

 TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE **Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2010)**

In the last decades historical fiction has emerged from the shadow of disapproval into the full glare of the literary spotlight, and is now to be considered seriously within the studies of literary criticism and theory. One of the difficulties in coming to grips with historical fiction as a genre is in finding an adequate definition. To define it simply in terms of how many years ago the story is set, or how many generations back, is too simplistic. Sir Walter Scott did not write the first novel with an historical theme, but his novels introduced what Georg Lukács referred to as the specifically historical, in which the derivation of the characters was drawn from the historical peculiarity of their age. Since Scott's time historical novels have never lost their appeal, possibly because, as Patricia Duncker points out, they have the best plots. I would add that they also have the most interesting characters.

The Historical Novel, written by the historian Jerome de Groot, is part of Routledge's *The New Critical Idiom* series. The aim of this series is to 'extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century'. Jerome de Groot, in his introduction refers to the 'explosion of sales and popularity of novels set in the past', and these novels, diverse as they are, deserve serious attention. Being popular does not necessarily equate with lack of literary merit and one of the strengths of this book is that the writer has examined not just the 'worthy' or literary historical novels but historical novels across a number of subgenres, including detective, gender specific, postmodern, and metafiction.

The introductory chapter gives an overview of the development of the historical novel since Scott. In the chapters that follow the book moves through an examination in detail of genre fiction, literary fiction and history, postmodernism and finally, books that challenge history. Within these chapters specific texts, for example, books by authors as diverse as George Eliot and Sarah Waters, are discussed in detail.

There are some incisive studies of historical novels already published, but those which include literary criticism tend to concentrate on a particular period, such as the Victorian novels, or for particular reader groups, such as children or women. I can think of none that gives a better introduction to the genre in all its manifestations. In addition it provides a connection between historical fiction and general literary theory. In discussing postmodern historical novels de Groot writes that: 'the techniques of postmodernism ... have become the techniques of the modern historical novel. Questioning the legitimacy of narrative and undermining authority are fundamental to the ways that contemporary novelists approach the past.'

The chapter on genre fiction concentrates on novels that 'are not generally judged literary and therefore are often unconsidered by critics.' The historical novel may be regarded, and is often justified, as being educative, but surely it has merit as entertainment as well. Mills and Boon have an historical series, which does not deviate from the basic romantic message. Catherine Cookson's novels, on the other hand, 'refuse to compromise their message about the privations suffered by women in

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the past and in doing so they represent a type of historical romance which is idealistic about relationships, but clear-sighted about history’.

De Groot makes a strong case for the historical novel to be taken seriously within the formal study of literature. He writes that ‘from its beginnings as a form, the historical novel has queried, interrogated, and complicated fixed ideas of selfhood, historical progression and objectivity.’ Further to this he looks at how ‘accepted history has been disputed and how untold atrocities have been uncovered in a fictional context’.

There is a glossary of terms, together with an index and an extensive bibliography. This book serves as an excellent introduction to the reading and study of historical novels, but it goes well beyond a superficial overview. It is detailed and substantial enough to be a valuable resource for those who wish to delve further into a literary study of historical fiction.

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