

### Just The Facts?: Historians And Novelists Discuss The Relationship Between History And Fiction

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## Review

### JUST THE FACTS?

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Winter 2002

**Carnes, Mark C.** *Novel History: Historians and Novelists Confront America's Past (and Each Other)*. Simon & Schuster, \$26.00 ISBN 684857650

Just the Facts? Historians and novelists discuss the relationship between history and fiction

Very few phrases can make an historian flinch like "artistic license." Likewise, even a writer of the highest ability may occasionally balk under the strain of history's unyielding web of facts. It would appear that the battle line is drawn, and "all that is left is the staring." But it is not silence that marks the relationship between historian and novelist; rather, as Mark C. Carnes's *Novel History* shows, this delicate balance is one of discussion, discovery, and creativity focused on the question, "What should the link between history and fiction entail?"

Using Carnes's work as a stepping-stone, we have invited two historians and two novelists to give their opinion on the subject. Distinguished historian Herman Hattaway, honored novelist Josephine Humphreys, cutting-edge historian Louis Masur, and award-winning novelist David Madden, have graciously agreed to share their time and opinions with us. What follows is a fascinating exploration of the power of history in fiction, and the power of fiction in history.

-Laura Ng, Editor

Herman Hattaway

Josephine Humphreys

Louis P. Masur

David Madden

Many of the numerous contributors to this wonderful, intriguing, and captivating book assert that all novels are historical novels. Ah, but there are good historical novels and bad historical novels. True: there also is good history and bad history, but I suspect there is considerably more bad fiction.

Many people are going to read historical novels, whether we historians like it or not. That is why I chose to include selections of what I regarded as "good" novels in my admittedly idiosyncratic annotated bibliography in *Shades of Blue and Gray* (Harvest Books, ISBN 0156005905, \$16.00 softcover).

What really is egregious about bad fiction is for the author to put blatantly wrong data into the work. I offer as examples two popular movies based on historical fiction: *Shakespeare in Love* and *Elizabeth*. In the former, Queen Elizabeth is aged but still quite alive, and Gwyneth Paltrow's character cannot marry her lover, Shakespeare, because her father is sending her off to marry a tobacco plantation owner in Virginia. Hello? Elizabeth died in 1603 and Virginia was not founded until 1607. Meanwhile, nothing was said about the fact that Shakespeare was already married! In the latter movie, the young Elizabeth, contrary to her better judgment, sends a military expedition against forces loyal to Mary, Queen of Scots. The movie shows much carnage and implies that the venture was a horrible mistake for Elizabeth. But in fact the English were victorious in that campaign!

Both the good historical novelist and the good historian attempt to approach truth through probability. Both at times have to take interpolative leaps of faith. So the two do similar things, but they do it in starkly different ways. The novelist is free to embellish or create much additional material beyond that which is revealed in the evidential records—passages quite simply can just be made up out

of the writer's imagination. The historian is *not* supposed to do that. The historian posits conclusions based on probable reality as suggested by available facts.

### **Point/counterpoint in five parts**

*Novel History* has five parts: Biography, The West, Slavery, Religion and American Culture, and War. There are learned critical essays by historians, each assessing one notable historical novel. Then, where possible, the novelist presents a response.

One of the most intriguing among the many thought-provoking passages throughout the book is Joan D. Hendrick's observation that the year before Harriet Beecher Stowe completed *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Dutton, ISBN 0451526708, \$5.95 softcover), she helped her brother Charles write a fictionalized biography of Christ. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is an artful retelling of Christ's story through the character of Tom. Hence, in this particular tradition of the historical novel, religion is interlaced with nationalism, and the hero is freely given godlike qualities.

Eugene D. Genovese begins by pointing out that there is no profit in rehashing the endless assertions that William Styron in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Vintage Books, ISBN 0679736638, \$14.00 softcover) falsified history. Of course he did! But he has ennobled Nat Turner, giving him qualities that he *may* have possessed, although the historical records do not say. Genovese opines that Styron's passionate art did indeed lead him to the heart of historical truth.

Tom Wicker's essay on *Cold Mountain* (Vintage Books, ISBN 0375700757, \$14.00 softcover) is a gem. This book transcends its specific subject matter, the Civil War experiences of one particular man, and becomes a meditation on any war in any time—and what it does to the soldiers and their society. Charles Frazier thus offers material that can be equated with the works of Ernest Hemingway, Erich Maria Remarque, Tim O'Brien, and Tolstoy. Perhaps Frazier's keenest accomplishment is to convey a deep sense of how things were at the time about which he was writing; the reader gets to see and feel the moments. We are reassured that life goes on despite all sorts of unhappiness and tragedy, and there

is a kaleidoscopic matrix of wondrous co-realities.

-Herman Hattaway

*Herman Hattaway is a much-published historian of the Civil War. Recently he published, with LSU photographer A.J. Meek, From Gettysburg to Vicksburg: the First Five Battlefield Parks (2001). With Richard Beringer, he has Jefferson Davis: Confederate President pending publication in the spring with the Kansas University Press.*

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A taxi driver once asked me what kind of books I'd written. "Novels," I said. He nodded, then asked the tougher question: "Fiction novels or true novels?"

I thought of explaining that all novels are fiction but at the same time fiction is truth on a deeper level, etc. But I just said, "Fiction novels," because I was gearing up at that moment to write a true novel, after three fiction ones, and I was exhilarated by the difference. It was a strange feeling, a thrill almost embarrassing, to be closing in on Truth. The thrill was undiminished by the fact that I didn't know how to do it.

Mark Carnes's book would have been a big help to me. My novel was to be about a woman living through hard times in North Carolina during and after the Civil War. She was a Lumbee Indian, married to an outlaw. Her world was so far from mine, I would have to learn it from scratch. Problems would stump me every day. How much research was needed? Could I alter facts? How would I find the right sound for the narrative language? Who was I anyway, to tell what most historians had glossed over? And-most worrisome to me-was it okay for me as a white writer to speak in the voice of the Indian woman? Novel History could have saved me a lot of fretting.

It would have helped, for instance, to learn of John Updike's simple formula for allotting research time, while he was working on *Memories of the Ford Administration* (Ballantine Books, ISBN 0449912116, \$14.00, softcover). How

did he know when to quit researching and start writing? "When I thought I knew enough," Updike says.

As for the question of cultural expropriation, I decided that even if white writers weren't *supposed* to write about people of color, I had to. I simply couldn't help it; I was drawn to Rhoda Lowrie so strongly that I couldn't think of anything else. Only later did I realize that the pull I felt was the very essence of fiction, the writer's desperate need to walk in someone else's shoes. Now I'm happy to find out that Madison Bell's opinion-"that one ought make an effort to imagine the lives of others, no matter how different they may be from one's own"-is very close to the conclusion I reached. I would only change "ought" to "must."

I envy historians, because they know so much. It was scary to watch those who came forward in *Novel History*, graciously pointing out a certain number of errors before pouncing on the one that's just too big to forgive. I wonder whether I'm capable of telling a perfect truth, without a single error. An error is a wandering, and I wander. When I was told of the mistakes in *Nowhere Else on Earth*, I was embarrassed. How could I have gotten that date wrong? It seems I'm able to get a grasp of truth but I can't hold it tightly, the way the historian can. I sincerely wish I could do it. What I felt on the trail of truth wasn't just the thrill of the chase, but the hope I would round a corner and reach out, and *grab*, and *hold*.

I once heard a novelist say that where history leaves an empty space, the novelist may step in. I love that. On the other hand, I think it's also true that the novelist must then step out again, at least for a while. Writing a true novel is hard, and somehow emotionally wracking. I liked it more than anything I've ever done, but I don't know if I could do it again.

-Josephine Humphreys

*Josephine Humphreys won the 2000 Southern Book Critics Circle Award for her novel Nowhere Else on Earth (2000), a story of the Lumbee Indians of North Carolina at the close of the Civil War. She is a recipient of the Lyndhurst Prize*

*and a Guggenheim Fellowship.*

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Whenever I teach the Civil War and Reconstruction, I assign Michl Shaara's Pulitzer prize-winning *The Killer Angels* (Ballantine Books, ISBN 034540727X, \$12.00 softcover). Of the hundreds of Civil War novels published in the past fifty years, his is one of the most compelling, a favorite of professional historians who normally are leery of fictional accounts of the past. Shaara's novel works because it appeals to our emotions as well as our intellect. He makes the battle come alive by grounding it in the ideas and feelings of a wide cast of historical characters. And where he invents characters, such as an Irish soldier and a runaway slave, he remains true to the historical record as we know it. I once had a student who, after reading the book, took a bus from New York to Gettysburg to tour the battlefield. As far as I know, no work of nonfiction has ever had a similar effect on my students.

Shaara's book illustrates that the use of history in fiction is largely a non-issue. Most novelists use it well, and through dialogue, character, and plot, they help us get at the truth of history in ways that strictly factual accounts sometimes cannot. The place of history in fiction becomes an issue only when scholars decide to treat novelists as historians because fiction writers dare to use the past in their work. This is akin to viewing birds as beavers because both gather branches. The use of fiction by historians is an even less salient question than the use of history by novelists. To be sure, some historians have tried to incorporate fictional accounts into their writing, but the results have been less than successful.

The key issue that confronts historians is the literary quality of the nonfiction narratives that they write. If historical writing is a literary art, then historians need to work harder at being writers. Perhaps the only difference between the novelist and the historian is that the novelist invents facts, whereas the historian finds them. What each does with those facts is what distinguishes their work, not between fiction and nonfiction but between books that are tedious

as opposed to those that are stirring.

While working on his Civil War trilogy, Shelby Foote often quoted John Keats: "A fact is not a truth until you love it." Good writers, whether novelists or historians, must transform facts into truths. Novelists do this all the time, but historians, preoccupied with professional priorities, seem unwilling to devote as much energy to writing as to researching and analyzing. Foote, who wrote fiction before he wrote history, said he felt wonderful about all the little moments in his Civil War books precisely because he didn't have to make them up. "Making up a story is next to nothing," he reminded his friend Walker Percy. "Telling it is everything."

The best paragraph in all of Mark Carnes' *Novel History* arrives at the end, and it should come as no surprise that it is offered by a novelist. Tim O'Brien, who probes the legacy of the Vietnam War and the problem of narrating the past in *The Things They Carried* (Broadway Books, ISBN 0767902890, \$13.95 softcover), has this to say about stories: "A good story appeals not only to the intellect, but also to the stomach and the scalp and the tear ducts and the heart and the nape of the neck and the back of the throat, the whole human being." Until historians face the lack of artistry in most nonfiction, the novelists will continue to be the ones who get us out of our houses and pointed for the bus station.

-Louis P. Masur

*Louis P. Masur teaches history at the City College of New York and is the author of 1831: Year of Eclipse (2001).*

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Like the historian, the serious novelist begins with facts. But the historian must cleave to them, while the novelist draws upon the emotion-charged memories of individuals and of a culture at large, transforming private memories into public metaphors. The novelist goes further, into the private imagination,

shaping and transmitting truths that transcend facts alone to stimulate public enlightenment.

Most serious historical novelists, as opposed to commercial historical romance novelists, exalt the written record of facts to a status almost sacred, restraining the impulse to draw upon memory and imagination, with the aim of giving the reader the illusion that he or she is really there. Most closely aligned with the work of historians, such novels are necessary contributors to a kaleidoscopic perspective of history.

But there is another kind of historical novel that is unfortunately rare. In the realm of American Civil War novels, Evelyn Scott's *The Wave* (Louisiana State University Press, ISBN 0807120685, \$14.95 softcover), delineates the war in battle and on the home front and its immediate psychological effect upon over 80 well-defined characters in a broad range of places, relationships, and situations. The historical elements are authentic, but function mainly in the service of psychological insight.

William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (Vintage Books, ISBN 067973218, \$12.00 softcover) takes the reader through a complex experience of the effects of antebellum, war, and reconstruction upon several people, especially a young man, Quentin Compson, who is told the same story in conflicting versions by several people. They expect him to transmit the legacy of the Old South into the twentieth century; but Quentin is psychologically impotent. Facts are few, and the war itself is little more than alluded to. The effect upon the emotions, the imagination, and the intellect of descendants, and upon the reader willing to struggle with the novel's complexities, is profound and pervasive.

In Joseph Stanley Pennell's *The History of Rome Hanks, And Kindred Matters* (Permanent Press, ISBN 0933256329, \$22.00 hardcover), a young man named Lee actively seeks the facts among surviving relatives who fought on both sides, but imagination and emotion compete in their memories with the facts, and Lee's own emotions, imagination, and intellect transform everything he has read and listened to so profoundly that the legacy of the war pervades his very identity.

Even though the Civil War was thoroughly documented by its participants, such novelists as Scott, Faulkner, Pennell, and only a few others, know-and show-that facts alone are far from enough. They write out of an awareness of the fact that both Northerners and Southerners, civilian and military, entered the war ignorant of each other, that individuals and groups fought the war in ignorance of vital facts, and that in the national consciousness, the war is what memory and imagination make of the facts we know, facts that are too few and undependable, except as stimulants to the creation of myths and metaphors that light our way through successive epochs of our history.

I don't write historical novels; I write novels about the struggle of unique individuals in history with facts, memory, and imagination.

-David Madden

*David Madden, founding director of The United States Civil War Center, is author of Sharpshooter: A Novel of the Civil War (1996), and editor of Classics of Civil War Fiction (1991).*

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