ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW & SOCIAL SCIENCES

NORMING THE OTHER:
NARRATIVE EMPATHY VIA FOCALISED HETEROTOPIA

NICOLA J. GRIFFITH

A thesis in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of Anglia Ruskin University
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Submitted: May 2017

i

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW & SOCIAL SCIENCES

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

AMMONITE, SLOW RIVER, THE BLUE PLACE, *STAY, ALWAYS*, AND *HILD*

&

NORMING THE OTHER: NARRATIVE EMPATHY VIA FOCALISED
HETEROTOPIA

NICOLA J. GRIFFITH

May 2017

This critical commentary argues that the novels submitted (emphasis on *Ammonite, The Blue Place*, and *Hild,* with three others, *Slow River*, *Stay*, and *Always* briefly referenced), form a coherent body of work which centres and norms the experience of the Other, particularly queer women. Close reading of the novels demonstrates how specific word-choice and metaphor locate the examination of a focalised character's body in its physical and sensory setting. This examination of the body is referred to as *embodiment*. The commentary argues that embodiment of the focalised character activates neural mechanisms within the reader to create and sustain narrative empathy. It explores the creation of focalised heterotopias and the narrative consequences for characters traditionally marginalised in our society but not in their own.

Contents

Note:

As the glosses can be substantial this critical review employs footnotes instead of

endnotes.

Introduction

I write to find out and, in the process, change the world one reader at a time. Adrienne Rich said, "We must use what we have to invent what we desire" (Rich 1993: 215), and I desire a world where we are all, regardless of our identities, regarded by one another as human beings. I build worlds and populate them with women and other members of traditionally maligned groups who behave, and expect treatment, as full human beings. I create milieux so immersive that readers are eager and able to recreate and simulate the experiences of the characters inside themselves: the protagonist's feelings and lessons become the reader's, in scenarios enticing and vivid enough to facilitate narrative empathy. Through empathy I seek to alter the reader's standpoint long enough to persuade them to consider women and other members of traditionally maligned groups—whether queer, poor, disabled, or people of colour—to be as human as the reader themselves. I aim to norm the Other.

The first stories I absorbed were oral fairytales. Reading followed: myths and legends first, then an indiscriminate gulping of everything within reach.[1] In adolescence I discovered types of story that reliably delivered the frisson I had first found in fairytale and myth: adventure fiction, such as *She* (Haggard 1888), science fiction, such as *Dune* (Herbert 1965*)*; and adult historical fiction by authors such as Rosemary Sutcliff. My favourite fiction had fast-moving events; close attention to the varying emotion and psychological growth of the protagonist; intellectual engagement with something unknown; and, most of all, physical freedom in and enjoyment of the natural world. But I learnt very early that people like me were not represented in

---

[1] Literally. My local library seemed to operate on the principle that if you could reach a shelf you could borrow the books it held.

stories, that only male characters were free to have adventures.

As a writer I seek to represent people like me and to norm the Other, particularly queer women. I draw from diverse traditions and genres, including historical fiction, lesbian fiction, science fiction, crime fiction, literary fiction, and nature writing. I strive for a balance between the eventful epic and the intimate, psychological novel. For me, genre is a tool, a vehicle to traverse specific story terrains. An imagined reader will bring different attitudes and expectations to bear on any particular genre text: I consciously partake of genre conversations in order to harness and/or subvert the reader's expectations.

In this critical review I argue that, in order to norm the Other, my body of work creates reader empathy with members of traditionally maligned groups via the construction of focalised heterotopias. The review consists of two parts.

Part One, Theoretical Underpinnings, is divided into two chapters. Chapter One, on narrative empathy, argues that fiction can trigger mirror neurons which enable a reader to construct a character's actions and emotions inside themselves; this construction facilitates empathy, but that narrative empathy can be obviated by a reader's aversive emotional response. I respond to this in Chapter Two, on focalised heterotopia, my portmanteau term based on the focalisation theories of Mieke Bal (1985) and Gérard Genette (1972), and Michel Foucault on heterotopia (1986), and argue that situating the focalised character within a heterotopia that excludes the oppressive discourse associated with membership of maligned groups may preclude triggering an aversive emotional response.

Part Two, R/Evolution, presents three close readings of a novel or group of novels. Chapter Three concerns my science fiction novels and considers my evolution

from writing general heterotopia in *Ammonite* (1993) to focalised heterotopia in *Slow River* (1995). I argue that my use of metaphor partly facilitates the construction of focalised characters. Chapter Four examines my contemporary crime novel series, with particular attention to *The Blue Place*, and argues that embodiment of the focalised character is essential to the construction and maintenance of empathy for a female narrator who is unlike her literary predecessors. Finally, Chapter Five considers my historical novel, *Hild*. It situates the novel in context of other historical fictions and examines the novel's use of language, metaphor, and the embodied character's reflection of and in her early medieval landscape to norm the Other.

The conclusion summarises my argument that my fiction is a coherent body of work whose goal is to norm the Other, and that in achieving this goal I unite previously divided narrative paths.

My appendix offers a list of the novels' critical reception including literary prizes and other honours.

Part One: Theoretical Underpinnings

1. Running my software on their hardware: narrative empathy

Some neuroscientists theorise that mirror neurons are human brain cells activated when we perform actions and when we observe others performing those actions.[2] Mirror neurons let us recreate others' experience, emotions, and motivations inside ourselves; they may be foundational to human empathy.[3] Zanna Clay and Marco Iacoboni assert (2012), via empirical analysis of recent neuroscience, including that of functional MRIs, that reading can trigger mirror neurons, thus enabling readers' internal recreation of a characters' actions and emotions and constructing narrative empathy.

Reading fiction not only promotes empathy; it can also lead to real-world change. Kevin Oatley (2011) offers evidence that a reader is able to infer well-drawn characters' thoughts and intentions and that it is partly the work the reader does to piece together the clues offered by an author that leads to understanding of a character's motivations. Suzanne Keen (2006) posits that a reader's knowledge that they are reading a story plays a positive role in empathetic response: the knowledge releases them from "the obligation of self-protection" inherent in real-world situations, although "an appropriately inspiring social context, or an emergent structure of feeling promoting change may be necessary for efficacious action to arise out of internalized experiences of narrative empathy" (220).

There is a caveat. Narrative empathy can be obviated by a reader's negative emotions. If we observe suffering that we associate in some way with our own

---

[2] This is a not uncontroversial topic (possibly because of exaggerated claims advanced by the popular press). James Kilner and Roger Lemon (2013) have a useful overview of the current understanding.

[3] Keen defines empathy as a "vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect" (2006: 208).

situation, we may experience personal distress and respond with an aversion that "leads not to sympathy but to avoidance," a "turning-away from the provocative condition of the other" (208). Therefore, to norm the Other I employ strategies to avoid aversive emotional response in the particular arenas upon which my fiction focuses. When writing from the perspective of a queer woman I avoid taking the reader into an overwhelming experience of gender discrimination or sexual violence, or the homophobic violence (and threat of same) often experienced by those who identify (or are identified by others) as lesbian or bisexual women. I find worm-turns fiction[4] regressive and have little patience for pleading for equal treatment. I prefer to move beyond both Foucault's reverse discourse (1976) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reparative reading (1996). Rather than delineating the oppressions experienced by traditionally maligned groups, the struggles to overcome those oppressions, or what might happen if power positions were reversed, I have chosen to selectively exclude current oppressive discourse and structures which pertain to gender and sexual orientation.

The pro-social outcomes of narrative empathy can be facilitated by unconscious affiliations. Clay and Iacoboni note growing evidence that the more familiar the situation or actions of a character, the more easily a reader's mirror neurons are activated. Keen adds that when adult readers feel empathy for a character they tend to "experience empathy most readily and accurately for those who *seem* like us" (2006: 214; my emphasis). Also, Oatley quotes the work of Melanie Green and Tim Brook, who argue that immersion in a story leads to text inducing "empathy for the people of

---

[4] Role-reversal in which the traditionally oppressed gain the upper hand and oppress their former oppressors.

minority status" (2011: 172). I contend that the more precisely a writer limns specific character experience, the more readily a reader will empathise with that character.

I take particular care to create immersion for the reader by exploring a character's physical sensations and emotions. To build and maintain empathy for a character, whether or not she belongs to the same in-group as the reader, it is essential to create similarities with a reader's potential experience. I do this through a focus on embodied needs. Maslow (1943) argues that generally human beings experience certain common physiological and psychological needs. Keen argues (2006: 226) that elation, triumph, satisfaction and sexual arousal are all good examples of the emotions that might facilitate empathy. Embodiment facilitates narrative empathy via the portrayal of both need and joy.

2. Excluding to include: focalised heterotopia

Marghe, and to a lesser extent Danner, in *Ammonite*; Lore in *Slow River*; Aud in *The Blue Place* (and its sequels *Stay* and *Always*); and Hild in *Hild* are the lenses through whom the reader encounters events. The narrative is focalised through the protagonist's experience and this shapes the narrative. Burkhard Niederhoff (2013), following Genette (1972), defines focalisation as "a selection or restriction of narrative information in relation to the experience and knowledge of the narrator, the characters (...) in the storyworld" (n.p.). My focalised characters are all women and all queer, who as members of traditionally maligned[5] groups would normally suffer oppressive

---

[5] Throughout I use the term 'maligned' to mean reviled, mistreated, abused, subordinated and discriminated against.

discourse and its concomitant punishments.[6] However rendering this suffering would likely create an aversive emotional response which would work in opposition to the construction of narrative empathy.[7] Without empathy, the narrative cannot change the reader's standpoint or cognitive script (Stockwell 2002: 77), even temporarily, to norm the Other.[8] To norm the fictional Other requires both realism (see below) and the exclusion of empathy-repelling experiences associated with being queer and/or a woman.

Empathy is easier to create for characters in circumstances to which a reader might be willing to relate. To create narrative empathy sufficient to norm the Other my narratives construct heterotopias, spaces of "alternate ordering" that can "interrogate dominant ideologies" (Hetherington 2002: viii). My heterotopias differ from most, I argue, in that they pertain only to the focalised character; they are focalised heterotopias. I create worlds—in the future, the present, and the past—which exclude the operation of certain oppressions and oppressive discourses. My focalised characters do not surmount the oppressions of traditionally marginalised groups; they simply do not experience them. This, I submit, is what readers and critics point to when they

---

[6] In the cultural master story (Griffith 1997 and 2010), and in some of the genres with which my work is in conversation—for example historical fiction and noir—women's bodies have traditionally been, and often still are, the locus of their suffering: women are the corpse left when the psychopath has done his work; we are the war prize to be carried off.

[7] There are those who argue that because attitudes have changed sufficiently this may have been true at the time I wrote the earlier novels, but is no longer. I disagree. Just because some laws have changed does not mean our essential stance to and expectation of the world has.

[8] "[A] standpoint...refers not to a rigid or permanent stabilization of perspective, but rather to a fluid and dynamic negotiation of experience and point of view that can be temporarily stabilized in order to interrogate dominant ideologies" (Lenz 2004: 98).

describe my work as "armed to the teeth against convention" (*Interzone,* 1993).

3. Far and Near: The Future

My two science fiction novels, *Ammonite* (1993) and *Slow River* (1995), normalise queer female characters in the future. *Ammonite,* my first novel, is a general heterotopia set on an all-women planet in the far-future. It excludes the oppressions related to gender and sexual orientation by excluding gender altogether. *Slow River* (1995), my second novel, excludes these oppressions via a focalised heterotopia set in the near future.

     Ammonite owes a great deal to my reading response to many science fictional (SF) works. None came close to what I sought: queer women who were human in, of, and for themselves, and free to be so in the entirety of their world, including the outdoors. I read tales of isolated utopias, women-only communities such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1979), populated by alarmingly homogeneous blonde-and-blue-eyed white women; this struck me as much a product of eugenicist politics as feminism. Daphne du Maurier's mysterious mountain fastness in "Monte Verità" (1952) felt more like a metaphor for withdrawal than a reimagining of possibilities. I tried various SF sex-battle texts[9] in which the sexes are explicitly in conflict, ranging from E.E. 'Doc' Smith's apparently sex- and loveless Lyranians (1953-1954) to John Wyndham's "Consider Her Ways" (1956). In these male-authored stories, women were presented as less than human: hive-minded, and/or asexual. I read the science-fantasy gender explorations of Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Shattered Chain* (1976), which dwelt on suffering to the degree that it reads as an anti-feminist cautionary tale: this is

---

[9] For more on this, see Justine Larbalestier's *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* (2002).

what happens when you step outside the boundaries of gender. Ursula K Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) posits a genderless alien race: I admired but was not moved by its assumption of the 'universal' male pronoun and its cool intellectualism.[10] I found Suzy McKee Charnas's Holdfast novels (1974, 1979) much more emotionally engaging and immersive, though the naked rage and visceral warfare between the sexes did not ultimately appeal to me, nor did the arid setting which felt inimical to life. Conversely, initially I found the setting of Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (1979) wonderful: women-only enclaves in fecund hill country whose people roamed as freely as Charnas's horse women. However, on a second reading I could not accept the essentialism of the premise: men were irremediably violent because they were men ("It is not in his nature not to rape" [Gearhart 1979: 25]). This essentialism was reinforced in the novel's stark binary of technology and nature, with the accompanying value judgment (a staple of 1980s feminist SF) that nature is Good while technology, unless based on 'alternative science' such as magic or telepathy, is Bad.

Perhaps the text that influenced *Ammonite* most was Joanna Russ's short story "When It Changed" (1972). The two narratives have much in common: a newly rediscovered human colony on another planet struck hundreds of years ago by an epidemic that killed all the men. The planets Whileaway (Russ) and Jeep (Griffith) are populated entirely by women who know nothing of men and consequently nothing of gender roles: women fill all the roles—desiring and desired, smart and stupid, vicious

---

[10] Like *Ammonite*, the novels of both Bradley and Le Guin feature ice and snow. There is a long and honourable tradition in feminist SF of coldscapes. What is the attraction? There have been various suggestions but the most likely is, as Robin Roberts (1993) suggests, a variation on the Demeter myth which I interpret as the winter landscape being a metaphor for life springing from apparent death. That is, change.

and kind, protagonist and antagonist—and occupy all points of the moral compass. On both Whileaway and Jeep women form relationships, reproduce, and create families. However, there are essential differences. On Whileaway the plague agent is no longer active, and it is men, not women, who are the newly-arrived rediscoverers.[11]

I read most of "When It Changed" wrapped in a shining vision of women as human beings in and of themselves rather than in relation to men; women who were no more and no less than *people*. Women were free to be themselves in all aspects of their lives, going where and when they liked without fear. Then, on the second-to-last page, I came to a paragraph that dashed my shining vision:

> He went on, low and urbane, not mocking me, I think, but with the self-confidence of someone who has always had money and strength to spare, who doesn't know what it is to be second-class or provincial. Which is very odd, because the day before, I would have said that was an exact description of me. (Russ 1975: 257)

The men would destroy everything because they were men; the women would lose everything because when faced with men they knew they were merely women. The ending rests on the essentialist premise of the weakness of women. It felt to me a failure of imagination or a failure of nerve.[12]

In *Ammonite* the planet Jeep has been ravaged by a virus that killed all the men and many of the women of an early wave of colonists so many generations ago that all knowledge of it has been lost to the present inhabitants. Jeep and its different cultures is rediscovered and reinvaded by a multi-world corporation bent on extracting natural

---

[11] And if we are to believe a character in Russ's follow-up novel, *The Female Man*, perhaps the epidemic, viral or otherwise, never existed. The female survivors may have told themselves a story to salve a murderous conscience. "That 'plague' you talk of is a lie. *I know*" (Russ 1975: 211; emphasis in original).

[12] It is possible to infer that Russ also meant this feeling of inferiority to reflect the oppressions of colonialism but frankly it feels like a stretch.

resources, until the corporate employees they send are also struck by the virus.

It is not a 'world of women' because without men, without even the memory of men, there can be no biological gender; there can be no women. Without women there are no lesbians. It is a world of people who do not feel second-class by reason of sex or sexual orientation.[13]

Ammonite is a linear novel with two focalised characters. There are no traditional gender categories and so no association of 'feminine' with nature, nurturing, kindness or meekness. There is no binary choice (with its accompanying value judgments) between technology and nature, nor does the narrative employ magic, telepathy, or other 'alternative science'.[14] It explicitly engages with and rejects parts of what at the time had become feminist creed: that women are wiser, kinder, more nurturing and attuned to the earth than men, because we are women.

The novel is written from the third-person perspectives of two focalised characters, Marghe and Danner, in a strict pattern in which two chapters from Marghe are followed by one from Danner. I chose this point of view and structure for three reasons. First, by seeing Marghe through Danner's eyes and vice versa, the reader gets two distinct perspectives, military and anthropological, on the various native and invading cultures. Second, the 2:1 structural pattern enabled me to construct the characters' mutual intersubjectivity which bypasses some of the limitations of close

---

[13] Monique Witting, in "One is Not Born a Woman," said it most succinctly: "Once the class 'men' disappears, 'women' as a class will disappear as well" (1992) and so, by extension, will lesbians.

[14] In this I differ from critics who suggest that on Jeep the conception of children is fantasy, a 'plausible impossibility.' My argument is that almost all extra-planetary science fiction is on some level fantasy (faster-than-light-drive is downright impossible) but while what I describe is implausible it has not been shown to be impossible.

third point of view. This formal narrative rhythm is designed to set up and fulfill readers' pattern-recognition expectations and so facilitate pleasure and therefore engagement. Third, the reader experiences the contrast between Marghe's exploratory mind frame, mostly spent out of doors, and Danner's sense of being trapped, mostly indoors.

Ammonite is science fiction. My assumed reader was a practiced genre reader familiar with the narrative traditions of planetary exploration and at least aware of some of the gender explorations of the genre. I thus felt free to invent and explore alien flora, fauna, and material culture secure in the knowledge that the reader could suspend the immediate urge to fill in the gaps left by the writer: SF readers understand that a writer will, eventually, make everything clear; that the systems and events will make sense later, in context, but might not do so if immediately interpreted based on the reader's own contemporary surroundings.[15]

I had few qualms, then, about plunging the reader immediately into the new: a space station orbiting a planet in an extra-solar system. The novel opens with a metaphor made concrete: Marghe is about to cross the threshold to another world, an irrevocable choice manifested in a physical step. In the narrative aboard the station, the reader is placed in an artificial environment alongside Marghe, who feels stressed, alone, and overwhelmed by the new:

> The suit was wrinkled and smelled of just-unrolled plastic, and she felt heavy and awkward, even in the two-thirds gravity of orbital station *Estrade* (...) She rested the fingertips of her right hand on the smooth ceramic of the raised hatch frame; it was cool, shocking after two days of the close human heat of A Section. (Griffith 1993: 1)

---

[15] See Maria Nikolajeva (2005) for more on the implied reader.

We smell what Marghe smells and feel what she feels. Her surroundings are hard-edged and inimical. The first colour mentioned is red, signalling danger, and hard surfaces are juxtaposed against Marghe's soft organic systems.

Once we are planetside, though, the tone shifts:

> The doors cracked open and leaked in light like pale grapefruit squeezings making the artificial illumination in the gig seem suddenly thick and dim (...) She sniffed, trying to equate the spicy sweet smell on the wind to something she knew: nutmeg, sun on beetle wings, the wild smell of heather. (24)

The first colour is green; the light is bright and welcoming. We have the sense of a wide world, alien but enticing. These orientalised associations, initially subconscious on my part, parallel Marghe's gradual assimilation into what begins as an exotic world and then becomes home: her metamorphosis from alien to native.

Ammonite shows the impact of my early preference for romances of the wilderness. I was eager to take the focalised character into the wild to explore, think and feel; to compare and learn via her embodied experience. One of my most important tools as a novelist is this creation of character through physical and emotional interaction with their environment.

Marghe has visited more than one world; I assign her an implicitly planetary perspective by using geological imagery. The skies of Jeep are regarded in largely mineral terms: "The sky was slippery with cloud massed in ranks of zinc and pewter" (45). People, too, are seen through a geological lens: "Brown eyes met brown, but Aoife's were cold, igneous, compressed by years of hard living" (98). The consequence of this narrative choice is to shape the reader's experience through Marghe's experience. We analyse the world, we understand its people, through her; her lessons become our lessons. The construction of empathy renders possible a change in the

reader's standpoint.

Ammonite was my first novel. At the time of its writing the only way I knew to exclude oppressive gender discourse was to exclude men. So although *Ammonite* can be described as a heterotopia, it is not a focalised heterotopia: every character, not just the focalised characters, shares the women-only world. It did not satisfy me for long. Could women, especially queer women, be human a little closer to here and now?[16] Additionally, there were more complex and personal questions I wanted to answer. If gender is not essential but contingent, can the same be said for personal identity? Is there an essential self? If so, how far outside our own notions of moral behaviour will we step to protect that self, and how might we feel once we do?

It is difficult to answer multiple, complex questions with a wholly invented setting. A significant proportion of the narrative must be devoted to the biology, geology, history, culture of the new world (world building) which leaves little room to develop subtle, psychological examinations. I chose to set my next novel, *Slow River*, largely in Hull, a real city in the north of England, during what could be the day after tomorrow.

Critics have suggested that *Slow River* is a response to the cyberpunk genre of the 1980s and early 90s and certainly it owes a great deal to the borrowed noir topoi of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) such as the urban nightscape and the criminal

---

[16] When I first sent my agent an outline of *Slow River* she said, "This is not a selling outline. I understand why Marghe in *Ammonite* had a girlfriend, she had no choice poor thing, but why does Lore have to have sex with women?" I said, "Because she's a dyke, Fran," and fired her (personal communication with FG, 1993).

underclass.[17] However, it differs from noir in its humanism and hope, and departs decisively from the way *Neuromancer* and its imitators treat women as types. To paraphrase a conversation I had many years ago with another author, Gwyneth Jones: If you can't imagine a character changing the kitty litter, she's not real[18]. I could imagine none of the women of *Neuromancer* changing the kitty litter.

Slow River's structure is complex, with three interleaved timelines from the perspective of the same focalised character, Lore. To facilitate reader-acceptance I was determined to make it feel simple. I did this by differentiating the layers through varied tense and voice—William Boyd, in *Brazzaville Beach* (1990), uses a two-ply version of this technique—and connecting them emotionally.

Lore's story is divided into three: her childhood with her family until she is kidnapped at eighteen; the immediate past, three years between escaping her kidnappers and escaping Spanner, the woman to whom she turned for help; and the narrative present, the year she spends living on her own and integrating her experience. The narrative present, layer A, uses first person, past tense. The immediate narrative past, layer B, is in third person, past tense. Layer C, Lore's childhood, uses third person, present tense.[19] In this way I achieved a single, focalised character, but the Lore of each layer speaks with a slightly different voice to reflect where she is in terms of experience.

Present tense is the language of dreams, of dissociation and dislocation. It is

---

[17] Noir could be said to be a style as much as a genre. George Tuttle tells us that the term noir is often used to "identify a type of hardboiled fiction where themes of loneliness, despair, sexual obsession, and hard luck are prevalent" (Tuttle 2006).
[18] Possibly when we first met, in Beverley in 1988, but I'm not sure.
[19] For more on this, and a detailed exploration of the notion of an essential self, see "Writing *Slow River*" (Griffith 2016).

malleable, the tense of events to be reviewed and interpreted later, and suitable for a childhood that, in comparison to Lore's situation in the narrative present, is almost a fairytale—at least on the surface.

Past tense is much more concrete: this *happened*. The events described are not open to interpretation—just right for Lore's immediate past. I wrote this section in third person because she is looking at it from a little distance; not the same distance as her childhood but no longer quite who she is in the narrative present. The main layer of the novel, though, the one with which we begin and end, is in first person. This is the mature Lore working out how her childhood, her immediate past, and her present, fit together. This is the voice that decides, that chooses, the one with agency.

As with *Ammonite*, I used a strict and proportional alternation of these narratives to set up and fulfill reader expectations. Each of these narrative layers are connected emotionally by Lore's embodied experience.

Brian Attebery suggests that in *Slow River* "Griffith has consciously approached scientific questions through the experience of a female body (...) Such awareness turned *Slow River* into a sort of hymn to the impure, leaky, intricate grandeur of living systems" (1997:5). He continues:

> The alternative she offers is her particular way of knowing the world, which grows out of her experience of living in a woman's body—and, as a lesbian, knowing women's bodies are objects of desire rather than disdain. (6-7)

And:

> [T]he metaphoric systems that SF inherits from science allow the male reader to experience gender and desire at a safe remove, disguised as simple discovery and adventure and masculine comradery. (...) [M]ale bodies and male desire could, for decades, be metaphorized and distributed throughout SF stories without ever having to be acknowledged.
> But no longer. When writers like Griffith bring the body back to literality, they also draw attention to the operations of metaphor. (9)

Attebery's 'metaphorized' could be read as 'normalised'; in effect the male body, and, by extension, male experience and point of view, became the norm for the future, whereas women's bodies, experience, and point of view were Othered. In *Slow River*, this is not the case. I create a heterotopia, one closer to here and now than that of *Ammonite*, and narrow it to the focalised character. It is a focalised heterotopia constructed to create sufficient empathy to norm those, particularly queer women, who are often Othered.

4. <u>Turbine Dreams: The Present</u>

The Aud novels—*The Blue Place* (1998), and its sequels *Stay* (2002) and *Always* (2007)—normalise queer women in contemporary crime fiction by creating a first-person queer female narrator who is neither a victim nor a damaged female avenger, subverting many common topoi of queer fiction and crime fiction. The novels are often reviewed as 'Norwegian Noir' (Littleton 1998). This label is not wholly correct. Like many noir novels, they are narrated in first person and employ largely urban settings; but while Aud is Norwegian, she is not trapped, despairing, or down on her luck, all common topoi of noir (Tuttle 2006). Aud is the agent of her own choices and controls her own life. Because reader empathy can be obviated by an aversive emotional response, I situate Aud in the focalised heterotopia of an otherwise-realistic milieu in which she is never wronged as a woman or queer—although others around her may be. She has many advantages, including wealth, connections, and physical and intellectual confidence.

Like the focalised characters of both *Ammonite* and *Slow River* Aud has at least a scientific mindset and at least one area of expertise. Violence is a tool of her

expertise; it is as natural and divorced from approbation as a lightning strike. I wanted

readers to feel as though they know her intimately, as though they live in her skin

despite her unusual experience of the world; to gradually absorb Aud's mindset and to

begin to see the world as she does. By bending their perceptions to match Aud's, I

begin to draw the reader deeper into her character. *The Blue Place* immediately situates

the reader physically, "An April night in Atlanta between thunderstorms: dark and

warm and wet," then hints to the reader that we are with someone in a heightened state:

"Nearly midnight. I had been walking for over an hour, covering four or five miles. I

wasn't tired. I wasn't sleepy" (Griffith 1998: 1). Shortly thereafter I lead the reader into

one of Aud's memories, focusing tightly on visual detail:

> It was only after I had stared, fascinated, at the dry scum on the bar of
> soap...that I noticed her mouth was open, her eyeballs a gluey blue-grey
> where they should have been white... I wake up at night seeing those eyes.
> (2)

This narrative technique is analogous to a filmic zoom, pulling narrative focus from

long shot to medium, then tightening to extreme close-up to direct the audience's

attention (Sikov 2010). This switch entails a shift from external to internal focalisation

which, as with the switch from diagesis to mimesis, can operate to vary pacing, slowing

or speeding the narrative depending on the quality and quantity of information in the

observational field. It can also signal a change in narrative time, from present to

memory. In this context I used it to pull the reader closer to Aud to deepen reader

empathy.

I assumed that the reader of *The Blue Place* would be an adult with a

contemporary horizon of expectation: unlike a reader of SF, they would be inclined to

fill in gaps in description with their own model of a world they could reasonably expect

to match the fictional world. This worked to my advantage in two ways. I could devote less space to explanatory description and focus instead on subtle psychological change; and, in much the same way a poet or lyricist confounds expectation through unexpected rhyme and rhythm, or by refusing collocation of particular word combinations, I was able to surprise and delight the reader with events, situations, or attitudes at a slant to expectations, what Roland Barthes terms *jouissance* (1975).

Most obviously I do this through Aud herself. Aud is unlike any of her literary predecessors. English-language crime fiction series of the 1990s often feature male first-person narrators, written by men, who are straight, white, physically competent and comfortable, and use violence without second thought.[20] These narrators are well-rounded but not dynamic; over the course of several novels they do not change their psychological positions. Kinsey Milhone or V.I. Warshawski—straight female characters created by Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky respectively—change and grow, often due to the violence they suffer as perpetrators or victims (Hand 2013). These narrators are competent but not physically confident or comfortable; they are often tense and angry, and do not appear to take much conscious joy from daily life—not an affect conducive to narrative empathy.

Before I wrote *The Blue Place* I also read crime novels written in third person about queer, professional investigators such as Lindsay Gordon (created by Val McDermid) and Kate Delafield (Katherine V. Forrest). These series were firmly situated in the lesbian feminist politics of the time and while to some extent they normalised lesbianism, they also focused on the wrongs done to queer women as a

---

[20] See for example Spenser in Robert B. Parker's novels, Burke in Andrew Vachss's books, or the Dave Robicheaux series by James Lee Burke.

class and so, I would argue, failed to create the sheer exhilaration that might persuade a reader to fully commit to the focalised character.[21]

More recently, there has been a tendency for 'strong' female focalised characters to be avengers. These are often written by men.[22] Lisbeth Salander, of Stieg Larsson's *Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (2005; trans. 2008), first of his Millennium Trilogy, is a classic example of what Yvonne Lefler might call the "investigating detective transgressing all boundaries" (2013: 58).[23] These female characters can transgress these boundaries because rape and other horrific abuse has removed them from the constraints of civilised behaviour (Sims 2010); society has failed them; they need no longer obey its norms or require its permission (Martaus 2009).

Aud does not need a legitimating narrative. She does not need to be threatened or victimised in order to offer violence. She uses violence as she would any other tool, without sadism or fear-turned-to-rage:

> It's the adrenalin. When everything slows down and my muscles are hot and strong and the blood beats in my veins like champagne I feel this vast delight. Everything is beautiful and precious, and so clear (...) You feel how *fine* life is. (242)

Her violence is not an expression of hatred or misanthropy. She loves life and her place in it. Critics have been struck by this dual aspect of her psychological makeup:

> This description of the moment of violence as an expression of the love of life is possible only to this utopianly naturalized character, since it is

---

[21] A word common to several commentaries on the Aud novels is *exhilarating*. (Other frequent descriptors include *beautiful* and *brutal*.)

[22] Stieg Larsson's original Swedish title for the first Salander novel was *The Men Who Rape Women*. Many male authors (another good example is Peter O'Donnell, creator of Modesty Blaise), perpetuate in fiction the very thing they perhaps hope their work addresses.

[23] In Peter Hoeg's *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* (1993), Smilla is another avenger though her vengeance is intellectual as well as (less destructively) physical.

ordinarily impossible that violence and pain not be culturally inscribed. (Duchamp 1998: n.p.)

I would argue that Aud's so-called utopian naturalisation is, rather, the exclusion of personal experience of the discourse of gender-related oppression—a focalised heterotopia. Duchamp goes on to say:

> Everything in the book serves not only the exposition of this character, but the engulfing of the whole world into this character's construction of reality […] by the end of the book it's very difficult to question any of Aud's assertions or judgments. (1998: n.p.)

Aud is a hero[24] but she cannot escape fate. At the end of *The Blue Place* she does not; the woman she loves dies. Although Aud's heterotopia does not include danger and oppression related to sex or sexual orientation, there are no fairytale endings. I use Aud's joy and her physical competence to help create narrative empathy, and that empathy is what leads to the reader sharing Aud's wrenching grief in the final pages.

For Aud, love leads to grief and grief makes her feel vulnerable. *Stay*, the middle volume of the Aud triptych, examines the role of that grief in the evolution of character. Aud's grief leads to her single use of violence stemming from rage, an attack on a character named Karp. This is a pivotal moment in the Aud sequence; I take care to set it apart and make it stand out. Immediately before she attacks Karp, I amplify the fatefulness and importance of her decision by employing polysyndeton to slow the action and intensify focus:

> I shouldn't have turned, but, oh, I did, and the streetlight caught on the reddish gold of Karp's hair as he leaned in towards the woman, and the light slid across her hair, too, as she tossed her head and the soft brown

---

[24] *The Blue Place* is, in Northrup Frye's terms, a high mimetic narrative, with "characters superior to others but not to laws of nature or power of Fate" (quoted in Nikolajeva 2005: 61).

wing of it swung past her cheek, just as Julia's had, and I saw the way he looked at her, and wondered if, in one of those alternate worlds, I would just stand here and do nothing. (135-136)

A switch to present tense amplifies the difference further:

This is not the blue place. It is a rough roar in my ears, the need to damage this man heaving like volcanic mud in my belly (...) I growl as I hurt him; the noise spills from me as harsh and hot as gravel shoveled from a furnace. (136)

This is Aud as Lisbeth Salander: an avenging fury rather than a force of nature. In order to recover, to resituate herself in her heterotopia, she retreats to her mountain fastness and immerses herself in nature; in the Aud novels, as in most of my work, nature is balm.

In my novels, I use the focalised character's environment—built and natural—to reflect her emotions and internal thought processes. In *Ammonite* I split focalisation. In *Slow River* I maintain single focalisation but split the timeline/environment, tense, and voice. In *The Blue Place* and *Stay*, I marry single focalisation to single timeline while contrasting built and natural environments. In *Always* (Griffith 2007), the third novel of the Aud triptych, I again maintain single focalisation, single tense and single voice. The narrative, however, alternates between two timelines, each set in a different city. This layering of similarly urban environments makes it possible to simultaneously show Aud's continuing emotional evolution and a before-and-after comparison of her internal state around a perspective-altering event.

In *Always'* narrative past, Aud teaches self-defence to ten Atlanta women whose experiences and understandings of gender discourse are radically different to hers. Simultaneously Aud is being schooled by her students, family and friends, in the ways of human interaction and vulnerability.

The meat of the novel, though, is in Seattle, where Aud reconciles her

vulnerabilities and her strengths, and she becomes much more a creature of the real world. Until the events of *Always*, Aud, living in a focalised heterotopia, has no experience of being a victim apart from a moment in her past where she was mistakenly perceived as such.[25] I chose in *Always* to make Aud physically vulnerable in ways that had absolutely nothing to do with being a woman or being queer, in order to explore how she might rely on family and friends.

Norman Jones (2007) identifies one of the topoi of gay and lesbian fiction as the emphasis on the protagonist's separation from blood relations. The Aud novels depart from this tradition. Aud's mother, Else Torvingen, is present in all three novels, and the Seattle narrative of *Always* is largely concerned with family obligation and feeling. Else, like Aud, is not average; she is the Norwegian Ambassador to the Court of St James's and has a not-unreasonable expectation of one day becoming Prime Minister of Norway. Mother and daughter often disagree, but their love and admiration for each other is clear. Else does not shun her daughter in any way for being queer.[26]

The empathy I generate for Aud via the three novels' heterotopia alters the reader's standpoint just long enough to envision different possibilities, a world in which queer women are no longer Othered.

---

[25] A mistake not repeated: she killed her assailant.

[26] Aud's heterotopia does not extend to disability. In future novels, this particular discourse and its structures will have to be examined. I suspect that part of my momentary unwillingness to do so added to my decision to discontinue the Aud novels in favour of *Hild*.

5. <u>What I Desire: The Past</u>

   a) <u>Situating *Hild*</u>

Hild is a novel focalised around the woman born more than 1400 years ago who is today known as St Hilda of Whitby. The novel aims to operate as a second-order discourse regarding the "contingency of events" and illusory nature of history's seeming solidity (Butler and O'Donovan, 2012: 15). It is a serious historical novel in the well-researched, realist mode established by Sir Walter Scott[27] that deconstructs the intersectional construction of the oppressive discourse of gender, sexual orientation, and race (Reid, 2015).

   It is a response to and a conversation with three traditions. First, and most important, *Hild* descends from the work of the heirs of Scott, the mid-twentieth century British historical novelists Rosemary Sutcliff, Mary Stewart, and Henry Treece whose work towers over fictional representations of the so-called Dark Ages, and Mary Renault, who radically revised the possibilities for the reimagination of Ancient Greece.[28] These novelists were critically lauded for their research and consequently accorded great authority. *Hild* follows in this tradition: Dr Alex Woolf, a medievalist at St Andrew's, states that *Hild* is "the best fictional attempt to recreate Dark Age Britain that I have ever read." (Woolf, 2013)

   In their novels, Sutcliff (*Sword at Sunset,* 1963), Stewart (*The Crystal Cave*, 1970), Treece (*The Great Captains*, 1956), and Renault (*Fire From Heaven*, 1969), foreground male characters and masculine social dominance and reinforce traditional

---

[27] As described by Lukács, as opposed to Jameson's assertion of Scott's essential melodrama (Anderson 2011).
[28] Renault herself acknowledges Naomi Mitchison's invention of the historical novel told in modern discourse but as a young reader I only knew Mitchison's science fiction.

gender roles. These four novels wear their historicity on their sleeve, both in their

paratexts and in their occasionally obvious reliance on source materials.[29] These source

materials rely on notions of history, including the role of women, which, in turn, are

partially created from stories about historical events and people—myth, folk tradition,

and fiction[30]—founded on outdated notions of What Really Happened (Cook, 2014;

Thompson, 1999a; Thompson, 1999b).

Women barely figure in these four novels. Consequently, women readers must

take a cross-gender reading position. It is telling that when, for example, Stewart looks

even briefly at the lives of women in her Merlin novels she tends to portray them as

victims, prey to the whims of men.[31] When I first read *The Crystal Cave* I recoiled from

Merlin's pity for Ygraine. As a reader I was happier when Stewart stuck to male

characters. As Diana Wallace points out, "For the woman reader who has been able to

identify with Merlin by 'cross-reading', as Stewart herself clearly did, this depiction of

women as victims is remarkably unappealing" (2005: 174). This is dwarfed by the

revulsion Treece creates for female readers in one scene in which a hall of bored

---

[29] Stewart and Sutcliff are also both on record in interviews regarding their adherence
to historical research of the time (see Thompson 1999a and 1999b).

[30] It could be argued that popular history—historical education published for children
and autodidacts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in, for example,
encylopaedias, biography; and 'children's histories' by authors such as Kipling—also
had a role. It might be interesting to consider how such popular histories and fictions
were framed for children then. Today, according to Kim Wilson, although study guides
for contemporary historical fiction often discuss the historicity of questions of race or
place or justice, the "historicity of gender expectations is generally uncritically
considered" (2011: 66). Wilson also points out that children's historical fiction of the
early medieval leans heavily on the fictional discourse of the genre; she specifically
calls out Sutcliff and Treece.

[31] "Duchess and slut alike, they need not even study to deceive. I suppose it is the same
with slaves, who live with fear, and with those small animals who disguise themselves
by instinct to save their lives" (Stewart 1979: 471-2).

warriors amuse themselves by humiliating and assaulting a woman who is dancing for them (Treece, 1956: 67), a scene whose sole purpose appears to be to demonstrate one male character's relative compassion for women. For this reader, at least, this attempt to show feeling for women led to an almost irrecoverable failure of narrative empathy.[32]

A second tradition from which *Hild* arises is the historical novels created by out lesbians such as Sarah Waters (*Tipping the Velvet*, 1998), Stella Duffy (*Theodora*, 2011) and Manda Scott (*Dreaming the Eagle*, 2003). These novels foreground women although women are only partially normalised. Waters's main character is queer, although as the novel concerns the difficulties of identifying as a woman who desires women, I would argue it does not construct a focalised heterotopia in which there is no oppression associated with being a queer woman. Also, as Norman Jones (2007) points out, the character's sense of self and agency is only actualised when she dresses as a man and imagines that others believe her to be a man. Duffy's portrayal of a powerful historical female figure shows her gaining power through her sexuality. Scott creates a heterosexual woman motivated to act as a result of sexual victimisation; in addition, her use of the fantastic could, I submit, preclude the realism that might lead to a change in the reader's standpoint.

The third tradition is the popular British nature writing of authors such as Roger Deakin (*Wildwood: A Journey Through Trees*, 2007) and Robert Macfarlane (*The Wild Places*, 2007) whose observations of and reflections on the natural world gave me a

---

[32] I read the book for the first time as an adolescent and at this scene put it down and very nearly did not pick it up again; reading for the first time as an adult, I probably would have thrown it at the wall.

model for my own. This understanding of the natural environment was a vital tool in the creation of empathy via a focalised heterotopia set in a past most readers think they already know. Though nonfiction, both books feel oddly like fantasy, perhaps because in Northern Europe the forest is the cultural source of magic and folklore, the site of a Hero's testing and trial (Maitland, 2012). They are beautifully observed and written accounts of their experience of nature, with particular emphasis on woodland and birds (Deakin) and the emotional resonance of wild, natural landscape (Macfarlane).

This sense of magic grounded in nature, added to keen descriptions of landscape, were foundational to my construction of the setting of seventh-century Britain in *Hild*. This construction of natural landscape, allied with focalised heterotopia, facilitates embodied empathy for Hild.

b) Writing *Hild*

To norm the Other in *Hild* I foreground women and counter the outdated historicity of popular historical novels—novels I have read and loved—by creating sufficient narrative empathy to deconstruct the "widespread popular assumptions about the oppression and rape of women during the 'Dark Ages' (Reid 2015: 76). I perform this active intervention into the construction of a created past, I argue, through a dynamic, well-rounded and believable character embodied in both her physical landscape and cultural environment. This embodiment is reflected in the correlation between the behaviour and attitude of people and nature.

All that we know of Hild originates in the *Historia ecclesiastica gens Anglorum* (*HE*), a text written fifty years after Hild's death by Bede, a monk at the monastery of St Paul in Jarrow. *HE* is the foundational text of English history, the model and

exemplar of the genre for a millennium. Bede was steeped in the Pauline misogyny that was inseparable from the Christianity of the era. In *HE* women barely exist. Yet the work is, as Clare Lees and Gillian Overing point out, the "site for many treasured assumptions about Anglo-Saxon culture" (Lees and Overing 2001: 20).

These assumptions underpin much popular fiction set in or drawing upon the medieval era, novels which "contribute to the historical imaginary, having an almost pedagogical aspect in allowing a culture to 'understand' past moments" (de Groot 2016).[33] Prominent among those assumptions is that women of elite status, like Hild, lived trapped in a cage of domesticity whose purpose was continuance of the male line.[34]

I was born and raised in Yorkshire, in the geographical areas known in the seventh century as Elmet and Deira, where Hild most probably lived. I loved the land; I knew and loved Whitby Abbey.[35] I longed to write about how it began, to travel back through time and see how the sky might have looked, the moors smelt and the birds sounded in Hild's time. But I did not want to write about a woman trapped and constrained in all the ways I had been taught she would have been. Throughout my twenties and thirties, I revisited the idea but could not reconcile my understanding of women's roles with Hild's recorded achievements.

It was not until I finished *The Blue Place* that I saw a glimmer of the path

---

[33] In addition to the novels cited, see, for example, George R. R. Martin's novel *Game of Thrones* (1996) and the TV series of that name.

[34] "The history of England is the history of the male line, not of the female. For very little is known about women (...) We know nothing of them except their names and the dates of their marriages, and the number of children they bore" (Woolf 1929).

[35] I knew Whitby in person and also through novels such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and A.S. Byatt's *Possession*. I'd be surprised, though, if either novel influenced my work.

forward. In my SF I had extrapolated plausible futures: perhaps I could now work

backwards to recreate the seventh century; a working world; its people, places, and web

of political, religious, and personal relationships. I could then replay known events and

observe the interstices, learn what shape a person with Hild's achievements might take.

For this experiment to be robust, I could not contravene what was known to be known,

even in the smallest detail. I therefore had to know those details. I read everything I

could about the late sixth and early seventh centuries: from ethnography, archaeology,

numismatics, jewellery, textiles, languages, food production, weapons and warfare,

medical approaches, religious belief, even the phases of the moon.[36] Reading texts in

Old English was foundational for me. I read several different translations of the extant

poetry, then the originals in a variety of recensions and more than one dialect.[37] I read

Latin and Ancient Welsh (the closest I could get to Brythonic, the proto-Welsh tongue

spoken in the Celtic parts of Britain), and imagined Old Frisian and Pictish. Gradually I

worked my way into recent and even not-yet-published research from scholars in the

field.[38]

I wanted more from *Hild* than realism. I wanted the sense of immanence and

destiny that Mary Stewart captured so well and that Mary Renault touched upon. I

wanted realism to feel like myth—an origin myth but for a person who could have

existed as portrayed. I returned to the background and source of my earliest stories: the

---

[36] If Hild sees a waning moon on a stated occasion then on that date, nearly a millennium and a half ago, the moon was in that phase. To have the authority of realism, historical fiction must be (as nonfiction is, as Webb and Brien point out; 2011) bound by the data.

[37] This despite my pitiful understanding of the language. It seemed important to try...

[38] I built a research blog (www.gemaecce.com) through which I interacted with scholars in Early Medieval history and material culture.

natural world of folk- and fairytale, particularly the forest. I researched flora and fauna, weather systems, climate, and geology until I could inhabit the seventh century in my imagination and feel that it might be possible to infuse it with a sense of wild magic using only landscape.

An embodied character's exploration of her natural surrounding lies at the heart of my primary joy as a writer—all my novels begin with a character in her environment, usually outdoors. In *Hild*, the themes of the book are present in the first page: multi-lingualism, landscape, and the close observation of and correlation between the behaviours of people and nature. The opening uses not only visual information but scent, sound, and sight in order to establish the beginning of reader empathy as soon as possible:

> The child's world changed late one afternoon, though she didn't know it. She lay at the edge of the hazel coppice, one cheek pressed to the moss that smelt of worm cast and the last of the sun, listening: to the wind in the elms, rushing away from the day, to the jackdaws changing their calls from "Outward! Outward!" to "Home now! Home!," to the rustle of the last frightened shrews scuttling under the layers of leaf fall before the owls began their hunt. From far away came the indignant honking of geese as the goosegirl herded them back inside the wattle fence, and the child knew, in the wordless way that three-year-olds reckon time, that soon Onnen would come and find her and Cian and hurry them back. (Griffith, 2013: 1)

The novel opens with an exterior, omniscient perspective on the focalised character in an outdoor environment, then focuses, ending—and from that point remaining (with the exception of occasional chapter openings)—in free indirect style written from her perspective in order to construct an embodied character with whom the reader can empathise. To make Hild a child was an instinctive choice but I saw immediately that it was right. Few of my assumed readers would have a deep understanding of the differences between the material and social cultures of the twenty-first century and

early seventh century; many would carry Bede-formed assumptions about the Other (women, of course, but also people of colour and those with same-sex desires). I would therefore let the reader learn as a child learns, encounter the great cultural and political changes—from a pagan, aliterate Heroic tribal culture to literate Christian proto-states with nascent bureaucratic apparatus—as Hild encountered them, through her physical experience. This was the best way to show the formation of a girl who becomes a woman whose "lived experience foregrounds the intersectional constructions of gender, sexual orientation, class, and race" (Reid, 2015: 79).[39]

With Hild the character and *Hild* the novel I sought to write queer women back into history, to immerse the reader in landscape—natural and built—and cultural environment to the degree that they might live Hild's experience and share her understanding of how the discourse of gender and sexuality began. Her heterotopia is based on myriad factors many of which, such as her natural attributes and elite status, relate to heritable privilege and to personal choice. In this sense it is a focalised heterotopia. However, other aspects of her heterotopia are not focalised but more widely applicable, particularly the cultural attitudes relating to same-sex desire. Here is Hild's mother giving her the elite seventh-century version of the birds-and-bees chat:

> "Well, don't get yourself with child. Do everything but that (...) The king will have no use for a swollen seer, and you'll be more interested in your belly than anything else in the world (...) And don't attract the attention of priests. Why Christ or his priests should care what we do with each other, I don't know. But they like to meddle (...) One thing. Whatever you do, make sure it's not your gemæcce:[40] when these things go wrong, and they always do, you'll need her to be on your side, the one constant." (379-380)

---

[39] *Hild* does not argue that Christianity created the anti-woman and anti-queer discrimination we see today, but that Christianity gave a particular shape and rationale to that discrimination: it influenced the discourse.

[40] I invented the social and emotional role of gemæcce; the word itself is a repurposed Old English noun meaning partner or mate.

This is just one of many moments in which I point to the influence of the Roman church and its patristic misogyny on the construction of the discourse surrounding gender and sexuality.[41]

Language, in many senses of the word, was my foundation. One of my centres of attention was the differences between Brythonic and Anglisc (Old English) and their users.[42] Other aspects of language—syntax and emotional weight—became vital in delineating changes both in various layers of Hild's society and within Hild herself. In the first three pages, for example, my sentences are literal; although there are many sophisticated concepts embedded in the opening passages, I wanted the reader to take away an impression of childlike simplicity. It is not until page four that I use figurative language, and then it is to describe Hild's understanding of the nature and role of different tongues:

> Anglisc voices: words drumming like apples spilt over wooden boards, round, rich, stirring. Like her father's words, and her mother's, and her sister's. Utterly unlike Onnen's otter-swift British or the dark liquid gleam of Irish. Hild spoke each to each. Apples to apples, otter to otter, gleam to gleam. (5)

Language influences *Hild* at the most basic level; I indicate Hild's multiple nature by using short, plain Anglisc words and winding Brythonic sentence structure:

> Her days, the court's days, were one of constant movement from royal vill to royal vill: Bebbanburg in the lean months for the safety of the rock walls and the cold grey sea, and Yeavering at the end of spring, when the cattle ate sweet new grass and the milk flowed rich with fat. Then south to the old emperor's wall, to the small towns built of stone, and a day at Osric's great house in Tinamutha and (...) and then, sometimes, Sancton, and always to Goodmanham's slow river valley at summer's height—the rolling wolds crimson with flowers, the skeps heavy with honey, and the

---

[41] I researched and wrote about the issue on my research blog; see "Playful Mating With Another Women" (2008a) and "The Beautiful Sin" (2008b).

[42] For more on this, see my essay, "The Language of *Hild*" (2013b).

fields waving with grain. (13)

Here I move out slightly from free indirect narration to a more distant, omniscient position to offer a locutionary summary in the epic style—to move the narrative along without taking up too much space or too much time away from the intimacy of Hild's perspective.

At first intuitively, and then consciously, I used as few Latin cognates as possible to mirror the minimal impact of Christianity and literacy on Hild's first years. When roaming (and feeling) alone, Hild thinks "in British, the language of the high places, of wild and wary and watchful things. A language of resistance and elliptical thoughts" (400). Metaphors, too, reflect that cultural lack of literacy: no one 'takes note' of anything, and the clouds over the moon are never 'inky.' Once I discovered that textile production occupied more than 65% of an Anglo-Saxon woman's day, I embedded weaving metaphors in the social structure of the narrative culture, as well as in the prose.[43]

My decision to paint an intimate novel of character on an epic canvas added an additional challenge to that of writing a long novel from the perspective of a child becoming an adult. To attain both intimacy and epic the narrative needed to be always and completely embodied—always focalised through Hild. She is on every page of the novel; this is what makes it possible to suggest early on that she can imagine herself into other characters' mindsets and consider how the world might seem through their eyes. Via Hild's omnipresence I offer readers simultaneous access to both Hild and others' perspectives of her, yet do not surrender the constant connection between the reader and the inner world of the focalised character.

---

[43] Penelope Walton Rogers (2007).

> *Watch men and women*, her mother had said. *Put yourself inside them.*
> *Imagine what they're thinking.*
> The little muscles around Coledauc's eyes tightened. He was weighing
> information (...)
> He closed his eyes briefly, then smiled, as men do when they're about
> to do something difficult but want to seem at ease, and walked his mount
> forward.
> The tension in his shoulders and the ripple in his jaw shouted *Usurper!*,
> and when he spoke he shaped the Anglisc carefully, like a man mouthing
> something disgusting. Hild realised that every shape the man's body made
> refused the words... (57)

This passage simultaneously enacts and explains the link between embodiment and
empathy.

The body of a child, with no sexual awareness, and that of a young woman
swimming in full hormonal tide are quite different. I had to find a way to show that
changes in Hild's body changed her perspective of the natural world and her place
within it. Metaphor, once again, was key; I explicitly link seasonal change to
adolescence, ripening-to-harvest to Hild's physical maturation:

> The world turned, ripened, grew hotter and heavier. The days lengthened
> and stretched, thinning at each end to a kind of timeless blue twilight in
> which nightjars churred and moths fluttered (...) Her skin felt denser, more
> alive, her bones stronger, her belly heavy (...) She felt her mother and
> Gwladus watching her, just as everyone else watched the fields, watching
> the barley turn gold, the heads bend, the whiskers touch the dirt. (385-386)

In *Hild*, imagery conveys that although Hild can assume an almost superhuman
physical ability and an uncanny political sense she is still a very young woman with
human vulnerabilities:

> Slowly, carefully, like an orphaned foal folding itself down on the straw
> by a cat and her litter, Hild tucked herself alongside Begu and laid her
> head on her shoulder. (496)

Through metaphor I maintain empathy not only by avoiding aversive emotional
response regarding the discourse of gender and sexuality, but by not letting the

35

language itself mitigate the carefully cultivated sense of Hild's personal power.

The final challenge in maintaining narrative empathy while also maintaining Hild's agency comes at the end of the novel. The story concludes with Hild's marriage, but I did not want it to convey the traditional subtext of marriage: the woman's surrender to the authority of another. I use the inherent dynamism and power differential of verbs to demonstrate that Hild always remains the primary agent and subject of her own life. Instead of the usual power direction of verbs associated with sex and reproduction (Martin, 1991) in which the male is active and the female passive, I chose active verbs for everything Hild (and Hild's body) does. [44] Rather than being acted upon by her new husband, she acts:

> She wanted all of him (...) to pull his skin through her skin, his muscle to hers, his bone to her bone. She could squeeze him, crush him to her, flex, strain, and reach, fight without blood, without bruises.
> And she did.
> She closed tight around him, tight as a fist, tighter, and his eyes were the bluest blue she had ever seen, bluer than the sky, bigger than the sky, wide, endless, the horizon of home. (536)

With Hild the character and *Hild* the novel my primary challenge was to balance the readers' probable understanding of the position of women in a time when most readers have been taught women had little control, even over themselves, with a portrait of a girl living in precarious circumstances who becomes a young woman of great personal and political power. I also wanted *Hild* to be both an intimate novel of character and an epic; simultaneously a seriously researched historical fiction, and an examination of the intersectional development of the discourse of gender, sexuality, race, and class. I submit that Hild the character embodies all these qualities.

---

[44] Female reproductive process is often seen as passive and male as active. Sperm *penetrates* the egg. I have yet to read of an egg *subsuming* sperm.

Hild's embodied experience is the foundation of the heterotopia through which I construct narrative empathy. This empathy is key to my motivations as a writer: to create the kind of novel I have yearned for since I heard my first bed-time story, a rational, realist adventure narrative underpinned by the irrational magic and mystery of nature, shot through with joy and sadness, moments both quiet and epic, in which women are the centre and the norm.

Conclusion

Two years ago in the *Paris Review*, Elena Ferrante said, "[W]omen's struggles, women's nonfiction, women's literature—they made me an adult" (2015: 219). If we are able to judge a writer's input by their output, what Ferrante was reading were novels of women constrained and shaped, temporarily or permanently, by oppressive gender discourse. Yet in the very same issue as the Ferrante interview, Hilary Mantel said, of revising a draft of *A Place of Greater Safety*, "When I read my draft, I saw that the women were wallpaper. There had been no material. Today you would think, Well, I must invent some, then. At the time I hadn't seen the need—I hadn't thought the women interesting" (2015: 49). Growing up, I felt similarly.

In the narratives that influenced my work—perhaps just as in those read by writers such as Mantel and Ferrante—there is a divide between realist narratives that are externally focused, eventful and centred on men, and those that are internally focused narratives centred on women's growth and struggle. My work shows that it is possible to bridge those previously divided narrative paths. My narratives are realist and centred on the examination of queer women as embodied human beings, people physically and psychologically affecting and affected by their surroundings. The focalised characters, always queer women, experience joy as well misery, clarity as often as confusion, and strength as much as weakness.

This critical review has explored the ways in which my fiction forms a coherent body of work that functions as a literary bridge between previously divided narrative possibilities. The bridge permits a narrative centred on queer women to simultaneously explore internal psychological enquiry and externally-oriented event without the need to focus on oppressive discourse relating to gender or sexuality.

Excluding oppressive discourse permits the inclusion of queer women as human. This review has argued that my novels—variously classified and cross classified as science fiction, crime fiction, lesbian fiction, noir fiction, literary fiction, or historical fiction—allow the full range of human experience to characters traditionally maligned and constrained by oppressive discourse based on gender and sexual expression. The techniques I use create sufficient narrative empathy for an imagined reader to consider my focalised characters, always queer women, to be rounded, dynamic human beings. My work norms the Other.

The review developed the theoretical underpinnings of my argument, discussing narrative empathy and focalised heterotopia. Then it demonstrated, via a close reading of my novels, how word-choice and imagery contribute to the embodiment of a focalised character's body in its physical and sensory setting. It showed how this embodiment of the focalised character activates neural mechanisms to produce narrative empathy through which the character's experiences become the reader's experiences, her lessons their lessons, and her joys their joys, thus influencing the reader's standpoint long enough to permit a norming of the Other. It traced an increasing control of narrative technique.

Whether set in the future, the present, or the past, whether the theme is grief, exploration, violence, or change, my novels allow the reader to imagine new ways of being in the world. I wrote my first novel, *Ammonite*, to address the question that has been the subtext of countless science fiction narratives: Are women human? I aimed to render the question meaningless by writing a novel without a single male character that begins from the standpoint that women are simply people. Recently, others have begun

to do so.[45] The Aud novels are narrated by a queer woman in a contemporary setting untroubled by traditional discourse of gender or sexual expression. *Hild* is one of the first historical novels centred on a queer woman that concerns itself simultaneously with national historical events, the evolution of gender discourse, and the psychological growth and change of a person—without demanding constant attention to gender oppression.

My goal has been and continues to be to make it possible for readers and future writers to see women characters as rounded and dynamic agents, subjects not objects; for writers to create narratives focalised around a character of any gender or sexual expression on a narrative journey that is open rather than closed to the full range of human possibility. Over the last twenty years I have sought to bring my readers to an awareness and understanding of the queer female body as a site as much of delight as of struggle. My readers are women and men, queer and straight, young and old, disabled and non-disabled. Among them may be writers who will grow up assuming— partly as a response to my body of work—that it is possible for women to be the centre and focus of any story: a pirate novel as easily as a love story; a voyage of discovery as naturally as a tale of grief. Women, queer women, my work asserts, are human beings in, of, for and by ourselves. That is the standpoint I want readers to gain from my work; it is the dream I believe is now possible for writers to carry forward.

---

[45] See, for example, Kameron Hurley's recent *The Stars Are Legion* (2017).

Works Cited

By the author

Griffith, N. (1993). *Ammonite*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Griffith, N. (1995). *Slow River*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Griffith, N. (1997). Writing from the body. In: V. Brownworth and S. Raffo, eds. *Restricted Access: Dykes and Disability*, 1st ed. Berkeley: Seal Press, pp 221-232.

Griffith, N. (1998). *The Blue Place*. New York: Avon Books.

Griffith, N. (2002). *Stay*. New York: Nan A. Talese.

Griffith, N. (2007). *Always*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Griffith, N. (2008a). The beautiful sin. < https://gemaecce.com/2008/08/20/the-beautiful-sin/ > [Accessed 23 November 2016]

Griffith, N. (2008b). Playful mating with another woman. < https://gemaecce.com/2008/08/29/playful-mating-with-another-woman/ > [Accessed 23 November 2016]

Griffith, N. (2010). Living fiction, storybook lives. In: L. Duchamp, ed. *Narrative Power: Encounters, Celebrations, Struggles*. Seattle: Aqueduct Press, pp 198-208.

Griffith, N. (2013). *Hild*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Griffith, N. (2013b). The language of *Hild*. < https://nicolagriffith.com/2013/11/04/the-language-of-hild/ > [Accessed 22 November 2016]

Griffith, N. (2016). Writing *Slow River*. < https://nicolagriffith.com/2016/03/01/writing-slow-river/ > [Accessed 6 November 2016]

Works of Reference

Anderson, P. (2011). From progress to catastrophe. *London Review of Books*. Vol 33(15), pp 24-28.

Ascher, S. and Pincus, E. (2013). *The Filmmaker's Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide*. 4th edition. New York: Plume.

Attebery, B. (1997). American science fiction and the gender of knowledge. Presented at NAAS, Göteborg, Sweden.

Barthes, R. (1975). *The Pleasures of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang.

Bal, M. (1985). *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Bortolussi, M., and Dixon, P. (2003). *Psychonarratology: Foundations for the empirical study of literary response*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Boyd, W. (1990). *Brazzaville Beach*. London: Sinclair-Stevenson.

Bradley, M. (1976). *The Shattered Chain*. New York: DAW.

Butler, C. and O'Donovan, H. (2012). *Reading History in Children's Books*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Charnas S. (1974). *Walk to the End of the World*. New York: Ballantine.

Charnas, S. (1979). *Motherlines*. New York: Berkeley.

Clay, Z. & Iacoboni, M. (2011). Mirroring fictional others. In E. Schellekens and P. Goldie, eds. *The Aesthetic Mind: Philosophy and Psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp 313-320.

Cook, A.M. (2014). *Genre, Gender and Nation: Ideological and Intertextual Representations in Contemporary Arthurian Fiction for Children* PhD Dissertation, University of Bedfordshire.

Cooper, E. (1972). *Who Needs Men?* London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Deakin, R. (2007). *Wildwood: A Journey Through Trees*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

de Groot, J. (2016). *Remaking History: The Past in Contemporary Historical Fictions*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Duchamp, L. (1998). Nicola Griffith's <u>The Blue Place</u>. < http://ltimmelduchamp.com/node/61 > [Accessed 15 November 2016]

du Maurier, D. (1952). Monte Verità. In *Kiss Me Again, Stranger*. New York: Doubleday, pp 112-176.

Duffy, S. (2011). *Theodora*. London: Virago.

El-Mohtar, A. (2013). With nuanced beauty, Hild destroys myths of medieval womanhood. National Public Radio. < http://www.wbur.org/npr/243268986/hild > [Accessed 11 March 2017]

Ferrante, E. (2015). Eleanor Ferrante, Art of Fiction No. 227. *Paris Review* # 212, pp 210-232.

Foucault, M. (2012). *The History of Sexuality 1: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. New York: Vintage Books.

Foucault, M. and Miskcowiec, J. (1986). Of other spaces. *Diacritics*, Vol 16(1), pp 22-27.

Gearhart, S. (1979). *The Wanderground*. 2nd ed. Watertown, CT: Persephone Press.

Genette, G. (1972). *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Gibson, W. (1984). *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace.

Gilman, C. (1979). *Herland*. New York: Pantheon.

Haggard, R. (1888). *She*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co.

Hand, E. (2013). Femininjas. *Boston Review*, Jan 01, 2013.

Herbert, F. (1965). *Dune*. Philadelphia: Chilton Books.

Hetherington, K. (2002). *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering*. New York: Routledge.

Hoeg, P. (1992). *Miss Smilla's Feelings for Snow*. Translated from Danish by T. Nunnally, 1993. London: Harvill Press.

Hurley, K. (2017). *The Stars Are Legion*. New York: Tor.

Jameson, F. (1970). The case for George Lukács. *Salmagundi*, 13 (summer), pp 3-35.

Jones, N. (2007). *Gay and Lesbian Historical Fiction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Keen, S. (2006). A theory of narrative empathy. *Narrative*, Vol 14(3), pp 207-236.

Kilner, J. and Lemon, R. (2013). What we know currently about mirror neurons. *Current Biology*, Vol 23(23), pp 1057–1062.

Larbalestier, J. (2002). *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Larsson, S. (2005). *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. Translated from Swedish by R. Keeland, 2008. New York: Knopf.

Lees, C. and Overing G. (2001). *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Lefler, Y. (2013) Lisbeth Salander as a melodramatic heroine: emotional conflicts, split focalization, and changing roles in Scandinavian crime fiction. In: B. Åström, K. Gregersdotter, T. Horeck, eds. *Rape in Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy and beyond: contemporary Scandinavian and Anglophone Crime Fiction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Le Guin, U. (1969). *The Left Hand of Darkness*. New York: Ace Books.

Lenz, B. (2004). Postcolonial fiction and the outsider within: toward a literary practice of feminist standpoint theory. *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 16(2), pp. 98-120.

Littleton, T. (1998). < https://www.amazon.com/Blue-Place-Nicola-Griffith-ebook/dp/B000R8ABGS/ > [Accessed 11 March 2017]

Lukács, G. (1983). *The Historical Novel*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 2nd edition.

Macfarlane, R. (2007). *The Wild Places*. London: Granta.

Mantel, H. (2015). Hilary Mantel, Art of Fiction No. 226. *Paris Review* # 212, pp 36-76.

Martin, E. (1991). The egg and the sperm: how science has constructed a romance based on stereotypical male-female roles. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* Vol 16(31), pp 485-501.

Martin, G. (1996). *Game of Thrones*. New York: Bantam Spectra.

Martaus, A. (2009). "You get tough. You get even": Rape, anger, cynicism and the girl detective in Veronica Mars. *Clues* Vol 27(1), pp 74-86.

Maslow, A. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*. 50(4), pp 370–96.

Niederhoff, B. (2013). Focalization 1 Definition 2 Explication. In P. Hühn et al, eds. *The living handbook of narratology*. [online] Hamburg: Hamburg University. <

http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/ > [Accessed 18 Oct 2016]

Nikolajeva, M. (2002). *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature*, Lanham: Scarecrow Press.

Nikolajeva, M. (2005). *Aesthetic Approaches to Children's Literature.* Lanham: Scarecrow Press.

Oatley, K. (2011). *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Reid, R. (2015). Nicola Griffith's Hild: the authenticity of intersectionality. In: H. Young, ed. *The Middle Ages in Popular Culture: Medievalism and Genre*. Amherst: Cambria, pp 75-90.

Renault, M. (1969). *Fire from Heaven*. New York: Pantheon.

Roberts, R. (1993). *A New Species: Gender and Science in Science Fiction*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Rich, A. (1993). *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Rogers, P. (2007). *Cloth and Clothing in Anglo-Saxon England: AD 450-700*. York: Council for British Archaeology.

Russ, J. (1983). When it changed. In: H. Ellison, ed. *Again, Dangerous Visions*. 2nd ed. New York: Berkeley Books, pp 251-260.

Russ, J. (1975). *The Female Man*. Boston: Beacon.

Thompson, R. (1999a). Interview with Mary Stewart, 1989. The Camelot Project, University of Rochester. < http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/interview-with-mary-stewart > [Accessed 11 March 2017]

Thompson, R. (1999b). Interview with Rosemary Sutcliff, 1986. The Camelot Project, University of Rochester. < http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/interview-with-rosemary-sutcliff > [Accessed 11 March 2017]

Scott, M. (2003). *Dreaming the Eagle*. New York: Dell Publishing Company.

Sedgwick, E. (1996). Introduction: queerer than fiction. *Studies in the Novel*, 28(3), pp 277-280.

Sikov, E. (2010). *Film Studies: An Introduction*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Smith, E. (1953). *Second Stage Lensman*. Reading: Fantasy Press.

Smith, E. (1954). *Children of the Lens*. Reading: Fantasy Press.

Stewart, M. (1970). *The Crystal Cave*. New York: William Morrow.

Stockwell, P. (2002). *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge.

Sutcliff, R. (1963). *Sword at Sunset*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Treece, H. (1956). *The Great Captains*. London: The Bodley Head.

Tuttle, G. (2006). What is noir? < http://noirfiction.info/what.html > [Accessed 9 November 2016]

Voisin, J. (1996). *Making Dreams Come True: Feminist Speculative Fiction and Cultural Politics*. MA thesis. Carlton University, Ottawa.

Wallace, D. (2005). *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900 - 2000*
New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Waters, S. (1998). *Tipping the Velvet*. London: Virago.

Webb, J. and Brien, D. (2011). Addressing the 'Ancient Quarrel': creative writing as research. In M. Biggs & H. Karlsson, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*. New York: Routledge, pp 186-203.

Wilson, K. (2011). *Re-Visioning Historical Fiction for Young Readers: The Past Through Modern Eyes*. New York: Routledge.

Woolf, A. (2013). < https://gemaecce.com/hild-the-novel/> [Accessed 11 March 2017]

Woolf, V. (1929). Women and fiction, *The Forum*, March.

Wyndham, J. (1956). Consider her ways. In: *Consider Her Ways & Others*. London: Michael Joseph.

Appendix — Critical Reception

AMMONITE AND *SLOW RIVER*

- Winner, James Tiptree Jr Award
- Winner, Nebula Award
- Winner, Lambda Literary Award (1993)
- Winner, Lambda Literary Award (1996)
- Winner, Premio Italia
- Winner, Spectrum Award
- Runner-up, Locus Award, Best First Novel
- Shortlist, Seiun Award
- Shortlist, Arthur C. Clarke Award
- Shortlist, British Science Fiction Award

Los Angeles Times Book Review
Ammonite's story is gripping, many-layered, ever-changing. Griffith has a fine way with character and sure talent. Many passages are beautifully written; most seem to do double duty, shimmering with the many levels and complex meanings of this remarkable first novel.

New Statesman and Society
Ammonite is utterly believable, and at times heart-wrenching in its emotional power; the characterisation is impeccable.

Washington Post Book World
Uncompromisingly packed with nondogmatic feminist and queer ideologies (...) Griffith reveal[s] herself to be fluent in presenting realistic science and its implications, capable of cinematic clarity in her prose, insightful with emotions and character.

Interzone
Nicola Griffith's first novel, *Ammonite*, flies all the banners of traditional sf [but] beneath the banners, it is armed to the teeth against convention.

 Locus
Ammonite represents a major, no, make that a revolutionary change...a remarkable departure from the commonplace.

Dorothy Allison
A serious assault on conventions so enormous that it is very much more dangerous, sometimes, than writing about lesbianism.

off our backs
This novel succeeds where others of its genre have failed.

Atlanta Magazine
It charts a new and different kind of women's space.

- Winner, Lambda Literary Award
- Winner, Quality Paperback Book Club Best Novel
- Winner, Alice B. Medal
- Shortlist, Lambda Literary Award

New York Times Book Review
Griffith is a writer of considerable gifts. Her sentences shimmer, her powers of observation and description are razor sharp.

Voice Literary Supplement
The Blue Place doesn't follow any obvious course; it's as if La Femme Nikita stepped into a '50s lesbian weepie to mess around with the rules (...) It may be the first-ever nugget of post-gay pulp, with a hero as sexy and iconic as television's Xena.

Washington Post
It's hard to overpraise the taut plotting and broad intelligence of this thriller. Beyond some smart narrative moves, what makes *The Blue Place* stand out is its precision.

Women's Review of Books
Griffith clearly challenges us to understand a radically atypical—or perhaps just typically ignored—aspect of the female psyche: the fine line between brutality and passion. She produces passages that provoke and startle (...) finely rendered observations. The novel soars. Aud's blue place—where women glow with the elated, bluish tinge of power rather than the black and blue marks of victimhood—is a peculiar and unsettling place indeed.

Village Voice
Brilliant, a bracing, stylized thriller. A finely nuanced, frightening plunge into the dark heart of an exceptional woman.

L. Timmel Duchamp
What all this adds up to for me is a sense of enormous empowerment from reading Aud's story. That first night when my thoughts were still organized by Aud's view of things, I found myself reconstructing my life with an emphasis on plucking out of my memory one powerful, generative act of agency after another (...) There is something about Aud's Heroism—told from her peculiar point of view—that makes one do this. In other words, it authorizes one to do this.

Manda Scott
Taut, tight and intelligent, *The Blue Place* raises the female investigator to new heights of audacity, verve and heartwarming vengeance. Aud Torvingen is a heroine for the modern age. I promise you, she'll haunt your days long after you've finished the book (...) This is exhilarating stuff.

- Winner, Washington State Book Award
- Tiptree Honor Book
- American Library Association Notable Book
- Shortlist, Nebula Award
- Shortlist, Lambda Literary Award
- Shortlist, John W. Campbell Memorial Award
- Shortlist, Bisexual Book Awards
- *Seattle Times* Best of the Best of 2013
- *Huffington Post* Best Five Books of 2013
- Book of the Week, *The Week*
- Book of the Week, *Publishers Weekly*
- Editor's Choice, *Historical Novel Society*

Guardian
A magnificent and convincing portrayal of a strange, wild, beautiful world.

BBC History Magazine
Vivid, richly detailed (…) a powerful, clever novel. Griffith illuminates the so-called Dark Ages, reconstructing an often alien historical world with great precision.

NPR (Amal El-Mohtar)
I am used to conversations about women in historical fiction...consisting of apologia for there being so few of them...by and large this is accepted as a truism, an unfortunate element of an unenlightened past and an excuse. Nicola Griffith's *Hild* flies in the face of that narrative the way a hawk might fly through a spider-web (...) *Hild* is a book as loving as it is fierce, brilliant and accomplished. To read it felt like a privilege and a gift.

(...) [T]he next time I'm faced with yet another inane repetition of 'women were oppressed so we can't write their stories,' I won't need to painstakingly educate anyone about the realities of medieval life with recourse to books and articles. 'Read *Hild*' will be enough.

Robin Anne Reid
Review essays by medieval scholars attest to the quality of Griffith's use of medieval scholarship in the construction of the material, political, and social aspects of Hild's culture as well as to the radical difference between this novel and other medieval historical and fantasy works. (...) The radical difference in Griffith's novel lies in the extent to which Griffith deconstructs the popular and inaccurate image of women's lives during the 'Dark Ages' rather than in the narrative structure and point of view, neither of which are postmodern nor experimental.

The primary deconstructive narrative element is characterization.

The Bookseller
Beautiful, thorny jacket for this beautiful literary novel. It genuinely brings the period to life.

Paris Review Daily
[D]azzling (…) Griffith's lyrical prose emphasizes the savagery of the political landscape, in which religion, sex, and superstition are wielded mercilessly for personal gain.

Bookforum
In its ambition and intelligence, *Hild* might best be compared to Hilary Mantel's novels about Thomas Cromwell.

Neal Stephenson
The novel resonates to many of the same chords as *Beowulf,* the legends of King Arthur, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Game of Thrones*—to the extent that Hild begins to feel like the classic on which those books are based.

Dr Alex Woolf, University of St. Andrews
It is the best fictional attempt to recreate Dark Age Britain that I have ever read.

Morning Star
Hild by Nicola Griffith may well be a future classic. The writing is lucent and the plot enthralling, but perhaps most impressive is how the author creates and sustains a rare feeling in the reader of really living among the characters.