

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ANALYSIS OF THE VALUE OF HISTORICAL FICTION

MEGHAN O'LEARY
SPRING 2017

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in English
with honors in English

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Gregg Rogers
Professor of English
Thesis Supervisor

Marcy North
Professor of English
Honors Adviser

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

ABSTRACT

As a genre, historical fiction has not been perceived to occupy an esteemed place in literature. Consideration by historians, publishers, teachers, and literary critics ranges wildly from enthusiasm to derision. The convergences and divergences of perspectives on the value of historical fiction indicate that criticism often stems from assumptions based on subject matter and historical accuracy, which hold this genre to certain standards that do not exist for other types of novels. This thesis explores the differences in the perception of historical fiction in publishing, critical circles, and academia, in an effort to determine the distribution of opinions on the genre. The future of the genre affects all three areas, since the reception of historical fiction novels impacts the financial success of the publishing industry, the critical reception of the novels indicates its acceptance as a valid literary genre, and its inclusion in academia and education affects teaching practices. A general trend toward the continued acceptance of the value of historical fiction in these disciplines is emerging and indicates a positive future for the controversial genre.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1 Historical Fiction's Place in Publishing.....	6
Chapter 2 Historical Fiction's Place in Critical Circles.....	22
Chapter 3 Historical Fiction and Academia.....	38
Chapter 4 Conclusion.....	47
Works Cited	55

Introduction

Genre plays a large part in the reception of a novel, both in the publishing market and in academic criticism. Historical fiction is the subject of much debate in both areas. There is a disparity between academic and popular perceptions of historical fiction, and this paper will attempt to investigate where why, and if they converge. The information presented here will attempt to explore the place and value of historical fiction in the marketplace and academic discourse. Although consistently popular in the mass market, historical fiction is often held to a higher standard than other genres, because of its ambivalent juncture between fiction and historical fact. Historical fiction is a vast genre, with a world's worth of events and figures to represent. Rather than exploring all of historical fiction in the hypothetical, novels about Elizabeth I, a popular historical figure in this genre, will often be used as an example.

Historical Fiction Defined

First one must define what is meant by "historical fiction." The genre, like any, is a spectrum with fluid definitions that can dip into science fiction, romance, and novels simply set in the past with no particular connection or meaning associated with that time period. Myths and folklore, which would conceivably be the oldest tales set in the past, will not qualify as historical fiction as described here. Jonathan Nield, an early twentieth century scholar and defender of historical fiction, gives the following definition: "A Novel is rendered Historical by the introduction of dates, personages, or events, to which identification can be readily given"

(Nield). Limiting our scope to novels set firmly in a particular past in order to incorporate certain events or figures allows a more focused look at the genre. Sarah Johnson, creator of the historical fiction-centered blog, “Reading the Past,” is also the Book Review Editor for the Historical Novel Society. She acknowledges the importance of having a working definition to discuss this genre juxtaposed with the difficulty of pinning this definition down. Johnson theorizes, “...given that ALL novels are set in SOME time period, should we use the broadest definition possible, saying something like, ‘All novels are historical, but some are more historical than others?’ My journal, the *Historical Novels Review*, has a working definition: ‘historical novel’ is a novel which is set fifty or more years in the past, and one in which the author is writing from research rather than personal experience” (Johnson).

These definitions come from academic figures who view historical fiction as an area of criticism and study, but how does one define historical fiction in terms of publishing? One can look at its representation by the consumers: readers. Goodreads is the world’s largest website for readers and book recommendations, with millions of reviews, billions of books to peruse, and over 55 million members. This popular website platform combines blogging, reviewing, and book recommendations with users’ own virtual shelf of books that have the following options assigned to books: read, currently reading, or want to read. This allows readers to share thoughts on specific books and reading in general. Many decades after Nield, Goodreads gives a similar definition of historical fiction as “a story set in the past, often during a significant time period. In historical fiction, the time period is an important part of the setting and often of the story itself.” It goes on later with the caveat that authors can take liberties with “presentation and subject matter, so long as it does not deviate in significant ways from established history...events occurring in historical fiction must adhere to the laws of physics,” meaning that the magical or

fantastic will not be represented as we approach historical fiction here (“Historical Fiction”).

Historical fiction as it is discussed here will be defined in this way for the purposes of this thesis.

Value Defined

Now that we know how to interpret historical fiction, how does one define whether or not it has value? Most simply, value in an academic sense will refer to generally positive or negative views of the genre. While there will be a spectrum here as well, critics generally take a stance of either approval or disapproval of historical fiction novels in its consideration as literature and its usefulness in education. Value in publishing terms takes on a more traditional, economic meaning; value in the marketplace refers to its ability to sell well and/or consistently. Both the quantity and profit of historical fiction novels in the publishing industry will contribute to its value, stemming from the consumers’ (readers) demand.

Another question of value is unique to this genre: historical accuracy and its importance in determining the legitimacy of a work. One must seriously question if historical inaccuracy devalues a novel, and what amount of inaccuracy must exist in order to disqualify it from academic discourse. While historical inaccuracy may initially sound like a death knell for the value of a novel, one must examine the accuracy of historical reporting itself, and compare factual information with the point the novel is attempting to convey. Brent Peterson, German literary critic and professor, remarks that “The line between fact and fancy runs straight and uninterrupted until it hits historical fiction; at least the boundary seems clear before it bumps into this curious mixture of history and fiction that seems simultaneously true and false” (Peterson). The combination of history and fiction is complicated by historical fiction, which points out the fluid nature of the past that academics find so frustrating. Critics can be quick to point to

speculation on an authors' part as an instant censure of a historical fiction novel, as if the past has clear black and white facts that authors either choose to include or lie about. Yet this dichotomy does not exist in history. Hilary Mantel, historical fiction author who won the 2009 Booker Prize for her novel about the court of Henry VIII, *Wolf Hall*, has some thoughts on this subject. She states that contrary to some critics' expectations, the past "is not dead ground, and to traverse it is not a sterile exercise. History is always changing behind us, and the past changes a little every time we retell it. The most scrupulous historian is an unreliable narrator; he brings to the enterprise the biases of his training and the vagaries of his personal temperament... he must make the old new" in order to make his own career (Mantel). Historians seem to have the authority to connect the dots of the past with as little or as much information as authors, yet authors can be heavily criticized within literary circles for doing so. The intermingling of history and fiction seems to cause discomfort for the very fact that its perfect ratio is impossible to pin down in various areas of study.

Genre mixing is actually essential to the modern novel, and the more one argues for historical accuracy and against incorporation of speculative fantasy, the closer an author would get to simple nonfiction, which is not the goal. Nonfiction appeals to a very specific set of readers, readers who know they like this genre and as such, consistently read it. Historical fiction has more of a chance of appealing to trade fiction readers, readers who might usually read fantasy, or romance, or whatever is in the bestseller section. Malcolm Jack, a journalist for the online newspaper *The Independent*, points out, "Dan Brown's *Lost Symbol* dominated the fiction chart in the past year and all of the novels shortlisted for the Man Booker prize in 2009 were set against historical backdrops, with the winner – Hilary Mantel's Tudor England-based *Wolf Hall* – proving the most popular Booker prize winner of all time" (Jack). The researcher is pointing

out the connection between interest in the past and bestselling books; the incorporation of history into fiction boosts interest in both. With this endorsement, one may assume that the genre would be universally lauded, but critiques of historical fiction erupt from both sides: history and literary fiction.

Mass Media and Academia

There is an inherent contrast between value placed on historical fiction by academia and by publishers (and by extension, their readers). What is popular is not always, and a matter of fact is sometimes almost automatically, criticized heavily by academics. One easily recognizes this fallacy, that anything consumable by the masses cannot hold a more highbrow value. Is there a dichotomy between trade fiction readers' interests and legitimate literature? Precious "Literature with a capital L," the novels that are treasured by critics and quoted by professors at lecterns, does not always overlap with the bestselling fiction list. Is historical fiction a genre that can or does transcend this? In his 1915 book, Stephen J. Brown references Sir Leslie Stephen, one of the first serious critics of the novel who wrote in the 1870s. Stephen calls the genre "'pure cram or pure fiction' ...and with that dismissed it altogether. 'The novel called historical is merely fictitious history'" (qtd. in Brown). Since then, debate has raged on the issue of historical fiction's place in academic discourse. Changing critical perceptions about the genre may indicate an increasing academic respect for the genre that has gained such popularity with trade fiction readers. Exploring these convergences and divergences between historical fiction and academia allow us to determine the strength of its value in both arenas.

Chapter 1

Historical Fiction's Place in Publishing

The publishing industry is one that is constantly struggling against rumors of impending failure or irrelevance. Questions about electronic books, the loss of print books and literature altogether, plague this business. Yet readers, the consumers in this situation, seem to constantly push back against these pessimistic expectations. Nielsen Bookscan reported that 571 million print books were sold in 2015, a total of 17 million more than 2014 (Kellogg). With the advent of the Internet and online content, books still sell and the market rises and falls like any other. In order to keep the market profitable, publishers must be constantly aware of their consumers' capricious wants and needs as they choose which kinds of books to buy, recommend, or ignore.

Where does historical fiction lie in this fluctuating landscape?

Historical fiction has existed for as long as people could write about the distant past (generally and variably defined as more than 50 years before publication) and has managed to stubbornly stick around as a favorite of readers. In 2014, an infographic (produced by the website Ebook Friendly, a website with 150 thousand users who communicate via blog posts about reading) outlining the sales of the most popular book genres throughout time estimates historical fiction to make up 80 million of the 1.6 billion formally published adult books (Kowalczyk). Quick searches on Amazon, the biggest online bookseller by far, reveal immense interest in both classical and modern historical fiction, via 415,000 options for "historical fiction" in the Books category. In addition to figures and sales available from booksellers,

Goodreads represents an enormous wealth of information regarding the preferences and opinions of readers worldwide. If one assumes that the users and contributors to Goodreads represent a generally inclusive sample of readers, their interest in historical fiction is immense and their parameters particular. A user-generated definition of historical fiction that the site employs notes the importance of attention to details that ensure the story fits into its setting. Readers on the site expect and accept “fictional characters, well-known historical figures or a mixture of the two,” immediately putting these novels in the realm of fiction, not just history. Often in this genre, “famous events appear from points of view not recorded in history, showing historical figures dealing with actual events while depicting them in a way that is not recorded in history. Other times, the historical event or time period complements a story's narrative, forming a framework and background for the characters' lives” (“Historical Fiction”). One can assume that this definition forms the basis for what publishers will choose to produce, in order to satisfy their customers.

With any genre of fiction or nonfiction, there is no standardization of what publishers look for in a manuscript. Not only is there variance among genre and age groups, there are differences in the parameters of publishing companies as well as each individual person who looks at a book manuscript or even concept. While surveying all of the people involved in the publishing process at every publishing house is impossible, Jane Johnson tries to shed some light on the mysterious question of what a publisher looks for in a historical fiction book. Johnson is the author of novels set in 17th century Morocco, and fantasy adventure novels for younger readers, and she is also a Director of Fiction Publishing with HarperCollins UK. As someone who has seen the publication of historical novels from both sides of the process, Johnson is uniquely qualified to talk about publishing expectations for books in this genre. She naturally

starts off by talking about the necessarily different process for every editor, reflective of the subjective nature of reading itself, but goes on to provide some general parameters of what editors look for in historical fiction. She lists the most important quality as a lively voice that is interesting and sticks with a reader, followed by a good story that is different from books that are currently in the market: she warns against dutifully following the market, as simply duplicating trends is both uninteresting and implausible in an industry that could take a year to publish a book in a fleeting subgenre that is popular for a short time. It is only in her last point that Johnson comes to the question of historical accuracy, which is significant in and of itself that this was not one of her first few recommendations. Her final piece of wisdom centers on an interesting cast of characters:

to give a proper sense of the period, make sure you cover the ground and understand a lot more about each of them than you tell the reader... They must stand out from one another in the way they behave and speak. And please don't lard your text with prithees and mayhaps or other silly, frilly fake-historical vocabulary. You want modern readers to connect with your characters: but there's a fine line to walk between authenticity and anachronism (Johnson).

With any work of fiction, it is generally understood that readers will forgive a lot for an interesting story or intriguing character. The conventions of good fiction should not be lost in the quest for undeniable historical accuracy. Not only would this be practically impossible to achieve, but meticulous historical research and close reflection of the historical record will still not produce a successful novel if it has a distasteful voice, a boring or tired story, and flat characters. One must not lose *fiction* elements in the pursuit of the *history* of historical fiction.

The Question of Genre and Duality

Historical fiction as a genre sometimes exists in a liminal state among romance, fantasy, thrillers and mysteries. While this makes it complicated to categorize, it also adds to its popularity with readers. Genre mixing is actually essential to the success of the modern novel, and the more one argues about historical accuracy and against incorporation of speculative narrative, the closer one gets to simply nonfiction, which is not the goal. Nonfiction appeals to a very specific set of readers, readers who know they like this genre and as such, consistently read it. Historical fiction has more of a chance of appealing to trade fiction readers, readers who might usually read fantasy, or romance, or whatever is in the bestsellers section. Historical fiction and nonfiction may seem like two sides of the same coin, but they can diverge sharply where historical accuracy is concerned.

This is one of the primary industry criticisms of the genre: how important is historical accuracy, and who is in charge of it? In this time of copyeditors and fact checkers, no amount of so-called truth seems to be enough, yet one must remember that half of this genre resides in its second word: fiction. In 1922, Michael Williams theorizes that it is a “necessary employment for the properly qualified experts to disengage the facts from the fantasies –but such pundits should not complain if few besides themselves turn zestfully to feed human hearts that long for the quickening things of life upon cold slabs of meticulously certified records” (361). Readers of trade fiction look for narrative and excitement in the books they spontaneously pick up off shelves, and a list of undoubtedly vetted facts and statistics would resemble a textbook more than a novel. Historical fact can construct what Williams calls the “bony structure” (360) of a book, but the life breathed into it by its novelist should appeal to the reader more than the historian if a publisher wants it to sell. Readers expect a certain amount of truth-stretching in the genre as

well—it could not sell to them otherwise. The Goodreads definition which was referenced earlier goes on to say, “artistic license is permitted in regard to presentation and subject matter, so long as it does not deviate in significant ways from established history,” delineating their expectations as well as differentiating the genre from alternative or magical/fantastic history (“Historical Fiction”).

Appeal to Readers

After establishing the role historical fiction can play in trade fiction sales, one might wonder why—what draws readers to this genre when they could read textbooks or nonfiction accounts and biographies about the same figures and events. Understanding readers’ motivations to buy historical fiction books ensures that the genre will continue to be successful for as long as they hold these intentions and preferences. After all, an inconsistent or risky trend of a genre would be a gamble for a publisher, and businesses require some degree of stability. In his “Carte Blanche” column in *Booklist*, Michael Cart, author or editor of twenty books and nationally recognized expert in young adult literature, has a theory about the general public’s interest in the past. He relates it to escapism: that the past became a truly popular setting to modern readers after Y2K and 9/11 scares made the present a little too present (Cart). Readers wanted the distance and safety of the past, which makes it easy to see why the distantly rigged Wild West or the glamorous European courts would appeal to consumers. While this is not necessarily a negative commentary on the genre, Hilary Mantel gives historical fiction readers a bit more credit; after all, the distance of events in history does not always reduce the emotions associated with learning about them. She argues, “The grumbling is aimed at literary fiction set in the past, which is accused of being, by its nature, escapist. It’s as if the past is some feathered sanctuary, a

nest muffled from contention and the noise of debate, its events suffused by a pink, romantic glow. But this is not how, in practice, modern novelists see their subject matter. If anything, the opposite is true” (Mantel). Authors of historical fiction aim to instill a sense of immediacy into the past, encouraging readers to have real time emotions and reactions to historical events. Whether readers choose historical fiction to escape the present or to bring the past more centrally into modern life, both authors indicate that readers are specifically invested in learning about the people and events of the past in a narrative fashion.

As noted in the introduction, nonfiction tends to appeal only to readers who have a habit of reading these books. Without celebrity endorsements or tremendous media acclaim, novels tend to be more likely to grab the attention of a casual bookstore perusal. A narrative written in a novel format matches readers’ expectations and desires of events that unfold in a story format. “While history and historical fiction share a common purpose in presenting the past, the novel deals with what is ‘real’ and can tell the past as accurately or even in a more plausible way than history, which deals with what is ‘true,’” theorizes researcher Richard Carroll, whose studies focus on the way historical fiction portrays the past and the effects of authenticity in the genre. Jerome de Groot, author of *The Historical Novel*, offers a different perspective:

Current readers are interested in revisionist versions of the past (hence possibly the success of *Wolf Hall*) and novels that challenge the received opinion or the stories that we are told. This ‘conspiracy’ society, brought up on WikiLeaks and *The Da Vinci Code*, might seek alternatives and challenges in their fiction. Certainly this would also account for the hundreds of alternative narratives that strew the Internet, as people seek to make their own stories out of the materials available (De Groot).

This desire for revisionist versions that de Groot refers to basically demands historical fiction, which has the ability to view events from more than just the strictly factual and anti-speculative nature of history. In this way, readers' interests reflect the climate of their society, and a desire for change and progress can be found in examining the gray areas of the past. Contemporary readers' interest in the past can reflect their own time as much as the time they are reading about. In 1994, scholar Katherine Paterson comments, "'If you want to understand a period of history, don't read the contemporary fiction written during that period, but the historical fiction'" (qtd. in Brown). This theory reflects an essential understanding of fiction itself, that the subjects people are interested in and the problems they are struggling with are portrayed through art; as a subset of fiction, historical fiction would not be any different, and will similarly mirror its culture.

Historical fiction not only allows but encourages, even demands, a more complex and flexible notion of history. Events do not occur in a vacuum, and actions do not take place without human motivation and emotion. Exploring possibilities that are not unarguably supported by fact may reveal a more holistic understanding of history than if one examined bare facts and figures. As Mark Twain famously put it, "Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities. Truth isn't" (qtd. in Parini). Historical novels give authors the creative license to portray people and events in experimental and innovative ways that takes no subject off the table for being overdone or already studied. No figure could ever be wrapped up or completely understood when the world of fiction exists. The advantage of time allows authors to take both traditional and unconventional looks at the events of history, giving readers a more nuanced version of history than a textbook or primary source may. Unlike a factual history in which one could already know everything that has happened, historical fiction makes it impossible to truly know a subject as long as authors come up with new ways to approach it, and this questioning of the historical

record encourages a healthy scholarly skepticism rather than one concrete explanation that can never be questioned or amended. Mantel thinks this discomfort with multiple narratives may be one root of the dismissal of historical fiction. She muses:

What really disconcerts commentators, I suspect, is that, when they read historical fiction, they feel their own lack of education may be exposed; they panic, because they don't know which bits are true. So here is a handy pocket guide. Every time the author writes, "He thought that . . ." or "She felt that . . .", she's making it up. We never know what people thought or felt, unless they kept frank and full journals. And the world is full of people who lie to their own diaries (Mantel).

Nobody likes being called out on a lack of knowledge. The idea that multiple explanations of historical events challenges one's own mental narrative could certainly lead to a distaste for, and subsequently a distrust of, historical fiction, which may explain the academic disdain that often occurs. While it is easier to have one story and one answer for every event or question that has popped up in history, the flexibility to examine history from multiple perspectives, even if some are more plausible than others, encourages creative speculation rather than enforcing rigid explanations that cannot be scrutinized or challenged.

The Tudor Court in Historical Fiction

Tackling all of history and significance of historical fiction may seem like a daunting task, but breaking it down into an example period and historical figure can help to support points about the genre. In a 2013 study comparing readers' interests and publishers' output, the 13th to 16th centuries were favored by more than 50% of participants ("Historical Fiction Preferences – Publishers vs Readers"). If one searches popular historical fiction books on Goodreads, 6 out of

the first 50 have to do with the Tudor (Plantagenet) dynasty, which roughly lasted from just before 1500 to 1600 (“Popular Historical Fiction Books”); the success of *Wolf Hall*, which centers on Henry VIII’s court, has already been noted and reflects both previous and continuing interest in the reign of the Tudors. While other books in this list cover various time periods and diverse subjects, this concentration on the Tudors is unique. It would be difficult to talk about the relevance of historical fiction in modern publishing without acknowledging the popularity of this period and its figures. The intensely interesting and dramatic figures of Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn, (Bloody) Mary I, and the legendary Elizabeth I are set against the volatile background of a country in religious, social, and political upheaval.

In a commentary on Philippa Gregory’s (queen of British historical fiction, according to AudioFile) popular collection of novels about the extended family of the Tudors, one reviewer realizes, “Thanks to historical-fiction hits such as *The Other Boleyn Girl*, Gregory has turned millions of readers into rabid amateur historians fixated on Henry VIII’s mating woes” (Donahue). Getting readers interested in history may be a secondary concern for publishers, but catering to their interests is critical for book sales. Cultivating an interest in a certain time period makes selling more books with similar subject matter more likely to succeed, and one cannot deny the rabid reader interest in the Tudors. In a segment of the NPR show *Talk of the Nation*, historian and *New York Times* bestselling novelist Alison Weir responds to questions and comments of readers who call into the show. When asked why she chose her subject matter, she gives an answer that would resonate with readers of her books about the Tudors: “larger-than-life characters, dynamic, forceful characters. And this is a dramatic period in history. You couldn’t make it up, a king with six wives? Two of them lose their heads? Seventeen-year-old girl, queen for nine days, executed? It - you know, it’s quite dramatic stuff” (Weir, Interview by Conan).

Weir, Gregory, and countless others have made careers from serializing this dynasty, or writing about figures from the same time period without requiring the books to be read in any kind of order. A caller into Weir's *Talk of the Nation* interview effusively states that her books, "ha[ve] sparked an interest in medieval England and medieval Europe overall that just fascinates" fans of the author (Weir, Interview by Conan). This fan base makes each subsequent book easier to sell, as readers start to trust the storytelling voice of a certain author. Feeding this interest is as close to a guarantee of book sales as a publisher could hope for in the publishing business.

Often, modern readers of historical fiction tend to find an author they enjoy, such as Gregory or Weir, and read each book that author writes because these readers already like the way this author writes about a time period. The popularity of these kinds of authors' careers supports a trend that Joanne Brown, English professor and author of a novel about the life of a bestselling young adult novelist, noticed back in the late 1990s. She observes that the genre was "riding a crest of popularity, so much so that publishers are now promoting not only individual historical novels but entire series of historical fiction...'[S]uddenly *historical fiction* is the magic phrase on every publisher's lips, beginning to replace . . . even- saints be praised!—*horror*'" (Brown). Brown's commentary shows that historical fiction was popular 20 years ago, but the genre goes back much further than that—this genre is entrenched in the history of publishing. If one continues to trace the interest in fictionalized Tudor narratives, an example from a century ago appears from Jonathan Nield. In 1902, thirty years before the *New York Times* bestseller list was first published, Nield compiled a list of historical novels he considered reputable. Reviewer and historical fiction blogger Eileen Iciek, a modern analyst of Nield's book from a century ago, notes that one can find a trend in his list of good historical novels. She states, "It was also clear the ancient Romans, the Tudors, and Mary, Queen of Scots have fascinated authors of historical

fiction since the beginning” and while other periods and figures of course received some attention, “Caesar, Henry VIII and the Scots queen have captivated writers and their audiences for a long time” (Iciek). Excluding the Romans, two thirds of the topics Nield chose as the most important in the history of historical fiction center around the Tudor family (and associated figures).

Chipping the Gild of Elizabeth I

While looking at the historical fiction of one time period may seem exclusive, one can narrow the scope even further and still have an extraordinary array of novels to examine. After all, thanks to Henry VIII’s six wives, there is an enormous pool of figures to write about. While novels about each wife, child, extended family member and fictionalized periphery characters abound, a particularly interesting figure to look at is the golden child herself: Elizabeth I. With a whole era named after her reign that has the additional moniker of a “golden age” for England, the Virgin Queen, among other monikers, begs to be complicated and animated in fiction beyond her public image. The value of historical fiction’s ability to reimagine and add nuance to public figures and events has already been examined theoretically, but focusing this lens on a specific figure adds dimension to the argument that this personification of a name in a history book is valuable. In this genre, different sides and speculations about the character of Queen Elizabeth can be explored. If flexibility was absent, as it is in nonfiction, one completely accurate biography of the monarch would sell, with maybe a new edition every decade if new information came to light. Instead, the publishing industry is flooded with many different versions and perspectives on the illustrious Elizabeth.

For example, *Elizabeth I: Red Rose of the House of Tudor, 1544* by Kathryn Lasky is one book in the Royal Diaries series and tells the story of Elizabeth as a princess (with the term used loosely, since her father did not acknowledge her as part of the line of succession for many years during her childhood). This book is written in diary style, from a young Elizabeth's point of view as she navigates her father's court and develops the characteristics and experiences that will influence her reign much later in life. It is written for Middle Grade readers, with style and language to match its intended audience, so Lasky writes about complex and historical topics in language that a young reader can understand; for example, Anne Boleyn's extramarital affairs are described euphemistically as "It was said that she had been with other men before she had married my father and since," leaving further understanding up to a reader's own knowledge and maturity level (Lasky 37).

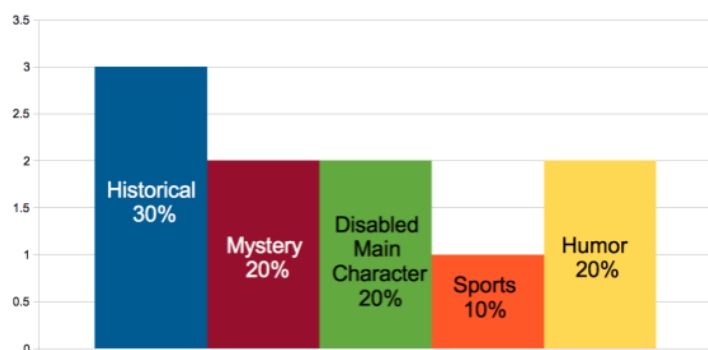
If anything, the first person nature of the book means that the author had to be even more aware of historical plausibility because diaries are written with sparing amounts of dialogue and immense passages of description. She must balance narrative with a rule of historical fiction in which, "A narrator whose voice relies too heavily on outdated language, however historically correct, is sure to lose readers. On the other hand, a narrator's vocabulary, like the dialogue for all characters in historical fiction, must be restricted to language in use at the time of the story" (Brown). Both the time period the book takes place in and Elizabeth's age affect her tone in this book. To introduce the diary style and emphasize that Elizabeth's voice is much less formal than the way a courtly lady would be expected to speak, Lasky's Elizabeth writes, "Within these leather covers I can commit my most private and utmost secret thoughts. It is here that I shall speak my mind. There will be no flourishes of words and languages...the way one must write in letters of speak in Court" (Lasky 4). This explanation justifies both the casual, informal language

one would use in a diary, as well as the simplified language since the book is intended for younger readers. For example, Lasky writes that the eleven-year-old Elizabeth thinks, “Father is quite, no, very fat. Because of his weight and the terrible sores that afflict his legs and make them swell, he can no longer mount a horse by himself” (Lasky 5). While many adults may easily understand an author who described Henry VIII’s failing health as a result of age and gout, a younger reader requires this more transparent and literal definition of the king’s state. In an effort to explain the confusing changes of religion occurring at the time, this version of Elizabeth reasons, “Father is the head of the Church of England. That is not being Catholic, and it is not quite Protestant” (Lasky 170). This book exemplifies an author who takes liberties with her subject, as nobody could possibly know Elizabeth’s thoughts and motivations for her actions as a child; Mantel previously reminded readers that anything beginning with words like “thought” or “felt” are educated guesses on the part of the author. Lasky is able to realistically and creatively pull from the historical record to create one version of the inside of Elizabeth’s head, shown through diary entries. Elizabeth’s aversion to marriage is referenced often throughout the book, implying that Elizabeth’s eventual unmarried state began with her ideas in childhood. Lasky supports this with the educated guess that a young Elizabeth would understand that the women her father married and then abandoned, or sent to their death, were not an ideal future. Elizabeth explains, “I have seen enough of my father’s matrimonial turmoil to understand that marriage for a woman is a risky thing, a dangerous business” (Lasky 27). This diary format allows her to speculate on things Elizabeth could never have put in the public record, which the princess herself points out when she notes, “I, perhaps, am writing my own death warrant, for if this diary is discovered I shall be finished” (Lasky 192). This assertion justifies all of the criticisms of the king, Mary, and Edward, which may not be reflected in the historical record because of the

implication that Elizabeth would be endangering herself if she had spoken these ideas publicly.

Reading the events of her childhood through her own eyes and perceptions makes the history more real and present to the reader than a list of the princess's movements or records of her paltry interactions with her father and sister ever could.

One might wonder how this Middle Grade fictionalized diary could contribute to an understanding of historical fiction in publishing. Such a question is easily answered by the publishing industry itself, as children's fiction has always been an enormous part of fiction sales and young adult fiction is rapidly rising in popularity. Ellen Brock (professional freelance editor, previously head editor of Musa Publishing's middle grade imprint) compiled statistics about the *New York Times* bestselling middle grade novels in 2013, and the breakdown of topics in realistic fiction (shown here) indicates the interest in historical figures (Brock).



This displayed interest is not

diminishing, and the publishing industry is taking notice. In books categorized as Juvenile

fiction, History increased 3% in popularity between 2013 and 2014, and made up a significant

Juvenile Fiction			
Animals	9,430	9,051	-4%
Classics	9,684	9,981	3%
Concepts	8,916	8,909	-0%
History/Sports/People/Places	13,686	14,107	3%
Holidays/Festivals/Religion	7,420	8,621	16%
Science Fiction/Fantasy/Magic	32,900	45,511	38%
Social Situations/Family/Health	23,777	27,815	17%
General Juvenile Fiction	51,895	52,690	2%
Total Juvenile Fiction	157,707	176,685	12%

portion of the totals (Milliott).

The skeptic may brush aside reports of young readers' interests, doubting their influence on the greater trends in publishing. However, young readers grow up to be adult readers, and carry their childhood preferences and memories with them into their adult consumer behavior.

Value as Revenue or Refinement

While adult and younger readers alike clearly enjoy and buy historical fiction, this does not mean it has been respected or even acknowledged in all circles. As historical fiction author and editor Leon Garfield noted in 1988, books in this genre were often thought of as “being something of an embarrassment, like an elderly relative, to be tolerated out of a sense of duty and reluctantly supported in a condition of genteel poverty” (qtd. in Brown, Joanne). Even now, one may hear the vague claim that our culture is becoming less sophisticated and each generation accuses the next of bringing the bar lower. Literary critics and book awards committees sometimes seem to ignore the types of books readers actually enjoy and have been proven to purchase. While the literal value of historical fiction is clear in the publishing industry, as the

consistency and popularity of the historical fiction genre has been shown here, its esteem and more abstract value in academic circles is quite controversial.

Chapter 2

Historical Fiction's Place in Critical Circles

Historical fiction is a literary genre that exists in publishing because there is demand for it. People read historical fiction, so publishers supply this product, as basic economics requires. The very existence of the genre does not mean that it is respected at the same level as other types of literature. In the realm of literary criticism, opinions diverge as to the merit of historical fiction as literature rather than value determined by mere book sales. Merit in this case refers to a general judgment of the genre as on par with other types of literary fiction; regardless of a critic's opinion of the book itself, merit would be reviewing it on individual terms without a preconceived bias based on genre. The general trend is an increasing acknowledgement of the possible value of historical fiction as literature worthy of serious review, while still including varying degrees of acceptance and resistance to the concept.

The Nature of History

The very nature of history comes into question when it is held up as a point of comparison with fiction. One's opinion on historical fiction can stem from interpretation of history itself as either fact or narrative. Richard Carroll, an Australian researcher on authenticity in historical fiction, shares his observation, "Early critics in the nineteenth century questioned the value of historical fiction. Famous Cuban poet Jose Maria Heredia believed "that history was opposite and superior to fiction; he accused the historical novel of degrading history to the level of fiction which, he argued, is lies" (Carroll). This perception of fiction as lies and history as

truth represents a simplification of the complexity of history; while some historical fact such as dates and government proclamations may be inalterable, much of the retelling of history is subjective. One of the most well-known adages about the historical record states that history is written by the victors. Much of what is generally considered history consists of filling in gaps between authenticated documents and artifacts. History is constantly changing from new discoveries that alter preconceived notions, and therefore is inherently not static truth.

Some may argue that history and fiction are necessarily at odds with each other. Carroll claims, “traditional historians are bent on keeping faith with the tenets of their nineteenth century predecessors by defending history from the insurgence of fiction at all costs” (Carroll). The implication is that this propels an antiquated idea of these areas of humanities as distinct. This idea presents historical fact as a metaphorical rope in the tug of war between history and literature, with the idea of meeting in the middle as a progress not fully realized. Historian condescension toward fiction would be at odds with its own aim, as narrative is an important device used to relay historical events. It is human nature to expect a progression of a series of events that the average person is able to follow and study. There is a perceived dichotomy of history and fiction that is complicated by historical fiction, which points out the fluid nature of the past that academics find so frustrating. The idea that history is made fact simply because it is written cannot be accepted as unquestionably reliable. After all, many aspects of history are subjective and written from a particular perspective, so historical fiction’s playful relationship with the past may not be as far from academic study as scholars might think. For example, Alison Weir’s *The Lady Elizabeth* represents Elizabeth’s story from various characters’ perspectives, rather than only Elizabeth’s. For Weir, the dying Henry is contemplative, thinking “They stood before him, two slim girls and a child. The fruits, he reflected, of his six marriages”

(Weir 151). While there is no way for anyone to know what was going on in the king's mind as he painfully and slowly died, it is reasonable for Weir to assume that he reflected on his life, and Henry's obsessive changing of the line of succession certainly indicates that he was thinking of both his children and his country's futures. Henry VIII's declining health is well-known, which both Lasky and Weir emphasize with the king's difficulty getting into a saddle. In Weir's book, she explains an unscheduled stop of the king's retinue because, "their progress was slow, and riding behind her father, Elizabeth could see why, for it was obvious that every jolt of his steed was agony to him. She was not surprised, therefore, when on their arrival at Guildford, Mary came to her and told her that the progress was being abandoned" (Weir 149). Historical record might note the intention of the journey and where they actually stopped; Elizabeth's interpretation of it is speculation, but it is based in fact, and while the details may not be proven, they are certainly not fanciful guesses but a breath of life into a line of a transportation record.

For centuries, historians have used narrative and narrative devices to order and assign cause and effect to events in the past. Historical fiction may take this approach one step further into a realm of less likely possibility, but the bones of the concept remain the same. Kathy Nawrot, public school teacher and writer for *The Clearing House* journal regarding education, defends the presentation of history as a narrative rather than a list of facts. She cites the benefits of this approach in absorption and comprehension of history:

Textbooks often treat the subject of history as a science, offering objective analysis that the student is required to apply to events. The student is the outsider, looking in. A textbook focuses on the result of the event, with the human beings who were involved in the event taken for granted and their behavior portrayed as unalterable. Historical fiction, on the other hand, involves the reader in the experience, offering a synthesis rather than

an analysis. The focus is on the event as it unfolds, and the human being is the object of the inquiry.

Using this argument, one can argue that history and fiction actually complement each other.

Historical fiction does not slyly represent itself as history, but as a form of literature that incorporates historical elements and characters. Authors utilize history just as historians utilize literary devices to convey information, and neither is trying to misrepresent itself as the other.

The tendency for historians to use narrative as a means to convey facts appeals to people who are accustomed to learning through a story, which incorporates human elements into basic facts and figures. History at its most basic represents stories about people and events no longer alive and able to represent themselves. Parini comments on the artful construction of history as a “made thing. It does not exist by itself in anything like a recognizable form. Indeed, we might all forget where we have been, if we didn’t have somebody to assemble and arrange the little blocks called facts” (Parini). This presentation of history makes it accessible to those who are not a part of the discipline. Narrative allows history to reach more audiences, increasing the utility of history in other diverse areas.

Importance of Accuracy to Critics

The fact and fiction dichotomy lies at the heart of the historical fiction controversy. Opinions differ on exactly how much of a novel must be true before it can be considered proper literature, with subjectivity surrounding the parameter of true. The very definitions of historical fiction that have been examined account for variation in the accuracy of events, characters, and chronology, yet a novel’s distance from the perception of historical reality affects its critical reception. The different weight given to historical accuracy versus narrative effectiveness can

affect critical reception of a novel. Value of one over the other may lead a critic to condemn a beautifully written yet historically loose novel, or resist an accurate representation of history with little style.

A vehement literary critic against historical fiction, Toby Litt examines historical fiction as a genre: “the first word is the element of facticity, the *what was* of the world; the second element is the transcendence, the *what might have been* of the world. To yoke the two words together is to create an oxymoron” (Litt 113). This tendency of authors to comment on the speculative nature of the past is viewed as inherently contrary to the search for truth in history. Although filling in gaps can provide possibilities of history, Litt warns against authors who brandish a pen with the intention to embellish the past, regardless of how realistically they do so. “A history textbook will not establish itself on the territory of pseudo-subjects –such as, to take one example, the secret sexual relationship between Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Essex” (Litt 112). These pseudo-subjects Litt refers to represent the multitude of interpretations an author may take with varying degrees of historical backup. Sarah Johnson, editor of the Historical Novel Society website and creator of the popular *Reading the Past* blog site, shows parallels in criticism of historical fiction that show little change in over fifty years. In 1950, author Howard Fast, a historical novelist himself, wrote: “This is an era of many historical novels, few of them good, and very few indeed which have more than a nodding acquaintance with fact” (qtd. in Johnson). She compares this to a critic who fifty years later decided that most historical novels feel “thin” apart from the rich characters that attract a reader to a book (Johnson). The influx of historical novels in the twentieth century brought up many questions for critics about the importance of facts and realism in novels that remain unresolved and depend greatly on critics’ personal opinions. Ultimately, fiction is a genre of the imaginary, so its relationship with

historical fact is inevitably complicated. While many critics see any deviation from strict historical record as damaging the integrity of a novel, others take a more flexible view.

Fiction writers have the freedom to imagine possibilities that may or may not exist in reality. Researcher and critic Christopher Bartel claims that since, “works of fiction often ask us to imagine states of affairs that are not strictly true, then a work’s historical inaccuracies should be easily overlooked as the kind of make-believe propositions that authors of fiction often ask us to accept” (213). The genre’s title of historical fiction seems to bring about different expectations for different readers and critics as to the balance of historical and fiction that should be present in a novel, a scrutiny other works of fiction may not be expected to adhere to. As an author and editor of an online literary magazine, Alexander Chee reflects on the impact of one of the greatest examples of historical fiction, *War and Peace*:

“[It] holds a strange place in literary history, participating in the crowning of realism as a substantial and serious literary mode in America, even as the novel also contributed to the argument that historical fiction could be by nature dangerous, illegitimate, and inaccurate. This is the reason historical fiction is sometimes reviewed by historians, who may evaluate the novel for how much it has gotten right, instead of for its literary merit—as if the only thing for a historical novel to do is to authentically replicate the past” (Chee)

In fiction, reality is skewed in a way that is freeing for the author. Unless events are so unrealistic that they distract the reader from the story, the general trend is that anything goes. According to Chee’s argument, historical inaccuracy may be a small issue compared to impressive prose, poignant plot, or vivid characters, which makes sense considering that these authors are writing pieces of literature, not attempting to misrepresent a story as undeniable history (if one claims that this even exists). Minimizing the whole value of a historical fiction

novel to the percentage of facts it gets right disregards all of the other aspects of the book that make a novel. Critics who automatically dismiss a historical novel's merits because of accuracy may not give it the same regard as other fiction novels whose flaws and strengths are weighed more equally. Carroll rounds out his assessment of historical fiction critics with the observation that novelists can make assumptions and educated guesses at emotions and motivations that historical record could never provide, but prove important literary devices. He theorizes, "the reader should be able to experience first-hand the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality. Through historical fiction, the reader is thus able to gain a greater understanding of a specific period and why people acted as they did" (Carroll). Queen Mary's dislike of Elizabeth is pretty clearly supported by her sister's imprisonment in the Tower under Mary's reign. Mary saw her sister as a threat to both her rule and her religion. Clearly this situation was infused with many emotions; the suspicion and paranoia warring with affection for her sister, whom she spent significant time with growing up. However, a historian could not use the language to describe Mary's feelings, while Weir can write, "In truth, Mary would be happy to see the back of her, to be spared the sight of this constant thorn in her side, whose vibrant youth was such a contrast to her own fading looks and whose questionable paternity was a subject that occasioned Mary much concern" (Weir 343). Weir takes Mary's suspicion of Elizabeth, reputation as a fading beauty, and Elizabeth's documented stay at Ashridge, and combines them into a much more compelling and complex story of sibling rivalry and the pressures of being both a queen and a sister. This version is not necessarily truth; there is no documented diary entry of Mary thinking these thoughts. Yet this speculation connects these events in a realistic way that fits one's knowledge of human behavior and its patterns. Nonfiction authors and historians are confined to that which can be proved,

while fiction authors are able to explore possibilities of intentions and alternatives, employing literary devices that exemplify fiction as a genre.

Importance of Accuracy to Authors and Editors

While critics' opinions and reviews affect the perception of the genre's respectability, authors' tendencies and rules regarding their own work can also shed light on the question of historical accuracy. Though all authors and editors may have different standards, most seem to fall into a middle ground of balancing historical fact and fiction. As an English professor and historical novelist, Joanne Brown explains that regardless of the percentage of history and fiction an author employs, "accuracy remains a primary obligation of all historical fiction. There is no margin for errors or anachronisms, each of which can reduce a novel's usefulness or interest. No successful writer of historical fiction takes this matter lightly" (Brown). Historian-turned-author Weir takes her readers' feedback very seriously, and infers that they want to read something resembling truth. She advises, "where the facts exist, a historical novelist should use them if they're writing about a person who really lived, because a lot of people come to history through historical novels. I did. And a lot of people want their history that way" (Weir). This balancing act of fiction and history, taking liberties with the gaps but generally sticking to the historical record, seems to be working for the authors who gain their popularity and fan bases in this genre. Brown notes the popularity of historical fiction in the publishing market with reference to writer, critic, and editor, Patty Campbell: "suddenly *historical fiction* is the magic phrase on every publisher's lips, beginning to replace...even- saints be praised *horror*" (Brown). Authors and editors have found a genre mix that works for them and their sales, and while some critics are willing to make this leap with them, others are committed to dismissing most historical fiction as

inaccurate and lazy works of fiction beneath their notice, particularly if there is any deviation from established historical facts.

Authors write to share their experiences and interpretations of life with others, and choosing a historical subject does not change this intention. The subjectivity of the author certainly will shine through, regardless of how many accurate facts a novel contains, just like in any work of fiction. Yet this need not undermine the information the reader gains. After all, the very accuracy of a fact relies on the availability and validity of the latest analysis. Facts are not necessarily sacrosanct, and are subject to adjustment based on updated research and new information. A defense of historical fiction exists, which is that even if some of the information is speculative or exaggerated, one is still better off with some knowledge of history and literature than if that reader had not read anything in the first place. Yet Litt claims, “Historical fiction depends for its existence upon a pair of bad faiths – a reciprocal pair of bad faiths – the bad faith of the writer and the bad faith of the reader” in an effort to support his assertion that historical fiction is actually actively harmful to the reader (Litt 111). He believes the reader is worse off after reading a historical fiction novel, because to have no knowledge is better than to “*feel* they know more about the past” (113). Unless a book has glaringly inaccurate information that posits to be true or is ludicrously offensive to the legacy of the subject or event, it seems difficult to claim that anyone is worse off after reading than before; readers most likely actually do know somewhat more than they did before. In *The Royal Diaries* series, each book contains a Historical Note section at the back to instruct the young readers as to the nature of historical fiction: that not all of it is necessarily true, and that does not depreciate the value of the book. In *Elizabeth I: Red Rose of the House of Tudor*, Lasky provides religious and historical background that was not included in the text and tells the reader the fate of Elizabeth after the book’s

conclusion, for those readers who wish for more historical context. For example, Lasky provides further clarification on the situation between Henry VIII and his first wife, which Elizabeth alludes to but does not explain: “In England, the conflict between Catholics and Protestants had unique twist: Henry VIII severed all ties to the Pope and the Catholic Church because he wanted to divorce his wife, Catherine of Aragon, who had not given him a male heir” (Lasky 220). She also explains Elizabeth’s view on religious tolerance and foreign policy during her reign, including the famous sinking of the Spanish Armada. In her author’s note, Lasky states her love for intricate research and explains her interest in writing as, “there were musings that could never be answered directly in history books. So although historians may say Elizabeth was always strong...they do not know for sure” and goes on to explain that she hoped to responsibly portray the speculative gaps in Elizabeth’s actual personality (Lasky 235). When facts fade away, the person remains, and historical novelists bring to life the two-dimensional history book mentions in ways that make them more human to modern people. Readers identify with the emotions and motivations of the characters that no historian could realistically provide, but an author is free to imagine. Historians may criticize the fancy of novelists, but the historical novelist makes history more accessible to the common reader and inspires interest with familiar narrative devices that a textbook cannot.

Historical Fiction as Idealization and Theatrics

The criticism of historical fiction as a degradation of history introduces a related critique of historical fiction as idealizing the past. Rachel Teukolsky, who specializes in Victorian British literature, shares this concern. She accuses the historical fiction genre of femininely glamorizing the past and incorporating political fantasy in an attempt to appeal to the masses without

addressing the realities of the past, reality ranging from actual accurate historical events to hygiene and antiquated language. Parini connects this idea to initial criticisms of the genre, in which “the term *historical novel* was slightly derogatory, summoning visions of pageantry... History served as a kind of brocade curtain, against which ordinary people (for the most part) strutted their stuff” (Parini). While an exaggeration of the romanticized aspects of history can serve as grounds for critique, the amplification of parts of a setting or time period can be important tools for the sake of a story.

Describing historical setting in detail can necessarily seem garish because the details are so different from modern life. Weir describes the many residences of Elizabeth throughout her life to underscore plot points and indicate literary themes. *The Lady Elizabeth* contains many sweeping descriptions of the countryside, opulent ballrooms, and the ornate clothes members of the court would wear. Weir describes riding through London for the first time through a young Elizabeth’s eyes from the vantage of a horse where, “she marveled at the great houses that lined the streets, the beautiful churches with their chiming bells, and the roar of the people who came racing to line the thoroughfare to see their sovereign” (Weir 28). These descriptions serve the purpose of emphasizing Elizabeth’s early love for court, which makes her reaction to being banished later under Queen Mary’s rule that much more heartbreaking for her. The descriptions of the castles and grounds of the many estates Elizabeth lived in underscore her unsettled life, constantly shuffled around depending on the whims of her father, brother, or sister. Elizabeth could never depend on being where she wanted for any particular season, as shown when she is unable to return to court until her brother marries. She is unable to return even for her father’s funeral “as the King is unmarried, the presence of ladies at the coronation would not be appropriate” and Elizabeth feels she is “barred from the court and left to rot at Enfield” (Weir

160). Elizabeth had previously described life at court as exciting, wonderful, colorful, busy, and noisy (Weir 111) all within one paragraph. Emphasizing the glamor of life at court is not simply a way for Weir to fill space by encouraging the readers' imagination of an idealized castle scene, but a reminder of everything Elizabeth loses later in her life when she falls out of favor. When Katherine sends Elizabeth away and she goes to Cheshunt, she finds it a "large, imposing moated house," appropriate since she is being exiled there (Weir 234). While she may feel like a prisoner at Cheshunt, Weir ominously echoes this theme later when Elizabeth is actually imprisoned by Mary in the Tower. As Elizabeth approaches the very prison where her mother died, she sees that "ahead loomed the great threatening bulk of the Tower" (Weir 373). A critic may call these descriptions dramatic or an exaggeration of historical setting, yet to Elizabeth, this drama is her life where she very accurately was constantly fighting to survive her circumstances. A castle made of rock may not impress the modern reader who has seen skyscrapers, but the perception of an imposing castle is entirely plausible for someone living in the sixteenth century.

The tendency to critique historical fiction novels may stem from a doubt that they accurately reflect the past. Johnson mentions their unfair reputation for "being either costume dramas, in which modern-day characters are dressed up and paraded around in period garb with a few "thees" and "thous" thrown in for good measure, or barely fictionalized textbooks, in which the author's need to cram all of his prodigious research into a single novel overwhelms the plot" (Johnson). The pitfalls of the second example, in which a novel is barely discernable from nonfiction, are easy to see: a fiction reader who chooses a novel has certain expectations, which are not met by the characteristics of nonfiction books. The initial criticism that characters themselves are not historically accurate in their mannerisms reflects the idea that people are set against the previously mentioned "brocade curtain of history" simply for novelty's sake. Yet

with the proper research into customs of the time, which no outspoken author seems to argue against, readers should be able to find reflections of their modern thoughts and problems in historical figures—this is one of the intentions of literature as a whole. Making the argument that historical characters are too similar to modern figures and as such must be excluded from the realm of literature on grounds of inaccuracy directly contradicts its purpose to inspire self-reflection and discovery.

Historical Fiction's Gendered Readership

The line between historical fiction and historical romance is blurry and vague, yet may incite critics to either praise or denounce a novel on arbitrary grounds. One critical caller to an interview with Weir refers to her exhaustive research as historian into the lives of the members of the fascinating Tudor dynasty, yet ends with the scathing remark, “England's Tudor Dynasty featured some of the most significant and salacious monarchs in history...Historical fiction is one way to describe what she does - bodice-ripper may be more specific” (qtd. in Weir).

Elizabeth's reputation as the Virgin Queen inevitably inspired much speculation and research into her possible romantic partners throughout her life, and that very salacious history of the Tudors inspires conspiracies and rumors about affairs. Yet the one sexual scene in Weir's book between Elizabeth and the Admiral lasts about one page (Weir 227), and inspires the story line that leads to Elizabeth's seclusion because of her pregnancy and subsequent miscarriage. Does one scene make a historical novel a bodice ripper? It seems more like a logical character development scene for Elizabeth, whose sexuality and virginity were a commodity in the court that she had to skillfully and exhaustively protect. In addition, romance does not necessarily detract from historical possibility. As common as relationships are now, they were just as likely

and often more scandalous in the past, particularly when coupled with all of the courtly rules and customs Elizabeth outlines for the reader.

The very term “bodice-ripper” seems to imply an incrimination of representing historical relationships. Women in the past did wear bodices, so why is a story involving modern relationships somehow more valid than those set in the past. In 2015, author and blogger M.K. Tod conducted her third annual readers’ survey relating to issues authors and readers of historical fiction face. The survey’s 2033 participants were 84% female and 16% male, although Tod does warn that her readers represent a disproportionate amount of historical fiction readers, since she advertises mostly on their websites. The women reported reading more than the men, as 55% of women claimed to read over 30 books per year, compared to 28% of the men. The response to the question “what type of story appeals to you?” resulted in “Adventure” for men and “Strong Female Character” for women; since women made up the majority of the survey respondents, this was also the most popular subject overall. In addition to the majority of reader respondents being women, women also dominated as respondents who are authors, at 76% compared to male authors as 24% (Tod). With this dramatic skew toward female readers and authors, gender disparity comes up as a clear possibility for the bias against historical fiction. Along the lines of a “chick flick”, “chick lit” has emerged as a derogatory term about books that gain a reputation as being for female readers or about stereotypically feminine topics. American author and teacher Meg Wolitzer addresses this tendency to underrate these types of novels: “It’s done all the time, and not just by strangers at parties or by various booksellers that have no trouble calling interesting, complex novels by women “Women’s Fiction,” as if men should have nothing to do with them” (Wolitzer). Tod’s survey’s indication that female readers are interested in strong, female characters, and the academic community’s designation of genre as unworthy of attention

or validation does not seem like a complete coincidence. Wolitzer goes on to cite statistics found by women's literary organization VIDA, which, "showed in February in its second annual statistical roundup, women get shockingly short shrift as reviewers and reviewees in most prestigious publications. Of all the authors reviewed in the publications it tracked, nearly three-fourths were men" (Wolitzer). Automatically categorizing books about, or written by, women as lesser, with notable but rare exceptions, could contribute to the perception that a genre with many books written by and about female characters is viewed with disdain or skepticism. One of the callers into Weir's interview volunteered the opinion: "I think, especially for females, it's a wonderful way for them to connect with the people behind the dry facts that are often taught in our school system." Women are notoriously underrepresented in traditional portrayals of history, since their contributions were often behind the scenes or obscured and claimed by men.

Historical fiction gives agency and a voice to women who have been ignored by history, and if men are opposed to reading literature featuring strong females (consciously or not), this could contribute to the fact that the genre has been so undervalued, with the occasional historical fiction book making its way grudgingly into the public eye. Even Elizabeth I, a figure one would expect universal respect for, is criticized and ridiculed when authors dare to speculate on her romantic interests and possibilities. The very title of Weir's NPR Interview is "Writing the Well-Researched Bodice-Ripper," which automatically degrades Weir as a writer, constraining her and her years of research to this realm of fiction that is okay for women, but not for serious review.

Ruth Franklin, writer, editor, and literary critic, defines the problem in her experience: "The underlying problem is that while women read books by male writers about male characters, men tend not to do the reverse" (Franklin). Hopefully, the changing conversation about historical fiction's inclusion in consideration of serious literary fiction parallels social change, and

historical fiction's acceptance will continue to grow regardless of author or subject, but dependent on the quality of the writing and research.

Chapter 3

Historical Fiction and Academia

From prestigious universities to ubiquitous elementary schools, professors, parents, students, and teachers wonder if curricula should include or cover historical fiction. While historical fiction authors do not claim to write history, the inclusion of this genre in literature and writing is still controversial because it dips into the historical record. Historical fiction exposes the gray area between indisputable fact and the idea that the historical record is constantly evolving and being updated with time. Arguments about historical accuracy and factual learning compete with insistence on levels of interest and engagement. While mutual exclusivity with historical text is unlikely to be considered, academic opinions on the place of historical fiction in the classroom and as a legitimate area of study vary greatly among schools and throughout time.

Higher Education

In literature and creative writing programs, many students are given a great deal of freedom in what they can choose to study, read, and write about for their assignments. The areas students study in their undergraduate and graduate careers impact the respect and interest they may hold for certain disciplines in future academic endeavors. Despite the freedom many schools offer in one's interests and curriculum, some classes undeniably and specifically address historical fiction. The following list contains a sample of some colleges and universities whose English course titles and/or descriptions contain attention to the study of historical fiction:

Auburn University: Historical Fiction: Writing into the Past

Douglas College: Introduction to Writing Historical Fiction

Rosemont College: Researching and Writing Historical Fiction

Emerson College: Topics in Multiple Genres and Hybrid Forms (emphasizes readings in historical fiction)

Minnesota State University: Historical Fiction Workshop “Writing Historical Fiction: Balancing Accuracy and Authenticity”

Stanford University: Japanese Historical Fiction

University of Virginia: Plagues, Witches, and War: The Worlds of Historical Fiction

Public course catalogs show anyone researching these schools’ literature and history departments the importance of learning about historical fiction in higher education.

Teaching aspiring writers and editors strategies to produce and evaluate historical fiction instills the rigor of instruction into the fluidity of literature. Historian Michael Williams extols the opportunities of historical fiction to expand the influence of the discipline of history itself. He theorizes that “a heightened appreciation of the practical social utility of history is one of the new notes of our times. The problem of how to extend this appreciation and how to increase the practical utility of history, is a vital one” (Williams 365) on the opportunities presented by historical fiction. Different aspects of literature and history can be intertwined and uniquely examined in historical fiction, interpretations that neither course of study may invite on its own.

Younger Classrooms

Arguably one of the more compelling aspects of literature is the ability to engage with a narrator, character, or story, in a way that is usually only available in one’s own mind. Readers are exposed to the human condition with access to a protagonist’s particular perspective, different from that of the reader. Carol Sliwka, a Language Arts and History teacher in the Monroe, Michigan, public school system, notes, “although I have used many interdisciplinary

[Language Arts and History] projects and products, I have found there is no better or more consistently successful vehicle than historical fiction” (Sliwka 61). Yet some scholars still question the place of historical fiction in elementary, middle grade, and high school learning. Teachers like Sliwka are at odds with those who believe teaching children that history is subjective, or leading them to believe something is a fact when it is an interpretation or exaggeration, can be harmful in the short and long term.

I have personal experience with an integrated history and literature program. During my sophomore year in high school, honors students had the option to take correlative history and literature courses under the broad title “The American Experience.” The idea was that the time periods we were learning about in history could be complemented with important works of literature from or about those periods. For example, reading Sinclair’s *The Jungle* while learning about industrialization in America underscored the necessity of workers’ rights; although the novel is fictional, it exemplified key points we were learning in history. While we learned about the manic decadence of the twenties followed by the Great Depression, the differences between *The Great Gatsby* and *The Grapes of Wrath* brought real people and situations into broad concepts like boom and bust. The cooperation of the two teachers led to more nuanced conversations and explanations in both classes, where we could use historical context to understand novels and apply human experiences to key terms in a history textbook. Nobody claimed that Jay Gatsby was a historical figure, but for me, his story was a better example of the glamour of the Roaring Twenties obscuring fear and doubt leftover from the war than a textbook description of population trends and stock prices.

Historical Fiction as a Learning Tool

Historical fiction novels provide a unique way to incorporate history, which necessarily teaches students the events and lessons of the past, with literature, which then, in turn, conveys questions of the human condition and challenges readers with new perspectives and challenges they may not consider otherwise. Linda Levstik, author of *Teaching History for the Common Good*, emphasizes the responsibility of teachers to choose, and authors to produce, books that are both good literature and accurate history in order to instill responsible learning in students. She goes on, “In literature, readers encounter the human capacity for both good and evil in a framework that generally invites them to sympathize with, or at least understand, the protagonist's point of view. In a series of studies conducted by the author, children seemed to find this experience a compelling satisfaction of literature” (Levstik). She notes the importance of narrative to hold history up to a social system. In this way, history provides a context for students to examine the motivations and actions of people.

History imparts more of a lesson when told through the lens of a person who the student can relate to. Learning history in this way reminds children that history is not just a collection of facts and events but a result of human enterprise. Kathy Nawrot, a Canadian public school teacher who assembled various pieces of research regarding historical fiction in the classroom for teaching journal *The Clearing House*, makes the claim, “historical fiction exposes students to the power of literature. They see ordinary people doing extraordinary things. Those people, they learn, faced the same struggles and weaknesses that people do today” (Nawrot). For example, Queen Elizabeth, leader of the Elizabethan age, the Virgin Queen of hundreds of years ago, can easily seem inaccessible to people today, particularly young people. However, when Lasky writes of Elizabeth’s anticipation for the May holiday, how she is too excited to sleep, children will be familiar with this idea of Christmas morning. Elizabeth’s fun playing with a common girl

is ruined by the revelation that she is the princess, as “I saw her face freeze. Indeed it was if she was looking at something terrible. A witch perhaps” (141). This concept of being excluded because of something one cannot control, of being suddenly and bewilderingly left out, is familiar to any child, and makes Elizabeth more human. While this exact incident may not have happened, the idea that a young Elizabeth often felt alone and judged because of her mother is reasonable; presenting it in this way encourages young readers to relate to her as a person, not just a historical queen, which can help them to understand her historical actions as a ruler.

Identification with the past can be difficult to impart to young learners, who may not understand the point of both learning about the past or reading literature. Peter Brown is the Head of Learning and Interpretation at the Manchester Museum in England. For him, “edutainment” is a vital tool for sparking young peoples’ love of history, as long as it’s accompanied with a firm respect for where the fiction ends and the facts begin. He thinks that teaching historical fiction can “encourage learners to be critical of all sources, including the museum and their teachers, when they are researching a subject. The more discriminating they are, the less worrying ‘edutainment’ becomes” (qtd. in Jack). This idea may seem scientific, that learners should be skeptical of everything they hear from a single source, but one of the very purposes of literature is to provoke thought. Incorporating history into this goal is more inclusive of education, rather than being a detriment to any one subject.

Many authors encourage the use of historical fiction for educational purposes as well. In addition to the good business sense of getting readers at a young age interested in a certain genre, authors can judge other historical novels compared to their own, since they can be considered experts in comparing the value of certain kinds of novels. In addition to nonfiction educational material, Valerie Tripp writes the popular *American Girl* books, which tell the historical back-

stories of a line of dolls inspired by young women of the decade. In her article, after comparing history in fiction to vitamins in chocolate cake, she proposes that teaching through historical fiction makes the importance of history matter to the children, “because reading about the past not only gives children factual information—sort of a mental timeline, for example, so that they know that the Revolutionary War happened before the Civil War—but learning about the past also allows, encourages, and teaches a child to identify with others” (Tripp). This intention lends credence to her hope that her books will inspire and inform children. Even if they contain some speculation or deviation from historical fact, especially to account for the youth of her intended audience, she feels a responsibility to her readers. This relates back to Levstik’s theory on the obligation of teachers to choose to share authors who prioritize accurate history along with interesting literature.

Since its inception, educational fiction has been the subject of much scrutiny; the idea of teaching something that is not “true” simply does not make sense on the surface. Yet there is an inherent problem in this assertion: historical fiction may not always be 100 percent historically accurate, but does that necessarily mean it is not true, or does not have value? Fiction itself as a genre encourages thought, creativity, and empathy with characters and situations that may not have happened at all, or occurred exactly the way they are portrayed. Yet Jack points out “Few people would be so bold as to claim that the *Iliad* fails to play a key role in teaching us about classical history, or that Shakespeare can teach us nothing about the ancient world of Cleopatra, Mark Antony or Julius Caesar. It lifts characters and tales from the ancient world off the page and into our imaginations, even if Homer’s epic tale of Gods, heroism, fate and warfare has to be taken with a large pinch of salt” (Jack). Interestingly, the works of Shakespeare, which are so revered by academics now, were considered common back in his own time, when groundlings

laughed at bawdy jokes and playhouses were closed for perceived indecency. Yet somehow scholars can look at these plays and learn not only about the time periods Shakespeare was writing about, but also about the time he was writing in. If *Julius Caesar* can be taught in the classroom as a work of fiction with certain liberties taken with the historical record, why not *The Lady Elizabeth*? Encouraging students to read about the subjects in which they are interested in any capacity seems like a worthy educational tool, and incorporating history can add a new dimension of education to the experience of reading a novel.

Content Comprehension and Memory

History textbooks convey the facts as they are understood to be true by panels of editors and accomplished historians. In this case, the presence of historical fiction in the classroom may seem redundant or unnecessarily complicating the truth of history. Yet the argument exists that young students are more likely to remember events conveyed to them in a narrative structure than an assembly of facts with little plot structure or human interest. The familiar and less structured form of a narrative can encourage children to retain more information than a strictly educational one: “In one experiment with fifth-grade students, researchers found that children taught with historical novels recalled about 60 percent more information than children who were taught with traditional history texts (Smith, Monson, and Dobson 1992)” (qtd. in Nawrot). Remembering the content of a book will be more helpful in the long run for children learning and building on their historical knowledge.

The importance of not only understanding the words in a book but also retaining the information and lessons of the work is often undervalued. Sliwka states, “until fairly recently, studies have focused on how teachers use and students learn (or fail to learn) from content area

textbooks (Alvermann, 1989). Researchers interested in children's response to trade books have tended, on the other hand, to focus primarily on issues of language/literacy development” and the lack of attention to content learning in classroom literature (Sliwka). While reading and spelling may be the main focus of books for very young students, getting them interested in the content can improve both their memory of the plots and events, comprehension of more complex ideas, and interest in literature and history in the future.

Against the Use of Instructional Historical Fiction

Various teachers and scholars disagree with the use of historical fiction for education purposes. The argument against their inclusion in the classroom stems both from a preference for more traditional ways of teaching history and a distrust of the value of the contents of a historical fiction novel—emphasis on the fiction. Levstik cautions one of the possible issues that teachers should be aware of when teaching with historical fiction: “the reader may also come to expect history, at least in its narrative forms, to be interpretive and to involve moral issues” (Levstik). For example, during her reign, Elizabeth was known as a Protestant but religiously tolerant ruler, particularly compared to her sister Mary’s zealous enforcement of Catholicism in England. In *The Lady Elizabeth*, when Elizabeth learns that Mary has reinstated a law against heretics, or those who do not follow the Catholic religion, Elizabeth exclaims, ““But the Queen began her reign promising religious tolerance!’ she cried, forgetting her resolve to hold her peace” (Weir 414). Levstik would likely find fault with an author assigning a certain display of morality to a character with no record of speaking this sentence, because although it is backed up by the actions of both women, it assumes a certain ethic in Elizabeth that may not have existed or been so explicitly stated. She warns that a readers’ expectations for literature may bleed over into

interpretations of history, which may be confusing if they do not always line up. Events and historical facts may be assigned meaning or nuance that does not exist in anticipation of a deeper narrative. However, no historical event exists in a vacuum, so questioning of the context and circumstance surrounding or hiding in history may sometimes be relevant.

Toby Litt's criticism of historical fiction also extends to its use in classroom settings. In defense of his position against the value of historical fiction as a valid learning tool, he uses the example that a history teacher who had read nothing but historical fiction would not be qualified to be a history teacher. "If I found out that my child's history teacher preferred reading historical novels to history books, I would instantly lose a great deal of trust in them," however if they admitted to reading a Phillipa Gregory book once "but with a constant queasy feeling of self-disgust, I would immediately trust them more *as a history teacher*" (Litt 112). This judgment supports his previously stated assumption that historical fiction is actually more harmful than not reading at all, because it makes readers think they have learned something true about the past. He assumes this would be even worse in the more impressionable young reader. Yet this exemplifies a logical fallacy, a straw man argument that misrepresents the reality. It is easy for Litt to put forth this example and slice through it, in an attempt to prove that history somehow has more value than literature, but upon further inspection, the idea that a history teacher's worth is devalued by reading and enjoying a historical novel is absurd. Romanticized history or not, this is not a valid or fair critique of historical fiction, but a cheap shot at a novel that Litt would probably categorize as romance and therefore not worthy of a history teacher's time, despite the fact that an interest in history does not accompany a requirement that this person enjoy reading history textbooks more than novels.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

The Future of Historical Fiction

The future of historical fiction in publishing, critical circles, and academia is fluid, but trends seem to indicate an increasing acceptance of the genre's validity. Sarah Johnson, a book review editor for the Historical Novel Society who also runs the blog Reading the Past, reasons, "When you become involved with the field, you begin to learn that above all, historical fiction is a genre of controversy and contradiction" (Johnson). The considerable amount of articles, opinions, and studies examined seem to indicate that this will continue to be the case, with more people coming to the conclusion that the genre can provide valuable contributions to literature, literary criticism, and education.

Various arguments about the place of historical fiction in all levels of classrooms exist to inform teachers and curriculum creators. The history to fiction spectrum allows for many different kinds of balances and low to high levels of fiction in a history. Ultimately, it would be very difficult to remove all traces of narrative from history, as that is the way humans tell stories and history is necessarily affected, made, and recounted by people. The degrees of creative license to which teachers choose to expose their students depends on the type of classroom they prefer to instruct. Some instructors may find fiction and narrative conventions helpful or inspiring, while others take issue with deviance from historical fact and textbook learning. Trends seem to indicate an increasing acceptance and even welcoming of incorporating historical

fiction into education, although some prefer to hold to more traditional divisions of literature and history.

The use of historical fiction to complement traditional history classes and in literature continues to grow. Dr. Jennifer Howell, an Australian researcher and professor at Curtin University, reports on a pilot study exploring the use of historical fiction in education programs. She wanted to answer the question: “Why do people read an historical novel set in Tudor England and not a well-researched academic non-fiction text? Perhaps because the novel is presented in language that is more accessible and understood, but also the story will be rich with figures, dialogue and feel more personal” (Howell). While she cautions against some lower quality historical fiction that bears little resemblance to historical record, she acknowledges its possible benefits as a teaching aid. In an effort to understand Australian students’ declining interest in the subject of history, she examined this 2014 case study and corresponding survey of students training to be teachers. Her findings show that when these future teachers were asked if they thought historical novels would be useful in teaching history as “a supplementary resource or teaching tool. All of the respondents responded in the affirmative (100%) and their explanations ranged from historical novels being in a more interesting and accessible format to improving reading comprehension and literacy” (Howell). While a consensus among all teachers everywhere is impossible, this does show a general trend in acceptance of historical fiction in academics, particularly in these newer teachers. Assuming this trend continues, the passage of time may contribute to the presence of more historical fiction novels being used in academic settings.

While historical fiction may not make up the majority of fiction sales, these novels occupy a certain steady niche and tend to gain groups of loyal readers and fans who will

consistently read the work of a particular author, many books in a series, or various books about certain preferred figures and time periods. Author and editor Brown explains, “Historical fiction is riding a crest of popularity, so much so that publishers are now promoting not only individual historical novels but entire series of historical fiction” (Brown). Kathryn Lasky’s *Elizabeth I, Red Rose of the House of Tudor* is part of the 1999-2005 Royal Diaries twenty book series; Lasky wrote five of the books, while various other authors contributed to other stories of the early lives of women who would become great figures such as Cleopatra and Marie Antoinette. *New York Times* bestseller Alison Weir represents a successful author who has gained fans through individual books rather than a series. The author of *The Lady Elizabeth* has written seven historical fiction novels, all of which follow historical women in Tudor England. The trends of historical fiction’s popularity are evident in these instances of serialized novels.

M.K. Tod’s previously mentioned survey reached 2033 participants (84% female and 16% male), although Tod does warn the viewer that while she advertises the survey on many book review websites, she also targets several historical fiction focused platforms. While participants most likely represent a greater percentage of historical fiction readers than the average group of readers, the very presence of this survey shows interest in quantifying how historical fiction is performing now and will in the future. This survey offers the opportunity to see what is working and what is not for readers in general, as well as devoted fans of historical fiction. For the question, “What historical time periods do you read?” the 13th to 16th century was the most popular answer, indicating the relevance of looking at the Tudor reign and Elizabethan age. When asked, “Reflecting on your favorite historical fiction, how relatively important are the following factors?” readers prioritized immersion in time and place and superb writing first, followed by authenticity (Tod). “Authentic and educational” was valued at number three in a list

of nine possible factors—it is high on readers’ lists, but the literary aspect of good writing is still higher. Tod also found that the top three preferred historical fiction story types are “strong female character, adventure, and a series with ongoing characters” (Tod). Publishers who follow these trends are likely to find readers for historical fiction novels in the near future.

Those 2033 readers who participated in her survey cared enough about historical fiction to not only answer her questions, but to be on social media sites about historical fiction or reading in general. Feedback from readers helps to inform authors what they can be writing and publishers what to anticipate selling to meet the demands of the market. In addition to the market that already exists (readers who habitually read historical fiction), excellent books make their way into the hands of new readers by way of bestseller lists, like the NPR list above and the *New York Times* bestseller list (where one will find Alison Weir and Philippa Gregory next to Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* and Anthony Doer’s *All the Light We Cannot See*), and personal recommendations; both authors and publishers have incentive to keep producing high quality books in order to maintain and grow readership.

Yet simply because publishers are producing, authors are writing, or readers are reading something, does not mean it will go over favorably with more highbrow audiences. In fact, critics often condemn the popular simply for its quality of being mainstream. As stated earlier, Shakespearean plays were once considered entertainment for the common people because the masses flocked to them. However, many people do not buy into this idea that if something is well received by the masses it cannot also be academically valuable or valid literature. Novels as a form of literature have been subject to this scrutiny—the idea that something that is enjoyable or popular cannot have literary merit. In 1913, historian Richard le Gallienne reported on the tracing of the history of the novel by critic Professor Saintsbury (he establishes his credentials

with, “a leviathan swallowing whole libraries for a meal” (Le Galliene, 1). He finds that there is no true, perfect root of novels, no pure novel that exists strictly for the sake of artistic literature without containing aspects of romance and adventure. He goes on to explain, “the prejudice against both novel writing and novel reading long survived even ‘the greatest lexicographer’; and, of course, is not entirely dead yet” (qtd. in Le Galliene 2). This prejudice can be applied to the way critics originally perceived historical fiction. All novels contain some truth in the fiction, some aspect of person, place, or thing that is true or could be true. In a similar fashion, all of history contains some fabrication—new information is constantly coming to light that dispels previous interpretations of the past. History could also be told from an infinite number of perspectives: the place and date of Elizabeth’s coronation may be historical fact, but its context could come from a multitude of sources, including varying educated guesses at the thoughts and motivations of the queen herself. It seems that historical fiction is held to higher and seemingly arbitrary standards of accuracy and plausibility to which fiction, as a whole, is not expected to adhere.

Some historical fiction may represent little more than a romance novel or paranormal fiction set against a historical backdrop. Equating all historical novels to this lowest standard insults the authors who spend time researching history, the readers who hold authors to high standards of both accuracy and excellent writing, and the publishers and editors who seek to reconcile these impulses to write, read, and publish historical fiction. Williams, the book reviewer, argues, “you cannot condemn all novels because of the evil ones any more than you can condemn all histories because some are misleading or constructed in the interests of a particular propaganda” (362). This sentiment encapsulates the entangled nature of history and fiction that already exists in both media, and so the portrayal of one through the other is neither

misleading nor harmful, and very well may introduce readers to history or historians to literature. In an interview, when asked on going from historian to author, Weir explains that her motivation came from the “many gaps that I couldn't fill, and that's tantalizing. And the only way I could do that would be to write a novel” (Weir). In filling these gaps with stories, narratives, and characters that readers can relate to, she makes history more accessible. With some known historical facts and a literary understanding of human nature, an author's leaps between one known entity and the next may not be so implausible. An author can fill in those gaps in the record with speculation and imagination that may even come closer to truth than a historian's facts, which require corroboration and proof while taking the human aspect out of the past, are able to.

While critics attack departures from strict historical accuracy or accuse authors of misleading their readers, all fiction requires some creative license from its readers and reviewers. Even if one does not acknowledge that history itself is a subjective narrative, fiction itself demands some suspension of strict truth in favor of what could have happened in the past or might happen in the future. Johnson acknowledges the criticism the genre receives from academics and reviewers, noting, “You can see that over the years, while historical fiction has become more popular, other things – like the genre's overall respectability – haven't changed very much. At least if you believe what you read in the papers” (Johnson). As the genre's popularity increases and standards for historical fiction novels continue to rise, historical fiction readers and authors may soon force the literary and academic communities to take it seriously. As a form of fiction, an admitted speculation on historical fact, and an increasingly popular genre, historical fiction is moving in the direction of greater respect and will likely continue to do so until it takes its place for consideration beside other great works of literature.

Understanding the way publishing and academic perspectives on historical fiction have changed and may continue changing enhances an understanding of a genre that is clearly not going away. This knowledge may assist publishers in anticipating which types of books will sell and gain the respect of readers and reviewers, and will help academic researchers, professors, and critics to understand the context of the criticism of the genre and the direction in which it is moving. According to NPR's Book Concierge annual list, "Our Guide to 2016's Great Reads," 38 out of the 309 books they deemed to be the best of the year fall into the historical fiction category. Going back to the success of Mantel, the author said about the dominance of historical fiction on the Booker shortlist: "we have seen the resurrection of the time-worn debate about the value of historical fiction. Authors get tired of saying, 'It's all historical by the time it gets to the printers.' Sizzling topicality soon turns limp and tepid, and nothing dates quite so fast as a novel about the future" (Mantel). People are taking notice of historical fiction, and as they get interested in a certain time period or figure, they are inspired to read more about the subject, and so the genre snowballs into the future.

Clearly, opinions about historical fiction converge and diverge at various points, including its place in consideration as literature, its use in education of both younger students and higher learning, and its economic value in the publishing marketplace. Critics, reviewers, authors, readers, editors, publishers, and teachers all have opinions which slide along not even a linear scale, but a tangle of perspectives that depend not only on the situation but even on each specific book. For every benefit or detriment one can argue on the subject of the genre, there is an exception or an outlier. Yet even the generation of the discussion shows the mounting interest in historical fiction. There is not much discussion to find on the topic before about a hundred years ago, and even then it is scant, because it was not deemed worthy of being talked about in

an academic or professional setting. Although a lack of available (affordable) statistics exists to support reading trends with research, following discussions and recommendations serves as a worthwhile bar for the future of fiction. While there may be some historical fiction that conforms to stereotypes of glamorization or ostentatious speculation, no other genre, not science fiction or nonfiction or mystery, is represented only by its lowest forms. The historical fiction genre continues to fight against biases and preconceived notions, but increased attention from fiction awards and bestseller lists combined with social media and publishers' marketing are pulling historical fiction up into the light of serious literary fiction where it belongs.

Works Cited

- Bartel, Christopher. "The Puzzle of Historical Criticism". *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70.2 (2012): 213–222. Web 30 Mar. 2016.
- Brock, Ellen. "Bestselling Middle Grade Genres & Topics." *Ellen Brock Editing*. N.p., 30 Sept. 2013. Web. 3 May 2016. <<https://ellenbrockediting.com/2013/09>
- Brown, Joanne. "Historical Fiction or Fictionalized History? Problems for Writers of Historical Novels for Young Adults." *The Alan Review*, vol. 26, no. 1, Fall 1998. Accessed 17 Oct. 2016.
- Brown, Stephen J. "Irish Historical Fiction." *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 4.15 (1915): 441-53. Web.
- Carroll, Richard. "The Trouble with History and Fiction." *Journal of Media and Culture*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2011. Accessed 8 Oct. 2016.
- Cart, Michael. "Of Innocence--And Experience." *Booklist* 103.16 (2007): 37. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.
- Chee, Alexander. "Children of the Century." *New Republic*, 3 Feb. 2016. Accessed 2 Dec. 2016.
- Donahue, Deirdre. "Gregory's 'Queen' for a new era." *USA Today* 20 Aug. 2009: 06D. *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.
- Franklin, Ruth. "Why the Literary Landscape Continues to Disadvantage Women." *New Republic*, 4 Apr. 2012. Accessed 10 Mar. 2017.
- "Historical Fiction." *Goodreads*. Accessed 7 Oct. 2016.

"Historical Fiction Preferences – Publishers vs Readers." *Inside Historical Fiction*. N.p., 3 Jan. 2013. Web. 3 May 2016. <<https://awriterofhistory.com/2013/01/03/historical-fiction-preferences/>>.

Howell, Jennifer. "Popularising History: Re-igniting Pre-service Teacher and Student Interest in History via Historical Fiction." *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 39, no. 12, 2014. *ERIC*. Accessed 22 Mar. 2017.

Iciek, Eileen. "Favourite Historical Fiction Authors – A 1902 Perspective." *A Writer of History*, 25 Feb. 2014. Accessed 16 Oct. 2016.

Jack, Malcolm. "Edutainment: Is There a Role for Popular Culture in Education?" *The Independent*, 2010. Accessed 21 Feb. 2017.

Johnson, Sarah. "Defining the Genre: What Are the Rules for Historical Fiction?" *Historical Novel Society*, Mar. 2002. Accessed 8 Nov. 2016.

Kellogg, Carolyn. "6 Book Trends for 2016: Look into the Future." *Los Angeles Times*, 31 Dec. 2015.

Kowalczyk, Ola. "Most Popular Book Genres of All Time (Infographic)." *EBook Friendly*, 28 Oct. 2014. Accessed 13 Oct. 2016.

Lasky, Kathryn. *Elizabeth I: Red Rose of the House of Tudor*. New York, Scholastic, 1999. The Royal Diaries.

Litt, Toby. "Against Historical Fiction." *Irish Pages*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2008. *JSTOR*. Accessed 16 Dec. 2017.

Mantel, Hilary. "Booker Winner Hilary Mantel on Dealing with History in Fiction." *The Guardian*, 16 Oct. 2009. Accessed 20 Feb. 2017.

Milliot, Jim. "The Hottest (and Coldest) Book Categories of 2014." *Publishers Weekly*, 23 Jan. 2015. Accessed 17 Oct. 2016.

Nawrot, Kathy. "Making Connections with Historical Fiction". *The Clearing House* 69.6 (1996): 343–345. Web. 3 May 2016.

Nield, Jonathan. *A Guide to the Best Historical Novels and Tales*. New York: Macmillan, 1902. Print

"NPR's Book Concierge; Our Guide To 2016's Great Reads." *National Public Radio Books*, 6 Dec. 2016. Accessed 8 Mar. 2017.

Parini, Jay. "Making history: how historical fiction went highbrow." *The Atlantic* May 2009: 19+. *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.

Peterson, Brent O. "Mühlbach, Ranke, and the Truth of Historical Fiction". *A Companion to German Realism 1848-1900*. Ed. Todd Kontje. NED - New edition. Boydell & Brewer, 2002. 53–84. Web 30 Mar. 2016.

"Popular Historical Fiction Books." *GoodReads*, 21 Oct. 2016. Accessed 21 Oct. 2016.

Sliwka, Carol (2008) "Connecting to History Through Historical Fiction," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 23: Iss. 2, Article 11. Accessed 3 Jan. 2017.

Teukolsky, Rachel. "Why Does the Historical Novel Need to be Rescued?" *Public Books*. N.p., 14 Jan. 2013. Web. 31 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.publicbooks.org/fiction/why-does-the-historical-novel-need-to-be-rescued>>.

Tod, M.K. "2015 Historical Fiction Reader Survey." *A Writer of History*, June 2015. Accessed 6 Feb. 2017.

Tripp, Valerie. "Vitamins in Chocolate Cake: Why Use Historical Fiction in the Classroom?"

TeachingHistory.org, National History Education Clearinghouse, 5 Sept. 2011. Accessed 22 Dec. 2017.

Weir, Alison. *The Lady Elizabeth*. Random House, 2008.

Weir, Alison. "Writing the Well-Researched Bodice-Ripper." Interview by Neal Conan. *Talk of the Nation*, National Public Radio, 21 July 2010. *Global Issues in Context*. Accessed 23 Oct. 2016.

Williams, Michael. "Opportunities in Historical Fiction." *The Catholic Historical Review* 8.3 (1922): 360-71. Web. 30 March 2016.

ACADEMIC VITA

Academic Vita of Meghan O'Leary
meghan1357@gmail.com

Education: Bachelor of Arts Degree, The Pennsylvania State University, Spring 2017

Major in English

Minor in Business and the Liberal Arts

Honors in English

Thesis Title: Analysis of the Value of Historical Fiction

Thesis Supervisor: Gregg Rogers

Work Experience:

Production Assistant

Taylor and Francis Group, Philadelphia, PA

Summers 2015 and 2016

Writing Center Coordinator

Writing Center, Penn State Learning

Fall 2016—Spring 2017

Editorial Intern

The Dangling Modifier Peer Tutoring Online Magazine, Penn State

Fall 2015—Spring 2016

Awards

Dean's List, Fall 2013—present

Provost Award Scholarship Recipient

College of Liberal Arts Scholarship Recipient

Professional Memberships

Phi Beta Kappa

Community Service Involvement

Penn State Dance Marathon (THON), Merchandise and Operations

Committees

Fall 2014—present