple, voir Anna Clark, "Teaching the Nation's Story: Comparing Public Debates and Classroom Perspectives of History Education in Australia and Canada," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 41, n°6 (2009): 745-62.

[25] Darren Bryant and Penney Clark, "*Historical Empathy and Canada: A People's History,*" *Canadian Journal of Education* 29, n°4 (2006): 1039-1064.

[26] Peter Seixas and Tom Morton, *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts* (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2013).

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