

Hilary Mantel: is historical fiction misleading?

Discussion at The Park

Wednesday 19 July 2017 7:30pm at *The Park Tavern, Macclesfield*

Hilary Mantel gave this year's Reith Lectures. She argued that history, as an academic profession, allows and perhaps even demands 'good historical fiction' to complement it. Historical fiction and history may be bad for a number of reasons: they may be a sanitised version of the past that creates or perpetuates myths; may be badly written, and may be untrue to essential facts. Her message was that historical fiction using real persons within real events (as opposed to fiction that is merely situated in the past) is possible and worthwhile.

1. Is it shocking that many are ignorant of the past beyond what they have lived through? How do we get our historical knowledge: from school, history books, TV documentaries, novels or films? That of our history teacher, HM thinks, resonates strongest with most. Do we agree?

2. HM says, "History is a method of organising our ignorance of the past". The particular organisation chosen for a particular subject is often contested by other historians, as are some of the so-called facts. Writing it up involves interpretation, impartiality, selection, rigour, integrity, scepticism and devotion. This is a very saintly vision of academic history, not quite limited to the interrogation of documents but almost. Does this ideal correspond with the history we usually meet, or is our history more akin to the novel or film?

3. What no one will deny is that the historical record has gaps. Historical fiction is a way of filling the gaps through imaginatively entering the bodies of the protagonists, their psychology and their physiology, that is not strictly available to the academic historian. The novelist is allowed to guess. The dramatist has to compress time and reduce cast numbers. Do these contrivances enable fiction to achieve a greater truth, or to peddle greater distortions? How do novelists earn the readers' trust?

4. Selection is crucial to the task of producing an effective narration that makes sense to the reader: "without selection there would be no knowledge, only information." A questioner who worked in TV saw selection as imposing authority on the past (he was worried about editorial bias in a project in which he was involved). HM was dismissive. Do we have any sympathy with his point of view?

5. The purpose of writing fiction is "to put the reader in the moment", taking the material from the archive and putting it into a body that knows what it feels like to wear, say, Tudor clothes and hear Tudor shoes on beaten earth floors etc, moving from the academic historian's presentation to create a living drama using the protagonists' viewpoints. Her tips to writers: make the reader welcome, but not too comfortable and above all, do not lie. Do we suspect these insights are just feeding a relatively new industry of creative writing courses? Do we think that HM follows the advice she gives?

5. In her final lecture HM commented on adapting the expansive novel to the restrictions, economic and temporal, of stage and screen. But she also saw their advantages: the ability of film to focus attention on detail and to move rapidly from scene to scene; the immediacy of theatre and its power to convey physical action. Do we have preferences for novels, films or the stage?

Further listening and reading:

The lectures can be found on <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00729d9/episodes/player>

GR Elton: *The Practise of History*, 2nd edition 2002, Blackwell

William Shakespeare, various plays imprecisely dated; Friedrich Schiller, *Mary Stuart*, 1800; Robert Graves, *I, Claudius*, 1934; Anthony Burgess, 1964, *Nothing Like The Sun*; the novels of Jean Plaidy and Philippa Gregory; Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, 2009 and *Bring Up The Bodies*, 2012.

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