A Symposium on Historical Fiction

Editor's Note: As is always true in the case of our symposia, these contributions were written simultaneously and independently in response to the assigned topic. Any overlaps, parallels, or violent disagreements are therefore purely serendipitous.

FOR MUCH of the twentieth century, serious novelists were seriously uninterested in writing historical fiction. There were exceptions, usually from literary outliers—*Ben Hur*, the Pharaonic novels of Mahfouz—but if you were André Gide or Elizabeth Bowen or Dashiell Hammett or Joseph Roth, I think it's fair to say that the last thing you wanted to write was *Gone with the Wind*. Roth's *Radetzky March* is the kind of apparent exception to the rule that proves it. It may wear the trappings of costume drama, but it makes clear (and takes a certain pleasure in) how sullied, threadbare, and silly those trappings are. In *Heart of Midlothian* (the locus classicus of the historical novel, a beautifully boring book), Sir Walter Scott staged the march of history as the march of one Scottish peasant woman across the length of Britain to demand justice from the English queen, a demand she makes not angrily but in the full confidence of an obedient subject that it will be met, as indeed it is. In Roth's book, the march of history—played out between the trajectories of two bullets, one missing and the other hitting its target, both entirely accidentally—has become a hurdy-gurdy tune. A kind of joke, although what gives Roth's novel its poise and pathos is his resolute refusal to entertain the thought that anything might have been any better: a refusal of historical thinking that is in its own way historical.

It's not hard to see why this aversion to the historical novel took root early in the last century. Novelists, whether confronted by the restless inanition of the late nineteenth-century empires, the convulsions and destruction of 1914–1945, or the slow shuddering wind-down of the Cold War, experienced the historical novel as a tired convention. (Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel*, makes withering fun of Scott.) History itself was not "on the horizon" or even "in the making" so much as falling from the sky and exploding on the ground.

And then things changed, so that nowadays historical novels are staples of publishers' catalogues all over the world. What happened and when? I can still remember feeling amazement when I heard in the early Eighties that Thomas Pynchon, in the long lull that followed the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow*, was working on something as inconceivably stodgy as a historical novel. What amazes me now is that it was not until well after the appearance of *Mason and Dixon* that I asked myself what, in fact, was *Gravity's Rainbow* if not a certain kind of historical novel. In any case, from the vantage of the twenty-first century, the change seems to have begun as early as the 1950s, and to have gathered speed increasingly in the long years of relative peace and prosperity (and stagnation and growing inequality) that the West would go on to enjoy after the Sixties. The turning point could be said to be the publication of *The Leopard* in 1958, after the death of Lampedusa, who had seen it rejected time after time by publishers—a book of great integrity and beauty that was also a great popular success. Later came *Ragtime* and *The Siege of Krishnapur* and *Possession* and *Regeneration* and *Libra* and *Beloved* and *American Pastoral* and *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, to restrict myself to the Anglosphere.

What to make of this change? To a backward glance, the return to the historical novel seems inevitable, as of course everything always does when one is looking back. Perhaps "unavoidable" is the better word. As the shocks of the early century subsided and receded in time, it seems inevitable there would be a need to revisit and commemorate them, and then to take stock of them, to put them in temporal perspective. Analogously, the surprising forms that novelists, like other artists, had resorted to in response to those shocks had grown established and familiar, even old hat, and in any case historical; there was no denying that. Writers in the latter part of the century existed not in a state of emergency but in a moment of continuity, and that continuum had to be acknowledged and given imaginative form. That the historical novel was neglected and spurned for so long would itself have made the genre an attractive challenge to venturesome writers.

But are the new historical novels really historical novels, and do they constitute a new way of imagining the historical? Hard to say, at this point, though I am skeptical. There is the formidably bold example of Hilary Mantel, who in *A Place of Greater Safety* and *Wolf Hall* really does pick up the old standard of the historical novel, depicting history as a stage on which men and women define and realize, or fail to realize, their destinies; reminding readers that "men make their own history but they do not make it as they please." At the same time, however, her almost pointillist deployment of point of view subjects the reader to the utter uncertainty of history as it is lived, imbuing her books with that sense of emergency that, for the twentieth-century novel, was the mark of real moral and aesthetic engagement, but also with a larger sense of consequence of the sort we find in Scott—though Mantel, of course, is, or would be, revolutionary where Scott was not.

Mostly, however, the new historical novel comes down to a form of sentimental communion with the dead (the victims of the past century above all); or an exercise, more or less sophisticated, in historicization; or simple pastiche. The pastiche may sometimes attain the freakish ferocity of, say, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, but the sentimentality and the sophistication both remind me of nothing so much as the pallid historical motifs that decorate euro bills. And it strikes me that these novels and their whole not-so-new genre exist rather like the euro: not so much a reckoning with history as an antidote to it. Designed to be all things to all people—a little bit of fact (for the demographic males) and a little bit of a fiction (for the demographic females)—the new historical novels are, in other words, a bit of a blur. And perhaps it is anxiety that blurs them, the anxious sense that they are a product of a time without historical vision or experience (or for that matter interest), a time of marking time in the apprehension of a moment when history will steal a march on us again. If that is the case, I can hardly blame them for that.

—Edwin Frank

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IT USED to remind me of those paint-by-numbers kits in which you do just that, paint by numbers. In this case, though, it was the novelist, not the painter, who would add color, albeit within pre-set outlines of what happened when; as my first-grade teacher routinely scolded me, you have to stay within the lines. When I considered historical fiction, then, if I considered it at all, I relegated it to the tired rear-guard of literature, a comfy place drenched in naturalistic detail, where a papier-mâché past is molded into neat, ready-made stories.

This, as I came to discover, is a pretty benighted opinion, one born in part from my own discomfiture when, as a child, I wondered if Johnny Tremain, Ichabod Crane, or Johnny Appleseed were real, and if Hawthorne actually found that scarlet letter in the Custom House attic. Discomfiture probably helped me dismiss historical fiction as a handful of stuffed individuals plunked down on a stage of dreary facts. Still, I continued to worry endlessly about those blurry lines separating the imaginary and the true.

"I view the historical novel as tainted by a fatal cheapness," Henry James roundly declares, although he's speaking in Colm Tóibín's wonderful *The Master*, a novel about the historical Henry James. Yes, novelists do conjure individuals once alive and occasions once lived: John Brown, Lili Elbe, Hemingway's wives, Lord Byron, Virginia Woolf, the Rosenbergs, and the whole of the Civil War, to say nothing of Hilary Mantel's dazzling evocation of Thomas Cromwell or Pat Barker's W. H. R. Rivers and the traumatized soldiers at Craiglockhart Hospital. Tolstoy brilliantly wrote of tales already told. And Hawthorne liked to pretend he did: generations of scholars (and not just me) have tried to track down that red letter.

To such authors, history is more contingent than assumed, even if their readers presume to know the outcome of events. Their protagonists are various, fallible, often deluded; their beings are wrung from the terrifying, difficult, and ultimately moral confrontation with the bewilderment of experience. So historical fiction is not literature's poor relation. In fact, all fiction is in some way historical, whether it's *Tristram Shandy* or *Moby Dick*, *Pale Fire* or *The Blue Flower*.

It was thus with an increased tolerance for uneasiness (which is to say novels better than *Johnny Tremain*) that I realized the appeal of so-called historical fiction lies in some inchoate combination of the fixed and the conditional, or the real and the imagined, all of which replicate the coordinates of our lives. For even history has its fictions, omissions, and uneasy half-truths: think Truman Capote, Gertrude Stein, William James, Malcolm X. Boundaries sometimes do blur.

Of course, popular entertainments also strap themselves to historic events or people. *The King's Speech*, *Summer of Sam*, *Queen Christina*, *Lincoln*, *The Big Short*, and an endless loop of television docudramas—recently including *The People vs. O. J. Simpson*, *Narcos*, and *Show Me A Hero*—present fictions "inspired" by real events and individuals. Yet we judge these less by their historical fidelity than by their use of language, character, and narrative curve. If we care only for historical accuracy, we miss the mark, as Mark Twain, who loved to pull our historical leg, well knew. "You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer;* but that ain't no matter," says Huck Finn at the opening of his tale. "That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. That is nothing. I ain't never seen anybody but lied one time or other."

There is actually something vaguely consoling about historical fiction. Whether its narratives are smooth as eighteenth-century silk or composed in patches of modern reverie, it tells us that people whom we recognize, admire, loathe, or adore were temporal creatures beset by time. Perhaps no handiwork of Callimachus, "Who handled marble as if it were bronze, / Made draperies that seemed to rise / When sea-wind swept the corner," still stands. But that it once did, and can be re-imagined, reminds us that we are not just subject to accident, chance, or tragedy. We can recreate what we've lost across and through time.

"It's the truth even if it didn't happen," says Ken Kesey's Chief Bromden in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Historical fiction can also tell the truth, even if it did happen.

—Brenda Wineapple

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HISTORICAL FICTION is a high-stakes game, risking falsification of event and character. However, when played by the best, it is an utterly compelling form, in which the heft and consequence of both elements intermingle and move beyond the apparently limiting confines of mere fact or personage. It requires, simultaneously, a seriousness of scrutiny and a generosity of imagination that offer high pleasures of

mind and heart. Crucial to this hybrid experience is a fundamental doubt regarding the possibility of categorizing the chaotic nature of collective human events, and an implicit questioning of the role of interpretation in history as well as fiction—all of which are inherent in the form itself. But more striking than any of these is the very particular art of creating from the lineaments of a historical personage, whose lifespan and "significance" have already been judged, the weight, depth, and irreplaceability that is the indelible sign of a great fictional character.

In 1812 in Russia, in the French Revolution, or in the turbulent reign of Henry the Eighth, character is, whether willingly or not, forged and proven through moments of heightened intensity, ferocious violence, and massive consequences. The major figures of these periods are giants by anyone's account, exerting heat across the ages—the eternally restless and still prophetic undead. Few historical figures have been more brooded over by professional scholars as well as popular historians than Robespierre and Danton, with the poly-erotic Camille Desmoulins and his wife, Lucille, providing important if secondary fuel for analysis. Into this cauldron of words, ideological controversies, and analogies of evil, Hilary Mantel, still a young writer at the time, intrepidly dove to create her 1992 novel *A Place of Greater Safety.*

The miracle effected here involves imagining life for a set of characters whose fates are apparently foreclosed. We know the time and conditions of their death, and drag along with us some mixture of ideas regarding the forces of event and personality that brought them to the grave. But for us to care about them, Mantel must breathe into them the kind of radical freedom of choice and being that makes us believe that their destinies are still open in every moment—until the end. In my case, when the four characters of Mantel's imagination died inside the frame of the novel, I was bereft in the way of an abandoned lover: viscerally, imaginatively, nearly obsessively. The overwhelming sense of personal bereavement is, I am sure, directly connected, in this book and others I adore, to the author's compulsion to love these characters rather than judge them.

Mantel has confessed, in the *LRB* and elsewhere, to being an ardent Robespierrist, even if for many he has been found hard to love. "You couldn't buy him," she observes. "You couldn't impress him. You couldn't frighten him... Whenever Robespierre was interrupted, something is missing still. Whenever he was silenced, we are listening to the silences. Whatever else he was, he was a man of conviction and a man of principle." Mantel points out that she is not alone in her attraction to Robespierre: "You can believe that, as Desmoulins reported, he could bring 800 men to their feet in a single moment. You could quibble over the head-count, but the power seemed to be real. It extended to the women of Paris, who attended the public galleries of the Jacobin Club." Elsewhere she lingers over descriptions of his "green eyes." Mantel's ardor, at once instinctual and intellectual, is of the kind that doesn't admit of any distinction between the two.

So if Robespierre is the compelling object of her affection, why does Mantel give her fraudulent, free-wheeling, infinitely corruptible Danton the most moving and last major scene in the book? Powerfully, here, she shows her capacity to live inside the skin of a character and to love him intensely, even while recognizing that he was an embezzler, a Tammany-Hall-style party boss, a conscienceless womanizer. Mantel sets up our bereavement, and her own, as she follows Danton, Camille Desmoulins, and Herault from their three-day mock trial to the very foot of the guillotine. But having brought us to this fatal place, she seems at first to distrust herself. Though we feel sure that she has already made the decision long ago (and made it correctly), she poses an ever-looming question of historical fiction: How much can be made up without distorting truth? How must the imaginative life of facts be rendered? "There is a point," she says, "beyond which—convention and imagination dictate—we cannot go; perhaps it's here, when the carts decant on to the scaffold their freight, now living and breathing flesh, soon to be dead meat."

Yet she finds she can't let it go, can't refrain from what all of us have in our own poor capacity tried to do: to imagine ourselves mounting the scaffold. Too deep in to turn back (for either herself or Danton), she immediately re-enters Danton's imagination and body, watching first Herault, then Desmoulins, undergo the fatal transformation. She imagines Danton looking away briefly, just "for ten seconds," as Camille kneels before the executioner. "After that he watches everything, each bright efflorescence of life's blood. He watches each death, until he is tutored in his own." When his moment is ripe, the compellingly ugly Danton utters the words for which he is most famous. He calls to the executioner:

"Hey, Sanson?"
"Citizen Danton?"
"Show my head to the people. It's worth the trouble."

Mantel loves him with all her heart, as the crowd must have, and as I do. Her "efflorescence of life's blood" has already fixed him imaginatively, forever.

—Katharine Michaels

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"THE PAST is a foreign country: they do things differently there." That's L. P. Hartley, and that's exactly how I feel when a work of historical fiction most delights or terrifies me. The sensation of foreignness I'm talking about is the climax of an invisible seduction. As you read, you convince yourself that you're on familiar, or at least comprehensible, ground. We're all people, after all: you, me, the author, the characters occupying their near or remote past. Our common humanity must count for something—for everything! At least, it *should.*

Yet we might still discover something unbridgeable. Something we've forgotten, perhaps. Something that we must now remember.

When I first read one of my favorite novels, Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower*, I thought I was discovering what Romanticism had actually felt like as it happened: part fever, part absurdity. Fitzgerald creates a fictional world in which inspiration and "the great dingy snowfalls" of an annual washday co-exist, and seem to act upon you with equal force. *The Blue Flower* tells the story of Fritz von Hardenberg (later the poet Novalis) and his child-fiancée Sophie von Kühn, but its world includes many others, too. One evening Fritz reads aloud a story he's just written to a woman named Karoline. (She loves Fritz, though he never notices.) In Fritz's story, a young man lies in bed, remembering "the stranger and his stories." The young man reflects, "I have no craving to be rich, but I long to see the blue flower. It lies incessantly at my heart, and I can imagine and think about nothing else."

"What is the meaning of the blue flower?" Fritz quizzes Karoline.

She answers that "it cannot be poetry, he knows what that is already. It can't be happiness, he wouldn't need a stranger to tell him what that is."

After speaking, poor Karoline is "chilled with anxiety. She would rather cut off one of her hands than disappoint him."

I didn't fully comprehend Fritz's fragment of story, either. I understood its mystery, though; I understood Karoline's predicament. I even understood the way the story might have blown into Fritz's mind and out onto his pages like some divine wind, aromatic yet stinging. Karoline's answer felt as if it belonged to me, as did Fritz's calm reaction: "*Liebe Justen*, it doesn't matter." As did Karoline's subsequent misery.

I didn't realize until the very end of the book that there was, in fact, something I'd failed to grasp. My failure shrouded me, like the "piece of fine muslin" placed over Sophie's face during surgery. Somehow, Fitzgerald had coaxed me into believing that everyone in *The Blue Flower* would go on living. They were alive, as I was; most of them felt more alive to me than I did. That was why I loved them. But almost all of them were about to die of consumption in the book's sparse Afterword. They were about to die *young*.

"There now, you cannot see me now, can you?" Sophie's doctor asks, from the other side of the muslin.

"I can see something glittering," Sophie answers.

What was I doing, imagining my way into such a weird readerly knot? How had I convinced myself that a bunch of eminently Googleable consumptives would not die during their own deadly, consumptive time? I hadn't realized that by going back in time to them, I was also trying to bring them forward in time, to me.

I was reminded of my first reading of *The Blue Flower* in the dark days after the presidential election, when I picked up Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*. I wanted its polyphony: a queer Frenchwoman's 1951 imagining of the man who was emperor of Rome from 117 to 138, translated into English by her American lover. For his initiation into the cult of Mithra, Hadrian lay under a "latticed floor" and received "the bloody aspersion" of a sacrificial bull. Afterward, he explained,

> Each of us believed that he was escaping from the narrow limits of his human state, feeling himself to be at the same time himself and his own adversary, at one with the god who seems to be both the animal victim and the human slayer... Victory and defeat were inextricably mixed like rays of the same sun. These Dacian footsoldiers whom I crushed under my horse's hoofs, those Sarmatian cavalrymen overthrown in the close combat of later years when our rearing horses tore at each other's chests, were all struck down the more easily if I identified myself with them. Had my body been abandoned on the battlefield, stripped of its attire, it would not have differed greatly from theirs. The shock of the final sword thrust would have been the same.

This was not quite the polyphony I was expecting. Transgressive, yes. But not comforting.

I remembered that while the desire to enter into another consciousness might sometimes feel like compassion, it is not. It is never gentle. If I once looked to historical fiction for escape, what I've found in it are losses of self. I can hope that these losses of self might prove useful: perhaps they'll lead me to imagine my own time spooling before me with novel constraint, and fresh courage. But if they do thrust me deeper into myself, they remain alien country. The past might sometimes feel like home, but it's no place for homecoming.

—Mimi Chubb

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THE HISTORICAL novel is a slippery category—a catch-all that embraces an infinity of works of fiction that have nothing in common except being set entirely, or partly, in the past. Which is most works of fiction. A category that can encompass, say, *Gone with the Wind, The Scarlet Letter, The Memoirs of Hadrian, Henry Esmond, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, All Quiet on the Western Front, Forever Amber,* and *From Here to Eternity* is leaking at every seam. *From Here to Eternity*? Why not? Published in 1951, its subject is the attack on Pearl Harbor, a historical event that took place only ten years earlier yet is as isolated from the time of its telling as is the plot of that granddaddy of historical fiction, Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814), whose subtitle—insisted upon throughout the book—is *'Tis Sixty Years Since*. And then there's Proust's incomparable work, aptly called *In Search of Lost Time*: a search that's at the heart of every kind of historical fiction, from *War and Peace*'s re-imagining of the Napoleonic epoch to Georgette Heyer's Regency romances.

One strain of historical fiction has had as its basic impulse the founding, or strengthening, of the national myth. Scott, as has often been remarked, essentially *invented* Scotland. James Fenimore Cooper, following in his footsteps, created the American frontier. Benito Peréz Galdós, Spain's greatest novelist after Cervantes, wrote forty-six tremendously popular "national episodes" in addition to his thirty-one novels of contemporary life, with the professed goal of giving nineteenth-century Spain a firm national identity. *Gone with the Wind* served to conjure up a palatable ante-bellum and post-bellum South.

But constructing a past is just one thing historical fiction can do. Understanding the past is a different matter; it's the difference between *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Scarlet Letter*. (Of course, there's also the difference in talent between Cooper and Hawthorne.) The distinction holds throughout our entire literary history. The *true* first novel is the *Iliad*, even though it's called an epic, and is told in poetry. Epics (Homer's, the *Aeneid*, the Old Testament) are foundation myths—they imagine a past. Whereas the Greek tragedies are in essence fictional efforts to interpret and understand that past.

Historical novels set in a given period can accomplish very different things while translating the past to the present. Consider the uses made of ancient Egypt by three such wildly different novelists as Thomas Mann, Norman Mailer, and Mika Waltari. In *Joseph in Egypt* Mann re-imagines Egypt in the service of his monumental saga of Biblical Israel, *Joseph and His Brothers*, written while he was in exile—as Joseph himself was. Mailer's astounding (and unreadable) *Ancient Evenings* is an apocalyptic metaphor for his rampant personal cosmography. (Egypt should have sued.) *The Egyptian*, by the Finnish Mika Waltari, is a purely pop, if well-researched, reconstruction of the era of the religiously unconventional Pharaoh Akhenaten, complete with Queen Nefertiti and the young King Tut. It was America's top-selling novel of 1949. (The cast of the inevitable movie included Jean Simmons, Peter Ustinov, Victor Mature, and producer Darryl Zanuck's "personal discovery," Bella Darvi.) And let's not forget that although the Howard Hawks movie *Land of the Pharaohs* (Joan Collins as the scheming Queen) wasn't based on a novel, one of its three screenwriters was William Faulkner.

The Egyptian combines various crucial features of many successful "historicals." It's spectacular. It's action-packed. It's sexy and/or romantic. And it's religious. As far back as 1834 and Bulwer-Lytton's immensely influential *The Last Days of Pompeii*, those elements have prevailed again and again—though how do you top Christian martyrs versus pagans, accompanied by gladiatorial slaughter and the great eruption of Vesuvius? You don't top them, you recycle them. Among the greatest bestsellers of all time: *Quo Vadis, Ben-Hur, The Robe* (the most successful novel of mid-century America)—all paint-by-number "Biblicals," and all turgid beyond bearing. And Cecil B. DeMille gave us *The Ten Commandments*—twice.

The one phenomenally best-selling historical novel to steer clear of religion was the infamous *Forever Amber*, which became a byword for raciness in the Forties, famously "banned in Boston." I remember reading it at the appropriate impressionable age of fourteen and utterly failing to locate the sexy, or even racy, bits, while drowning in regurgitated research about Restoration England. Beautiful Kathleen Winsor, its author—she went on to marry Artie Shaw, among others—protested that there *were* no sexy bits: "I wrote only two sexy passages and my publishers took both of them out. They put in ellipses instead." Even so, *Forever Amber* went on to sell three million copies. For this eager teenager, *The Three Musketeers*, featuring the beautiful, wicked Milady, was infinitely sexier, but then Dumas was one of the great masters of the genre. And French.

And so it goes. Novels set in the past are as popular in our day as they ever were, only we don't call them "historicals" any more. Is *Beloved* a historical novel? A literary novel? A Toni Morrison novel? How about *The Underground Railroad*? Or Robert Harris's *An Officer and a Spy*, which reimagines the Dreyfus Affair by way of an invented narrative by Major Picquart? And to complicate the issue still further, don't almost *all* fictional plots begin in a past and hold our interest through their trajectory to a supposed present?

The more you consider the vast literature of the novel, the more bewildering the question becomes. Of Dickens's fifteen novels, two are very specifically historical: *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Barnaby Rudge* (his weakest book by far). But *The Pickwick Papers*, published in 1836 and vaguely set a decade earlier, is hardly a book purporting to reconstruct or interpret real events; it's a nostalgic and comic evocation of a vanished pre-railroad, semi-Edenic world. Yes, it takes place in the past, but does that make it a "historical"? *Pickwick*???

—Robert Gottlieb

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ALONGSIDE THE unfamiliar scent in the air of teargas and eucalyptus, one of the things that particularly startled me in 1969, the year I arrived in Berkeley as a twenty-five-year-old assistant professor, was the enormously heavy drinking of my senior colleagues in the English Department. It was a time in which many of these colleagues, whether from motives of pure generosity toward the young or a sly desire to scout out which among the large cohort of untenured faculty might be worth keeping, invited the new arrivals to an endless round of dinner parties, generally held in implausibly beautiful, redwood-clad houses in the hills.

I grew up in a household entirely innocent of wine, apart from the treacly Robitussin-like drink consumed for liturgical purposes at the Passover Seder. On rare occasions, in the company of their friends, my parents would sip small glasses of rye whiskey, but always consumed with a peculiar air of caution, as if they were handling TNT. At university I managed to get drunk once or twice, but I hated the experience—the muddled thinking, the spinning room, the nausea—and, having no desire to repeat it, I learned when to stop after a cocktail or a few glasses of wine. Hence I was aston-

ished to find myself in the company of highly distinguished academics who seemed already sodden when we arrived for dinner and who became progressively more sloshed as the evening wore on. Notable among these was the celebrated critic and writer Mark Schorer, whose short stories I had avidly read in *The New Yorker* and who somehow managed to convey that his inebriation was stylish, in the manner of William Powell in *The Thin Man*, or even that it was a literary achievement. It wasn't, I observed, that alcohol sparked in him any great flights of poetic inspiration, but rather that it seemed to keep at bay the melancholy that has always haunted creative minds.

By far the most memorable of the tipplers was Thomas Flanagan. The endless tumblers of Irish whiskey that he downed only sharpened his wit, even as they slurred his speech. His flashes of merriment, as Hamlet says of Yorick, would set the table on a roar. His humor was so apt that on several occasions I thought he must be faking intoxication, keeping his head by secretly pouring the booze in a flowerpot. But I sat next to him once at a dinner table when he followed a particularly inspired witticism by slipping off his chair and onto the floor, and I can testify that the collapse was not feigned.

In Flanagan's drunkenness, there seemed to be no undertone of melancholy. That *did* not prevent me from inventing a hidden sorrow for him. Why, I asked myself, had this supremely intelligent and learned man accomplished so little? A full professor at Berkeley, he had but a single, slim book to his name, published back in 1959, and that a warmed-over version of his doctoral dissertation. I imagined that he was struggling to write a successor to *The Irish Novelists: 1800–1850*, but that he was blocked. I did not think that drink was keeping him from writing literary criticism, but rather that it somehow transmuted whatever must be inhibiting his writing into his reckless, mad—and, sadly, evanescent—wit.

But as it turned out, Flanagan did have a secret work gestating within him. In 1979 he surprised all of his friends by publishing a brilliant historical novel, *The Year of the French*. An enormous critical and popular success, and deservedly so, it seemed at the time to have come from nowhere, though he must have been working on it quietly after the endless meetings and protests and marches that occupied so many hours of our days during the 1970s, or at nights after I watched his wonderful wife Jean help him stumble to the car and drive him home. (It was a mercy for all of us, we thought, that he had never learned to drive.)

In Flanagan's own account, the inspiration for the novel came to him in a single flash. He was sitting in his office in Wheeler Hall, waiting for Jean to pick him up at the end of the day, when he had a vision. The vision was of a man, a poet, walking down a road in Ireland. It was simple and spare, but it was enough: out of it, Flanagan spun a cunningly plotted, richly detailed, and moving story of Ireland's failed uprising against the British in 1798. The novel—and two other immense historical novels that he published in its wake—drew upon massive scholarly erudition amassed over decades, but that erudition would never have issued into fiction without the image that suddenly, uninvited, came into Flanagan's head. I do not know if it would have come to him anyway, without the course of heavy drinking. Had he been drinking already on that particular afternoon? I doubt it, or rather, if he had, I imagine it was only enough to make him lightheaded. "MacCarthy was light-headed that night when he set out from Judy Conlon's cabin in the Acres of Killala," the novel begins. "Not drunk at all, but light-headed."

—Stephen Greenblatt

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WHAT POSSESSED me? For once I know the answer: I happened onto *Children of the Sun*, a book by Gordon Kennedy about the German proto-hippies who came to southern California around the turn of the twentieth century. There were photographs of people sitting in the lotus position wearing Indian tunics and hair down to here, or farming with blissed-out smiles and no clothes at all. They looked for all the world like the dropout class of 1966, but they were in Los Angeles, Ojai, and the Mojave Desert in the 1910s.

In Germany they were called *Naturmenschen*, in California "nature boys." They were running away from war, money, cities, and the internet of their time, the telephone, telegraph, and movies. They came bearing mysticism, health food, and German Expressionist art that echoed through the Beats, hippies, Fluxus, folk-rock, and Burning Man.

I learned more from Martin Green's books (*Prophets of a New Age*, *Mountain of Truth*, another *Children of the Sun*). I remembered meeting Gypsy Boots, who ran around L.A. in bare feet and long hair in the Fifties, swinging onto the set of the Steve Allen show on a vine and making Steve drink carrot juice. I'd read about eden ahbez, whose song "Nature Boy," the Nat King Cole hit, was a group portrait of Gypsy, eden, and their friends, living off the land in Tahquitz Canyon outside Palm Springs.

A fictional story started knocking. Soon I was working on a historical novel, something I'd never thought of doing and for which I had a distinct handicap, a bias toward post–World War II culture. The earlier past had always felt used up and encumbering to me, but now I lost myself in August Sanders' photos, Walter Benjamin's memoirs, and Arcadia Publishing photo albums of California and New York in that period, bittersweet with lost time. Those street-corner boys in knee pants, with blurred uncertain expressions or Bowery Boys smirks, had grown up, gotten married, aged, and died, but not yet, not in those pictures.

I spent hours in libraries reading about Kurt Schwitters, Ludwig Meidner, and Jakob van Hoddis. If one of my characters did something as simple as take a photograph, I had an excuse to pore over a downloaded 1918 issue of the beautiful hobbyist magazine *Kodakery*.

Eventually, of course, you have to get down to work, which includes cutting everything that says "Look! Research!" from the manuscript. But what a comfortable world to live in on the way, imagining yourself onto those wider, quieter streets with the trolley tracks, the plaster mannequins, and the *Police Gazette*. That pleasure took me through ten drafts.

Then the 2016 presidential election happened, like a beating in an alley we were sure had been redeveloped for fair housing sometime in the Carter years.

When I got back to work I saw some lines in my manuscript take on an additional edge. The question wasn't whether to let the historical parallels into the book. They were already there. My German characters start out living under dim, murderous Wilhelm II, and feeling like their countrymen's meanness has progressed from a shortcoming to a crisis. Their California idyll of art and the erotic is overturned by World War I, the East St. Louis race riots, and the lynching of Germans in American towns. I had a character reading W. E. B. Du Bois, considering a return to Germany, and wondering what human society would look like just a year from his present day.

By internet and telephone, an anecdotal sample filtered in to me: a lot of writers were going through the same thing, enough to make me laugh for one of the few times that month. But it's natural to look at your work in progress and ask if it encompasses a world where what's happening can happen. If not, it isn't real enough. That's always a worry, but now, like so many other things, it seemed like an emergency. Writing stories might be a small enough gesture against our troubles, but consider that the talent pool out there could produce an *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or a *1984* before this is over. Failing that, I'd say a dozen or so *MacBird*s are in the bank.

There are a couple of special attractions to historical fiction: the differences from our own time and the similarities to it. All through the election campaign, people looked for historical likenesses as a way to make sense of what was happening. These days, at three A.M. especially, the differences go up in value.

I'm writing this early in the government transition (the press is only two-thirds inured) and midway through my eleventh draft. The words aren't changing so much, but Wilhelm and East St. Louis hover closer to them. Eleven drafts is a long time to spend with anyone, even one's dear creations. What possesses me now? All the above and our mutual pressing subject, a country still young but old enough to be haunted.

—Charlie Haas