

Worldbuilding and ‘Creative Histories’

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Abstract

Ever since the professionalisation of the discipline of history in the late nineteenth century, there has been a debate that has waxed and waned amongst scholars concerning the relationship of the discipline to the world of fiction. For much of this period, the general consensus was to regard history as a social science, with some historians even going so far as to describe a ravine or gulf existing between the discipline and the world of fiction. In recent years this propensity to demarcate strict boundaries between the fields of history and fiction has diminished and, indeed, what used to be considered a ravine is probably nowadays more usefully conceived of as a distinct niche or crevice (and, thus, those operating within it could usefully be described as a ‘crevice community’, plying their craft, as it were, in the borderlands of history and creative practice). The newly-emergent field of ‘Creative Histories’ (CH) stands testament to this shift, with a central tenet being the closer collaboration between academic history and creative practice.

This paper will, first, delineate an historiographical overview of the relationship between history and fiction. I then show how the recent reciprocity between history and creative practice/fiction has led to the establishment of the field of CH. I finish by suggesting that the concept of worldbuilding – itself an under-researched topic within academia – represents an apparent area of convergence between academic history and creative fiction and, hence, a potentially productive focus of research and practice.

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Some might point out, quite rightly, that the merging or fruitful coalescence of history and fiction is hardly a new thing. There is, after all, a very well established (and popular) genre called ‘historical fiction’ that has a long and rich history. Well, yes and no. It depends, to a large extent, on one’s perspective. From the point of view of the writer of fiction, yes, there is a long list of (some very famous) writers who have worked within this genre. Many date the roots of the genre to the nineteenth-century works of Sir Walter Scott but along the way, the genre can reasonably

lay claim to such famous names as Leo Tolstoy, Charles Dickens and, more recently, Hilary Mantel. And here in Australia – Kate Grenville, Thomas Keneally, and Peter Carey. Many of these writers have spoken about the time they spend in archives (and, these days, online) sifting through primary source material to research their novels. However, if we change perspective to that of the academic historian, we find that there are surprisingly few historians who have been willing to mix their historical research with a bit of fiction (at least not in a formal, public sense). The reasons for this lie in the history of the academic discipline of history – otherwise known as historiography – and its relationship with the world of fiction.

This relationship has quite the storied past. When historians discuss it, many will begin the account with two ancient Greek historians: Herodotus and Thucydides. These two figures are often cited as the founding fathers of history – most often one or the other is cited but, occasionally, both are cited together (Curthoys & Docker, 2010). These two historians of the ancient world had quite different ways of telling history; Herodotus was more ‘literary’ and Thucydides more analytical. Herodotus was inclined to include tall tales about gods and monsters and interesting, if somewhat incredible, stories about Greek heroes in his histories. As Mark Twain once wrote of Herodotus’s approach to history: ‘very few things happen at the right time, and the rest do not happen at all: the conscientious historian will correct these defects’ (Twain, 1906/2017). Herodotus’s successor, Thucydides, has a reputation for eschewing such cavalier history and is seen as more disciplined and ‘fact’-based in his methods and writing. He was assiduous in his approach to the evidence and only included in his history what could be verified from what he considered to be trusted source material (these were frequently eyewitnesses to the events he was relating). Thus, in Herodotus and Thucydides, the discipline of history had two quite different foundational figures, with very different attitudes towards historical ‘truth’ (and hence, probably, historical ‘fiction’) and the status of historical facts and evidence.

If we jump forward to the point in the late nineteenth century when the discipline first started to lay claim to professionalism, with attendant rules and codes of conduct, we see that loyalties were very much with Thucydides. Indeed, these late Victorian historians, following Plutarch, termed Herodotus the Father of Lies (Curthoys & Docker, 2010, p. 13). The rules of the discipline were more or less formulated by a German historian, the arch-empiricist, Leopold von Ranke, who wanted the discipline to have a modern, professional, ‘scientific’ comportment. Ranke sought to actively distance history from literature, with which it had been closely associated in previous centuries, and declared, like Thucydides, that the method and writing of history ought to be anchored in the historical ‘facts’ as revealed through a close parsing of the primary sources.

We cannot expect from the writing of history the same free development as is, at least in theory, to be expected in works of literature ... A strict presentation of the facts, contingent and unattractive as that may be, is the highest law (Ranke, 1981, p. 58).

And this is how it more or less remained for about a century. While during this time the topics and subjects that were considered appropriate for historical study expanded beyond the high politics of Ranke to include social history (or ‘history from below’), history of regions outside of Europe and North America, and historical monographs gradually began to be peopled by those other than powerful white men, the *method* of history – the way of researching and telling the

stories of this more varied global populace – more or less remained rooted in the objective, scientific analysis of primary sources. Granted, along with the expansion of the topics and subjects of research, what counted as a primary source also expanded during the twentieth century – for example, social history is intertwined with the rise of oral history methods – but, nevertheless, the way the historian approached these expanded sources and topics was supposed to remain objective, analytical, empirical. The literary world was left to the poets and writers.

Of course, there were exceptions along the way – historians who wrote their history with a more ‘literary’ bent – but these often drew the opprobrium of their scholarly fellows. The Australian historian, Manning Clark, is one such example. Clark’s multi-volume *History of Australia* is a sprawling, baroque tale that more often reads like an ancient Greek tragedy than a sober, detached work of history (Clark, 1962). This is not to say that the work doesn’t contain its fair share of evidence drawn from careful research in the archives and other primary sources but it is to say that Clark, like Herodotus, wasn’t averse to including the odd tall tale or versions of events that elided factual detail in favour of allegorical significance. For these reasons, Clark’s *History*, although often admired, was also accused at the time (and since, as we will see) of being fast and loose with the facts and blurring the line between history and fiction/fabrication.

This idea of the discipline of history being a strand of the social sciences, and, indeed, the notion of objective historical truth per se, was challenged in the late twentieth century by theorists influenced by postmodernism. Based on the earlier work of philosophers like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, historians like Hayden White and Keith Jenkins began to question the degree to which historical research and writing could make a claim for objectivity at all (White, 1978; Jenkins, 1995). They argued that despite these trappings of disinterested analytical method and theory – all the sifting of primary evidence and the careful (and often lengthy) display of said sifting via footnotes – historians nevertheless necessarily deployed devices and techniques borrowed from the world of fiction (plotting, story arcs, characters etc.) to present their history. History writing was, therefore, really just another mode or genre of literature, what White famously called the ‘literature of fact’ (White, 1978, p. 214). At bottom, White was contending that history had much more in common with fiction than historians would avow.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this produced a backlash from the scholarly community of historians. They accused White of arguing that history was inseparable from fiction and that, ergo, anyone could write anything they wanted and call it history. This, in fact, was something White was careful to never say. Rather, he argued that the writing of history bore more similarities to the writing of fiction than the scientific, empiricist historians were willing to admit. That while the historian is most often concerned with actual events that happened, they are unable to represent these without resorting to techniques that add a fictional, or at least creative, element, no matter how dispassionate the voice or lengthy the footnote. Nevertheless this presumption about White’s claims proved very persistent within the academy.

An unfortunate consequence of this postmodern challenge was an even greater sensitivity, or suspicion, amongst historians towards the world of fiction, especially fiction that pondered the past. Thus it was that when as renowned an historian as Simon Schama published a work of fiction – albeit one clearly grounded in rigorous historical research – it produced a kind of furor in the academic historical community. *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations* was published in 1991 and it was pretty clear it was a work of fiction; a fact Schama (2013) clearly

stated in the afterword, '[although] both the stories [in the book] follow the documented record with some closeness, they are works of the imagination, not scholarship.' And later, 'though these stories may at times appear to observe the discursive conventions of history, they are in fact historical novellas, since some passages ... are pure inventions, based, however, on what documents suggest' (pp. 319, 322). Nonetheless this didn't stop a number of historians viewing the book as a kind of betrayal. A review in the New York Times titled 'A Historian Enters Fiction's Shadowy Domain' described how Schama had 'intentionally crossed a frontier into the promising but, for a historian, always shadowy domain of invention, fictionalisation, imagination' (Bernstein, 1991, A Historian Enters Fiction's Shadowy Domain, para. 4). Schama responded, in a preface to the new edition in 2013, by expressing his surprise that 'a modest, playful piece of self-evident *fiction* would be regarded by the sentinels of the academy as a betrayal of History; an outrage against the profession and its code of conduct; a manifesto of ultra-relativism; the Enemy against whom a Stand Had to be Taken' (p. xi). Indeed, Schama's preface and afterword in *Dead Certainties* present a thoughtful and erudite contemplation of the fraught state of the relationship between history and fiction at this time.

This turf war between historians and writers of fiction was to play out in a particularly Australian context with the publication of a popular work of historical fiction in 2005 – Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*. A number of Australian historians viewed Grenville's book as an unwarranted incursion into what was properly their domain. Fresh from working with the same source material, Inga Clendinnen (2006) wrote in the *Quarterly Essay* about how she 'flinched from what looked like opportunistic transpositions and elisions' in the novel. She went on to state that 'historians are puritans when it comes to the novelisation of history' and that there was necessarily a 'gulf between writing imaginative fiction and writing evidence-bound history'. She argued that it was the distinction between 'the primarily aesthetic purpose of fiction and the primarily moral purpose of history which makes the present jostling for territory matter.' (pp. 16, 34). In a trenchant response to Grenville's response to her 2006 essay, Clendinnen (2007) described Grenville's work as an 'insouciant exploitation of fragments of the past' and elaborated on 'why so many historians believe so few novelists are capable of illuminating the actual past' (pp. 73, 77 emphasis added) (elsewhere she describes it as a 'ravine'; which echoes, albeit using a different metaphor, the New York Times reviewer's description of the boundary between history and fiction as a 'frontier').¹

In an article published around the same time, historian Mark McKenna (2005) wrote that 'we should be wary of novelists being encouraged to parade as historical authorities ... Fiction has historical elements, history has fictive elements, but fiction should not be claimed as history. All writers and critics have an obligation to remember to distinguish between the two' (Writing the past: McKenna challenges the rise of the novelist as historian, para. 29). Even though McKenna grudgingly admits here to some cross-pollination between the worlds of history and fiction, the sub-text is clearly that we should probably try and keep this to a minimum.

Obviously this territorial grandstanding did nothing to bring the worlds of history and fiction closer or into greater dialogue. Writing at the time, historian Iain McCalman (2004) noted that 'one of the unexpected casualties of our current History Wars may be a forced cooling of

¹ In an interesting side point, Grenville has said that it was Manning Clark's *History of Australia* that inspired her to write *Secret History*.

relations between fiction and history writing' (p. 151). Happily this didn't dissuade historical novelists from continuing to ply their trade – the genre has arguably only gone on to become ever more popular. But it did probably mean that historians who had literary inclinations were even less likely to venture into fiction for fear of being seen as some sort of traitors to their profession. Schama may have been big enough to weather such accusations of apostasy but lesser known lights may have, understandably, feared similar criticism from their academic peers. Indeed, those few who did publish works of fiction often felt the need to publish under different names (de Matos, 2015).

But, thankfully, in recent times, this propensity to mark out a gulf or ravine between the domains of history and fiction has dissipated considerably. When Schama's *Dead Certainties* was republished in 2013, there was no repetition of the earlier storm of criticism from historians. In a 2013 article in *Meanjin* on, of all topics, the impact of Manning Clark, we find Mark McKenna appears more sympathetic to the construction of bridges over (or, at least, the partial filling-in of) the ravine that was said to exist between history and fiction. He noted that 'we are living at a time when the language of fiction and nonfiction has begun to merge ... Discussing the differences between history and fiction has, of late, become standard fare at writers festivals, precisely because the boundaries that were once clear are clear no longer.' However, it isn't obvious from the rest of the article how he feels about this rapprochement.

Why this rapprochement? Perhaps enough time had passed since the turf wars and, as with many disagreements, with the lapse of time and cooling of temper the participants had reconsidered their initial salvos? Perhaps, having had time to mull over the finer points of the postmodern challenge, historians were now more comfortable with contingency and uncertainty and the role that fictive elements inevitably play in the re-presentation of history? In the Australian context, it was very likely that the History Wars of the 1990s (ie. the fracas within the Australia historical fraternity over the impact of colonial settlement on the Indigenous population), and the associated cultural and political reverberations, had had some impact on convictions about the supposed objectivity of historical scholarship (Clark & Macintyre, 2003).

Whatever the cause, there would be few historians today who would deny the influence of fictive and imaginative elements in their work. As Tom Griffiths (2015) recently put it, 'history and fiction journey together and separately into [the] past; they are sometimes uneasy partners, but they are also magnetically drawn to one another in the quest for deeper understanding' (p. 18). Apropos the theme of this inaugural issue of the *Journal of Creative Practice Research*, Clendinnen's ravine has been reduced to what can appositely be termed a crevice, and those working within this 'productive space', a crevice community. This thawing of the Cold War between historians and fiction writers have allowed a number of historians to start exploring more overtly the creative tension that exists between history and fiction and to embrace the speculative and imaginative aspects of their craft. Which brings us to 'Creative Histories'.

Creative Histories (CH) is quite a recent area of research and practice within the discipline of history. In the UK, CH has chiefly been championed by a group of historians at the University of Bristol. This Bristol group hosted an inaugural conference in 2017 at the Bristol Zoo Gardens (Creative Histories, 2017). In keeping with the guiding tenets of CH, the program for the conference included performances, exhibitions, and screenings as well as more traditionally academic papers and keynote lectures. In Australia, the field of CH has been pursued by a small

and disparate collection of academics. The University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) has an Australian Centre for Public History that explores ideas relating to creative and public history and the Centre has a research ‘stream’ that focuses on Historical Culture and Creative Histories (the blurb captures concisely some of the chief concerns of the CH field). And a recent journal article (April 2022) co-authored by a group of researchers from Griffith University, Australian Museum, the University of South Australia and Central Queensland University examined what ‘Creative Histories’ might mean in the Australian context. The most recent statement on the CH field is a 2023 article in *History Compass* (Twells et al., 2023):

Put very simply, the main objective for those working within the CH field is to present and tell history in more creative, diverse and reflexive ways. Furthermore, CH seek to break down boundaries that might exist between those who engage creatively with the historical record – writers, filmmakers, artists, museum professionals, as well as, increasingly, creators of online content – and academic historians, as well as boundaries between what’s often described as popular or public history and, again, academic history.

Perhaps a quick discussion of a couple of examples may be useful here. Will Pooley, from the Bristol group, recently collaborated with the poet Anna Kisby Compton and playwright Poppy Corbett on the Creative Histories of Witchcraft Project (Pooley, Creative Histories of Witchcraft). This project sought to address fundamental questions that lie at the heart of CH. What does it mean for history to be ‘creative’? Why might historians take a ‘creative turn’? To this end, collaborative creative practice methods were used to research and understand witchcraft in the long nineteenth century. A specific aim was to bring a creative practice lens to bear on supernatural experience and belief in order to try and ‘stay with the magic, rather than explaining it away.’ Western historiography of supernatural phenomena, like witchcraft and magic, has tended to frame it within a modernisation paradigm of the secularisation of society and culture, thereby distancing and ‘othering’ past belief in, and experience of, supernatural phenomena. Corbett, Compton, and Pooley wanted to utilise creative practice methods to move beyond this modernisation/secularisation paradigm and restore agency and comprehensibility to magical beliefs and practices. This project led to a recently published book in the Cambridge Elements series that explicates their process and results; the book also functions as a kind of exemplar and manual for creative-academic, practice-based historical research (Corbett et al., 2022).

This idea that creative practice methods can transcend traditional academic assumptions about working in and with the archive can be found in the work of another historian-cum-creative writer, Sue Harper. An accomplished film historian, Harper recently decided to branch out into creative writing via short stories. She was especially interested in the way ‘continuities can be forged between academic methods and creative writing’ in order to work within the categories of what she termed creative scholarship and grounded fiction. As with Pooley et. al. above, Harper’s quasi-historical short stories sought to move beyond conventional academic appraisals of the historical record, inviting readers to interrogate received versions of the past and take risks with the evidence which is habitually used. In ‘The Vintage Suitcase’, the protagonist happens upon some toy soldiers and restages some of the great battles of history. But in doing so, the original events get overturned and, for example, Napoleon ends up winning the Battle of Waterloo (Harper, *The Dark Nest*, vol. 4). In ‘The Cave Painters’, the heroine discovers cave paintings that are profoundly challenging to a normative view of history (Harper, *The Dark Nest*,

vol. 5). In writing these short stories, Harper expounded that ‘a movement into creative work should not always be seen as a *retreat* from the academic but can be a development of it.’ While academic methodology and creative writing are different kinds of activity, ‘they can mutually illuminate one another and stimulate new types of approach’ (Harper, 2023)

So what’s my particular interest in the CH field? In general, I would like to mine a similar intellectual seam to that in the examples discussed above. Like Pooley and Harper, I’m interested in the possibilities to be found in bringing academic history and fiction writing into closer synergy. One way of doing this is to explore commonalities, rather than the differences, between these two fields of endeavour. I’m curious about what seems to me at least to be an obvious area of common ground between historical and fictional writing: the theory and practice of worldbuilding.

The idea of worldbuilding is most commonly associated with fiction writing and, more particularly, the genres of fantasy and science fiction. The concept is also inherently transmedial in that it is applied to books, films, TV (both animated and live action), comics, roleplaying games, and, increasingly, video games. With most of this content the milieu or setting is invariably the overtly imagined world and, in this context, the concept has been the focus of some scholarly work (Wolf, 2012; Quina, 2021). However, based on my investigations, it has received very little, if any, attention from historians. This seems a little surprising (although less so if one considers the historiographical background discussed in the first half of this paper) since much of what has been said about worldbuilding in regards to imaginary worlds could just as fruitfully be applied to historical worlds.

Take, for example, one of the fundamental precepts associated with the theory of worldbuilding: that of subcreation. In *World-builders on World-building*, Mark Wolf adumbrates the process of subcreation as:

To ideate, prototype, develop, and understand the complexity of a world within any practical constraints, we must be able to enter it before it exists. A world changes constantly because we change our viewpoints and vectors constantly. We need to develop the knowledge, depth, and complexity for a multidimensional structure that can support our stories. The intended world is too intricate to understand, yet we cannot understand it unless we begin to build it (x).

If one replaces the word ‘world’ with the word ‘past’ in this quote, it remains just as coherent and meaningful. Although this is a handy brief illustration, it may appear a little glib, so it’s probably helpful to look at this idea of subcreation in a little more detail.

The term itself can be traced back to one of the pioneers (and someone whom many still consider to be one of the masters) of imaginary worldbuilding, J.R.R. Tolkien. Following ideas about Primary and Secondary Imaginations promulgated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and George MacDonald before him, Tolkien applied this thinking to the formulation of Primary and Secondary Worlds. Put simply, the Primary World is the observable, material world around us while a Secondary World is any imaginary, created world. There is a hierarchical relationship between these two worlds, with the Secondary World necessarily reliant on, and existing within, the Primary World – obviously without the Primary World the Secondary World wouldn’t exist.

Building on this, Tolkien termed the creation of the Secondary World ‘subcreation’ since this creation must depend on pre-existing ideas and concepts in the Primary World, even if the reconfiguration produces something entirely novel and unique (Tolkien, 1964).

Wolf builds upon Tolkien’s conceptualisation of Primary and Secondary Worlds to gradate the degree of secondariness a subcreated world may possess. Thus he posits a spectrum of secondariness in which the position of a product of subcreation on the spectrum is dependent on its degree of attachment to, or reliance on, the current Primary World and its default settings (Wolf, 2012). The example Wolf positions at closest proximity to the Primary World end of the spectrum is nonfictional autobiography. The next position along is occupied by biography and historical documentary and the next by historical fiction. It therefore seems plausible that – even though Wolf never explicitly says this – the work of most historians would sit quite comfortably amongst the historical documentary and nonfiction autobiography area of the spectrum. Wolf may come closest to applying this model of secondariness to the work of historians when he talks about the degree to which a Secondary World may differ *temporally* from the current Primary World. As he notes, ‘detachment and separation from the Primary World can also occur temporally; worlds set in the ancient (or even imaginary) eras of the past ... can also be made to differ from the known Primary World (as hinted in author L.P. Hartley’s claim that “the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there”)’ (Wolf, 2012, p. 28).

All of this strikes me as not only appropriate for historical worldbuilding but incredibly useful. Historians are clearly in the business of building worlds and more attentiveness to *how* those worlds are (sub)created, their relationship to the Primary World, and the believability of subcreated historical worlds seems to be a good thing. Not only does this way of thinking about worldbuilding bring the work of historians into the same ontological domain as writers of fiction but it also helpfully reminds historians of the integral and constantly relational nature that their Secondary Worlds of the past have with our current Primary World.

So in what kind of worldbuilding am I interested? It should be said from the outset that my work in this area is still at a very nascent stage but, following CH principles, I’m interested in the kind of Secondary World that is the product of both historical and creative practice and represents a genuine melding of both. Just where it might sit on Wolf’s spectrum of secondariness is unclear but it is a subcreation that would utilise the historical awareness and method of the historian and that also incorporates the imaginative and speculative dimensions of the fiction writer. My work will intentionally play with assumptions about what is fact and what is fiction, causing the reader, hopefully, to become uncertain themselves about the status of these terms.

It’s difficult to know just how to describe the particular kind of alchemical process of melding historical and creative practice that I have in mind but there are some descriptions and terminology other scholars have deployed when contemplating this kind of endeavour that I find apposite. An early proponent for the importance of imagination and speculation in academic history, Natalie Zemon Davis, once used the phrase ‘informed imagination’ to describe her approach to historical research. The fact that both a writer of historical fiction (Hilary Mantel) and an historian (Kiera Lindsey) have recently invoked this term as influential on their own thinking bodes well and points towards the relative propinquity of these fields today (Mantel, 2017; Lindsey, 2018). Historian Christine De Matos has recently coined the term ‘fictorians’ to describe those historians who write both non-fiction history and historical fiction. She also

describes the relative amity that historians now feel towards historical fiction as the ‘fictional turn’ in the field of history (de Matos, 2015). De Matos’s fictorians seek to combine their historical training with the freedom offered by fiction to tell larger (or more intimate) stories; stories that may be only gestured at, or hidden by, the historical evidence. This is reminiscent of Pooley’s preoccupations when wanting to represent – from the inside looking out – the belief in, and experience of, magic and witchcraft.

Following Pooley, my own work also seeks to subcreate a world of the late medieval and early modern period that incorporates belief in, and experience of, particular supernatural phenomena. Following Harper, this world will be a product of creative scholarship and grounded fiction. And as a de Matosian fictorian, while this world will obviously be a product of creative practice, it will be deeply informed by my background and training as an historian. The archive and historical sources will not only form an integral component of the worldbuilding but also parts of the narrative structure of the creative fiction. In this way, I aim to explore not only how the historical record can inform and inspire creative practice but also highlight the uncertainty, speculation and imagination that is intrinsic to the archive.

In conclusion, the historiography of history and fiction has often viewed these worlds as largely distinct spheres of intellectual activity separated by an ideological ravine. Frequently academic historians viewed the fiction writing with a mixture of distrust and condescension, an attitude that was more overt when writers of historical fiction were seen as intruding upon the territory of historians. Fortunately, this cold war between historians and the world of fiction has begun in recent times to thaw and a kind of détente has been reached. At the risk of mixing metaphors, what was once a ravine appears now to be little more than a crevice. Indeed, some historians have begun to actively work within this crevice community to explore the insights that can be afforded via a melding of historical method and creative practice. At the vanguard of this work are those working within the new field of Creative Histories. Historians like Pooley, de Matos and Harper seek to explicitly incorporate fictive devices within their own historical work and, furthermore, foster more collaboration between historians and creative fiction writers, poets and playwrights. My own interest in this endeavour sees, what seems to me, an obvious area of commonality in the theory and practice of worldbuilding. While fiction writers have long recognised the importance of subcreation in their work, historians have rarely, if ever, applied this to their work. I believe the creative practice and discipline of subcreation offers much potential for fruitful collaboration and cooperation between the worlds of history and fiction.

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