

**“Narrative ethics and character in the representation of the past  
in contemporary English-speaking fiction”, October 21<sup>st</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022  
Organised by Armelle Parey (U. Caen Normandie) and Christine Berberich (U Portsmouth) -  
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**ABSTRACTS**

**Elsa Cavalié, “Briseis, Circe, Medusa and others: appraising neo-mythical novels and literary consensus”**

As many critics have noticed, the last decade has witnessed a spate of what could be termed “neo-mythical” novels, that is to say historical novels revisiting Greek myth with a contemporary twist. In those novels, character, or characters, seem(s) to be the key element(s), as their titles illustrate it: *Circe*, *Galatea* and *The Song of Achilles* (Madeline Miller), *The Silence of the Girls* (Pat Barker), *Medusa* (Jessie Burton), *These Great Athenians* (Valentine Carter). As attested from that list, focus has now predominantly shifted from heroes to heroines, in a radical decentering of traditional myths, albeit sometimes rather unoriginally, for the rewritings usually seem to borrow from the neo-Victorian novel’s focus on racial, sexual and gender minorities and to transpose its strategies to ancient Greece, thus making the oppressed female the inevitable heroine of most of those works. Among the dozens of novels recently published, Pat Barker’s rewriting of the Trojan war from Briseis’s point of view, and Madeline Miller’s *Circe* stand out, as they go beyond a mere escapist revisiting of well-known myths and stories, and provide the reader with a truly original point of view, if not in the choice of a protagonist, but in the way characterization and viewpoint are constructed.

We may then wonder if there remains any essential difference between the “Neo-mythical” novel and the Neo-Victorian one, especially regarding their approaches to history. While “popular” Neo-Victorian works of art often happily disregard any claim to historical accuracy (one may think of TV shows such as *Penny Dreadful* or *The Nevers*), how do “neo-mythical novels” fare, in a context where there actually are very few “historical facts” to stick to? Is the relative absence of “fact” freeing for novelists, or does it unwillingly push them towards literary consensus, by systematically privileging a univocal narrative focus on empathy towards the poor and the oppressed, at the expense of artistic creativity? Could we then suggest then, that the ethical duty of such novelists lies with the demands of the present rather than the past? Are some of the more “popular”, less sophisticated novels commercially tailored to the needs of audiences expecting a certain “formula” aimed at righting historical and “mythical” wrongs?

**Sheila Collingwood-Whittick, “I gave my thinking to her”: Kate Grenville’s fictionalization of the historical Elizabeth Macarthur”**

Purporting to be a memoir of Elizabeth Macarthur, a well-known figure from Australia’s early colonial history, Kate Grenville’s latest novel, *A Room Made of Leaves*, opens with an explanation of the author’s role in editing and transcribing Mrs. Macarthur’s personal papers.

Until the fortuitous discovery of a wax-sealed box during renovation work on a house in Sydney, little was known, Grenville claims, about the private life of Elizabeth Macarthur beyond a few “unrevealing letters home” and “a lot of dull correspondence with her adult children”. Thanks to the newly discovered documents Grenville has, however, been able to fill in what was hitherto a “frustrating blank”.

In the 'Author's Note' 310 pages later, Grenville admits to being the author of the work, while simultaneously underlining the authenticity of the historical material in which it is grounded. She has, she stresses, "let Elizabeth Macarthur speak for herself".

Deconstructing the account of Elizabeth Macarthur's life that *ARMOL* offers, my paper will contend that far from letting the historical figure speak for herself, the author attributes to her two anachronistic characteristics (a feminist voice and an empathetic view of the Indigenous population and their interaction with settlers) both of which are designed to produce a narrative that conforms to Grenville's preferred vision of Australian history.

For what Elizabeth's memoir of the fledgling colony reveals is, I argue, the author's inability to accept the brutal truth of her country's colonial past proposed by contemporary historians. The humane and fundamentally likeable character on which *ARMOL* is centred serves, in fact, as a screen masking such realities as those exposed, for example, in Lyndall Ryan's recent mapping of the countless frontier massacres carried out by British settlers.

### **Georges Letissier, "Reparatory Historical Fiction: Re-collecting and re-connecting the pasts in Nadifa Mohamed's *The Fortune Men* (2021)"**

Nadifa Mohamed is a new voice in British fiction, and beyond. She was named one of Granta's top 20 young British novelists in 2013. She is deeply committed to fictionalising the past, as evidenced by the three novels she has published so far. Even if one must always beware of pigeonholing authors, her historical writings probably illustrate the combined features of 'decolonialism' and 'connected history.' This is probably why previous categorisations, such as 'History from the margins/Anticolonial fiction and identity/Race and the loss of history' (De Groot 2010), useful as they may be, call for some revision.

For her debut novel *Black Mamba Boy* (2010), Mohamed gave her father – a helpless Somali orphan buffeted in the troubled African continent of the 1930s – a tangible past, through the celebratory poetics of the griot. Her second fiction *The Orchard of Lost Souls* (2013) adopted a female-centred perspective by following the intertwined trajectories of three female characters during the Somali dictatorship of General Mohamed Siad Barre in the 70s and 80s.

*The Fortune Men* marks a rupture, both spatial and structural. The action is set in Cardiff's Tiger Bay in 1952 and the plot is predicated on a sadly famous miscarriage of justice, when Mahmood Mattan, a Somali migrant, was wrongly accused of slitting the throat of Lily Volpert (Violet Volacki in the fiction) and subsequently hanged. By choosing one of the last victims of the death penalty in Wales as her main character, Mohamed both decenters a fairly recent episode of British history and continues to flesh out her own plural identity, through interconnected historical ties. Mattan's characterisation is pivotal to the novel, as Mohamed both documents (through archival research) and fictionalises (by imagining her character's subjectivity) a lovable rogue, small-time petty thief and resilient victim who, through his versatile self, provides many affordances to hook the reader (Felski 2020). Through this contextualised portrayal, Mohamed exposes the systemic racism which has persisted in former colonising countries to this day. In this respect, her perspective is decolonial. She also opts for an immersive plunge into different cultures – Volacki is Jewish, Mattan Muslim, the silent, complicitous majority Christian – resulting in a situation which is contingent on historical factors, far beyond the characters' power to choose. This aleatory encounter between different civilisations and traditions, transposing a cross-cultural reconfiguration of the past within the limited, nondescript perimeter of Cardiff in the '50s, eschews any exclusive Western perspective, and as such ties in with the epistemological agenda of Sanjay Subrahmanyam's 'connected history.'

## **Héloïse Lecomte, “Re-wounding World War One in Graham Swift’s *Wish You Were Here* (2011)”**

21<sup>st</sup>-century British fiction is haunted by the shadows of World War One, which resurfaces beneath tales of contemporary conflicts or individual traumas. Nowhere is this process outlined more clearly than in Graham Swift’s 2011 novel *Wish You Were Here*, in which the protagonist Jack’s grief over the loss of his brother Tom during the Iraq War brings back reminiscences of family loss in the previous century.

Swift superimposes the present of the Iraq War onto the past of WW1 and weaves his contemporary story of mourning into the war palimpsest. In this paper, I intend to show that the narrative elegy crafts an ethical space that questions the heroism that has long been associated with soldiers’ deaths on the front in the past. By displacing the focus of his story onto a grieving protagonist instead of a soldier, Swift probes the depth of melancholia that characterizes the re-telling of 20<sup>th</sup>-century conflicts. As Eng and Kazanjian argue, “this engagement generates sites for memory and history, for the rewriting of the past as well as reimagining the future” (2003, 4). The vulnerability that characterizes Swift’s writing leads to a rewriting of glorious myths that puts flesh on the historical skeleton. In order to do so, Swift redesigns the elegy and gives it narrative form but he also borrows from the ancient genre of the epic to re-interpret past historical events.

By intertwining the elegy and the epic within the figure of what Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau call the “wounded hero” (2018), Swift turns his tale of private grief into a political (re)assessment of the past and of the glorious myths associated with the senseless deaths of soldiers both in the past and in the present.

## **Alison Gorlier, “Philippa Gregory’s Controversial Approach to Katherine Parr in *The Taming of the Queen*”**

The Tudors have enjoyed a particularly prolific period of representation in British popular culture in the twenty-first century. Historically, Katherine Parr, sixth wife of Henry VIII, was one of the prominent figures in English Reformation. She published her work under her own name, encouraged the translation and reading of the Bible in vernacular English and was a model female leader to the future Elizabeth I. English author Philippa Gregory published *The Taming of the Queen* in 2015 which relates Parr’s queenship as the last wife of a Bluebeard King Henry. In this biofiction, Kateryn shows determination to use her new notoriety to advance Protestantism and Reform and yet, terrified though she is of her husband who displays tyrannical behaviour, Kateryn acts more as a self-centred, highly sexed woman – which contrasts with her traditional depiction as Henry’s nurse in his old age – than a religious and educational leader in the sixteenth century. Gregory’s self-designation as a historian raises the question of ethics of writing historical fiction and the rewriting of history in Gregory’s depiction of the queen. Yet, “modern readers are wholly unperturbed by narratives such as Gregory’s heavily fictionalized re-imagining of the life of [Henry’s wives].” (Cooper and Short 2012, 6) Since reviving women from the past and representing them as real power-brokers have always been among Gregory’s fundamental goals, she chose to re-imagine Parr as a woman who exhibits agency, courage and who embodies the popular 21<sup>st</sup> century feminist values which resonate with her readers. This paper aims to question Gregory’s motives and concerns in her depiction of Katherine Parr as a modern, appealing but historically dissonant character in the context of different contemporary positions on the ethics of biographical novel writing today.

**Kimberley Vanderstraeten, "The representation of Henry VIII in TV series nowadays : *The Tudors* (2007-2010) and *Wolf Hall* (2015)"**

Among the televised representations of Henry VIII in the twenty first century there are *The Tudors* (created by Michael Hirst, 2007-2010) and *Wolf Hall* (Created by Peter Kosminski, 2015). *The Tudors* focuses on Henry VIII's reign from 1518 to his death in 1547, as for *Wolf Hall* it centers on Thomas Cromwell and his rise to power from 1529 to 1536. The two have different tones which can be explained by the historical and audiovisual approach chosen by the productions. Their starting point is also essential. *The Tudors* was developed because the creator of the show, Michael Hirst, was asked about making a show on Henry VIII and he worked on it. As for *Wolf Hall*, it was adapted from the novels *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012) written by the British author Hilary Mantel. The two tones give varying depictions that might differ from the historical point of view left by the sources. The questions of the physical appearance, the psychological aspect and the relationship to religion are perhaps the main factors to be discussed. Nevertheless, the theories developed by historians also bring material to the debate. Apart from the possible diseases brought to light, there is the theory of faction defended by several historians. This theory is the key to explain the many changes, rises to power and downfalls that took place during Henry VIII's reign even though historians may have divergent opinions on this very point.

**Lewis MacLeod, "The Progressivists May Be Wrong, But The Aesthetes Can't Possibly Be Right": On Martin Amis, Historical Violence and Creative Play"**

Martin Amis's political and historical interests (in particular, his investigations/interrogations of Nazi and Stalinist atrocities) have always existed in an uneasy tension with his poetics. Amis's clear obsession with creative "play" and his sustained and self-conscious foregrounding of his own literary style (the over-the-top linguistic pyrotechnics, the persistent recourse to self-reflexive, meta-narrations, the overt sense that he is inserting himself into—making a case for his inclusion in—"the literary tradition") indicate a writer for whom "fiction is freedom" (*Inside Story* 23). "In fiction," he writes in *Inside Story*, "there are no laws," no obligations, no limits, beyond the writer's creative energies: "write whatever you want; no one's stopping you." Still, the question of whether someone (or something) is "stopping you" from writing something remains distinct from the question of *if* one ought to stop, distinct also from *how* things ought to be said. Are there (political, historical, even rhetorical) territories in which one really shouldn't play, weapons which can never ethically be made into toys, tones which wound at a sonic level?

Amis's own freedom-of-the-imagination has, of course, had its own manifest and recurrent fixations, a decades-long and seemingly inescapable impulse to bear historical witness, to hold the Twentieth Century to account, to testify (to do research, set records straight, even as he insists on his own capacity to re-create and re-invent). Amis's champions see this marriage of high aesthetic style and historical heft as a mechanism for ethical re-engagement, a necessary re-vivification of a past whose failures might threaten to become rote if exclusively rendered in rote terms. His detractors see the same project as presumptuous and tone-deaf. Amis's work on Stalin, for example, is (according to different iterations of the *New York Times*) both "a powerful [and] unnerving journey into one of history's most harrowing chapters" and nothing more than the "narcissistic musings of a spoiled, upper-middle class litterateur." In a similar vein, *Time's Arrow* (misguidedly?) attempts to encode historical reckoning as literary tour-de-force: testing the absolute limits of narrative self-propulsion

(at the level plot and sentence structure), and registering the cognitive discord of Concentration Camps in the logic of sentences that always, upsettingly, move and work the wrong way. The proposed study reads Amis's historical texts (in particular, *Time's Arrow*, *Koba The Dread*, *House of Meetings*, and *Inside Story*) with, and against, each other in an effort to test the degree to which literary form and historical content can be (mis)aligned.

### **Dunlaith Bird, "This is where it begins': Beckett and Biofiction"**

'How end?', Hamm asks in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. With the publication of Jo Baker's highly popular *A Country Road, A Tree* (2015) and more recently the success of Maylis Besserie's *Le Tiers Temps* (2021) we can rather observe the beginning of a phenomenon, that of the fictionalisation of Beckett's life. This impulse to recreate the past of a real historical figure, particularly of a writer whose life's work involved the "vaguening" of historical and linguistic context and the excision of biographical detail, leads us to question both the artistic value and the ethical limits of such biofiction.

In this context, the public and critical acclaim the two texts have received also gives cause for reflection: to what extent does Beckett's reluctance to talk about his activities for the Resistance during WWII, and his retreat from public life and writing in the Tiers Temps nursing home, provoke our desire to hear the hidden story of this private, public figure? What respect and acknowledgement must be given to both Beckett's life and his work in undertaking such a project? In this paper, I propose to consider these two biofictional novels, *A Country Road, A Tree* and *Le Tiers Temps*, which bookend the beginning of Beckett's narrative in France and its end. Baker's novel ends with the Beckett character sitting to write: 'Words form. This is where it begins.' We in turn might ask ourselves where and how this biofictionalising of Beckett's life will end, and where the ethical and artistic limits of this practice lie.

### **Jo Baker**

Jo Baker is the author of 7 novels to date, 3 of which are set in the past. If her latest novel, *The Body Lies* (2019) is a contemporary novel that explores violence against women in fiction, *The Picture Book* (2011)-- also published as *The Undertow*— spans 4 generations over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In *Longbourn* (2013), she gives body and voice to characters hardly mentioned in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*: the servants looking after the Bennet household. If the characters of the past are all fictional in these two novels, the protagonist of *A Country Road, A Tree* (2015) is a real-life character as the novel narrates Irish writer Samuel Beckett's war years in France. *The Midnight News*, to be published in 2023, is set during the Blitz.

## Jessica Padilla-Sanchez, "The Future of LGBTQ+ YA Historical Fiction: An Exploration of Narrative Trends"

Demand for greater queer visibility in literature has led mainstream publishers to release an unprecedented amount of LGBTQ+ content in recent years, particularly for the Young Adult (YA) market. While certain genres of queer YA books, such as science fiction/fantasy and mystery/thriller have expanded, historical fiction has seen less growth (Cart and Jenkins 2006). To understand why this is the case, I consider a range of LGBTQ+ titles published from 2017 to 2021 through the framework established by Malinda Lo, who has compiled data on LGBTQ+ YA books published in the United States by "the Big 5" publishers (Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon and Schuster) and other select major publishers between 2003 and 2016. Using Lo's categories (genre, main character gender representation, and issue- versus identity-based LGBTQ+ content), I examine the content of these books to assess if certain narrative patterns repeat themselves, and if so, how these patterns reflect and affect cross-temporal identification – that is, "the process wherein people today identify with historical figures" (Koolen 2008). Can strict romance-based narratives work against the expansion of the LGBTQ+ YA historical fiction genre by defining a queer character strictly in terms of their sexual orientation? What portion of these titles can be considered alternate historical fiction? Is this subgenre increasing in number? If so, what does this tell us about readership identification and LGBTQ+ YA historical fiction?

## Peter D. Mathews, "Transcribing the Ethical Limits of Empathy in Daniel Davis Wood's *Blood and Bone*"

Across the four novels Daniel Davis Wood has published, it is possible to delineate an evolving ethics of literary voice. His initial step in *Blood and Bone* is to critique the boundaries of the narrator's knowledge, staging a usurpation of the third-person, omniscient voice by drastically expanding the imaginative abilities of the first-person narrator. Davis Wood does this to show that the literary narrator must always speak through a subjective position coloured by values and prejudices. The second step involves examining the extent to which the narrator's desire is not their own, but is generated by the Other. As such, the narrator of *Unspeakable* is portrayed as the victim of toxic narcissism and media manipulation, while the protagonist of *At the Edge of the Solid World* is so alienated from his own emotions he has to relive the calamities of others to discover his own feelings to process his own tragedy. Despite possessing the quasi-omniscient powers of *Blood and Bone*, these two narrators, far from being god-like, are shown to be puppets of desires that are not their own. The outcome is the dissolution of the subjective "I" in *In Ruins*, in which Davis Wood's narrator comes to understand the otherness that permeates human subjectivity. The moral failures of the subject are lost with the inability to say "I," transforming the text into a zone in which the new ethical task is to bear witness to the desire of the Other.

## George Kowalik, "That race war I been tellin' y'all about is here, I fear": Digging up the Past and Complicating the Present in Percival Everett's *The Trees*

In a 2002 chapter on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Kimberly Chabot Davis acknowledges Fukuyama and Jameson's postmodern "end of history" while underlining the imperative of, despite this end, retaining "an African American and modernist political commitment to the crucial importance of deep cultural memory, of keeping the past alive in order to construct a better future." Thirty-four years on from

*Beloved*, Percival Everett's *The Trees* demonstrates a continuation of "cultural memory" after the end of history by suggesting that African American literary narrative can productively reckon with a history of mistreatment by literally digging up the past and actively changing it, thus constructing a new and potentially better future.

*The Trees* is one of Everett's most explicit negotiations between reality and invention. This balance is clear from its premise: Jim Davis and Ed Morgan, two detectives from the "Mississippi Bureau of Investigation", investigate a series of murders connected by the strategic placement of Emmett Till's body at each crime scene. As my paper will argue, this negotiation between the historicisation of the real and the absurdity of the invented is specifically mediated by trauma. In *The Trees*, Till's body symbolises both the preservation of traumatic memory and the corrective promise that comes with history's afterlife. If we consider Till's body as a marker of this afterlife, Davis' suggestions of postmodern "political commitment" can be extended into the realm of post-postmodernism: a concept that, while problematic, is defined by a principle of continuation and a conversation between the past, present, and future.

### **Douglas Kneale, "[A]utobiographical in form but not in fact": Catachresis in Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women***

As a portrait of the author growing up in the 1940s and 50s in a fictional Canadian town, *Lives of Girls and Women* grounds its preoccupation with language in a convergence of rhetoric and character. In what Genette would call a "paratext," Munro's copyright page states the following: "This novel is autobiographical in form but not in fact. My family, neighbors and friends did not serve as models.- A.M." A curious disclaimer, it introduces, first, the question of genre – is *Lives* really a novel or (as many critics have contended) a collection of short stories linked by their narrator? – but it also directs us to an important aspect of literary language. The assertion of being "autobiographical in form" raises the expectation of first-person narration, while the caveat "but not in fact" signals a referential problem. I argue that Munro's statement is the tuning fork for a host of critical questions about language, character, and the intersection of fact and fiction. I shall show that what at first seems like a frivolous paratextual detail turns out to be one of the central concerns of *Lives of Girls and Women* – that is, the proper and improper use of language, especially as crystallized in the rhetorical figure of catachresis. In Munro's hands, catachresis functions as a form of deliberate rhetorical disobedience in the construction of a fictional autobiography whose ethos is grounded in not just the lives but the languages of girls and women.