

Narrative Strategies in the Reconstruction of History

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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

HISTORY THROUGH FICTION

ANA RAQUEL FERNANDES

The type of story is critical to how history is used in fiction, and the nature of the writer's interest in story influences the type of story chosen.
—Gillian Polack, *History and Fiction* (2016: 173)

The overt self-consciousness about language and (hi)story-writing in the novel is tied directly to the political...
—Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (2002: 6)

History exists not as one sole narrative but rather as a myriad of stories, some of which may be forgotten, while others are preserved and retold continuously – and more often than not quite differently – according to the cultural, social, political and economic panorama at the time. The present volume, *Narrative Strategies in the Reconstruction of History* looks into the narratives constructed by contemporary women authors from a British or Irish background. How do they perceive history? What histories do they narrate? How are stories recounted and why? The aim is to enquire into the ways authors such as A. S. Byatt, Pat Barker, Anne Enright, Tracy Chevalier and Ali Smith have incorporated the processes by which they recreate and pay tribute to history into their fiction. The various chapters explore why they recreate the past – whether their reasons are political, social or artistic – and the strategies employed to this end, the goal being to establish a comparison with the present.

These chapters establish the foreground for the ongoing and permanent need to engage with new forms of depicting history through fiction. The idea of bringing together these particular essays originated at the 13th ESSE Conference held at the National University of Ireland, Galway, in August 2016. As one of the conference activities, a round table was held on the subject of contemporary British women authors and the way they envisaged history in their writing. The debate that followed proved extremely relevant and compelling in the field of literary studies. A word

of acknowledgement must be directed to the early audience who helped to refine the ideas that lie at the core of the present volume. Believing that the collection ought to have a wider scope, the opportunity came along and Anne Enright's fiction was added to the list of writers whose work represented the original focus of the research. Concurrently, all the chapters have been thoroughly blind peer-reviewed and I am deeply grateful to all those who contributed to the completion of the present edited volume with their academic expertise and insightful readings, comments and suggestions.

When it came to structuring the contents, the subject matter of each chapter became the main criterion. The first two chapters discuss the fiction of two prominent British novelists who belong to a former generation and whose literary works cover a longer time span – A. S. Byatt (1936) and Pat Barker (1943). These are followed by an article on Anne Enright's production as a novelist. Enright (1962) is enthralling in the way she portrays history in her literary work, in particular, Irish history and the modern *zeitgeist*. The last two chapters are again dedicated to British writers of the same generation as Enright: Tracy Chevalier (1962) and Ali Smith (1962), both dealing with history and art and how fiction illuminates the relationship between the two.

The present volume is thus comprised of five chapters. Celia Wallhead's "History in A. S. Byatt, Novelist and Critic" opens the volume. A leading scholar on this author, in her essay Wallhead engages with A. S. Byatt's collection of critical studies, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*, in which the author set out her thoughts on the reasons behind what she called "the sudden flowering of the historical novel in Britain" (Byatt 2000: 9). Wallhead looks at Byatt's contribution to the discussion of history in fiction. She examines the author's thoughts in the context of the post-war novel and its heritage. Furthermore, she shows how Byatt uses the strategies she identifies in her critical studies in her own fiction in the course of her literary career.

In "Neohistorical Fiction and Dialogical Realism: Debunking *Loci* of Englishness in Pat Barker's *Noonday Trilogy*", María José de la Torre focuses on Pat Barker's latest fiction in order to explore the relevance of its historical settings. In particular, de la Torre addresses how Barker's use of historical settings responds to some of the different modes of writing to which the ascendancy of the historical novel in Britain has given rise. The author presents a survey of definitions of historical fiction written in English and focuses on the stylistic features (corresponding to David Lodge's description of dialogical realism) through which realism is enhanced, namely modernist strategies such as indirect free style and

postmodernist touches such as the inclusion of real-life characters. De la Torre considers Barker's use of postmodern elements of fact/fiction hybridity, as well as the social realist traces that may be found in the novels, linking both with the notion of rewriting history. Furthermore, de la Torre produces a masterful analysis of the tactics used by Barker to counteract stereotypes of Englishness.

The third chapter of the volume focuses on Anne Enright's fiction. Ana-Karina Schneider discusses the author's project of recuperating and reinstating women at various points in history via fiction. "Representations of the Contemporary in Anne Enright's Historical Novels, *What Are You Like?* and *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch*" investigates the narrative techniques and stylistic features through which *What Are You Like?* and *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* give a voice to women who have been silenced and constitute a pertinent commentary on the condition of women in the early twenty-first century.

What Are You Like? (2000) covers the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and follows the protagonists' exploits in Dublin, London and New York. *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* (2002) is the fictional biography of a real-life 19th-century Irish adventuress who became the mistress of Paraguay's dictator during the war against the Triple Alliance. In her chapter, Schneider discusses how both novels reflect critically on contemporary matters, ranging from the changing rights of women to consumerism and cosmopolitanism in Celtic Tiger Ireland. Indeed, while the discourse of the Celtic Tiger years typically celebrated immigration and return migration, Enright investigates the silenced histories of women emigrants, reflecting critically on the shame and lack of understanding that are frequently attached to their plight.

Alexandra Cheira's analysis of how visual elements (fact) and the stories woven around them (fiction) are intertwined in Tracy Chevalier's novels has revealed a striking approach to history. In chapter four, entitled "Hold Infinity in the Palm of Your Hand/And Eternity in an Hour": Visual Art in Tracy Chevalier's Novels', Cheira discusses Chevalier's use of visual art to create her novels. She carefully analyses the way paintings, etchings and other figurative works of art provide the stimuli behind the stories being narrated. Cheira ably draws comparisons and contrasts between three major novels by the author – *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999), *The Lady and the Unicorn* (2003) and *Remarkable Creatures* (2009) – while also placing them in the context of contemporary discussions of historical fiction, gender roles and women's writing. Moreover, since Chevalier is more concerned with the characters and the story than with the historical setting, Cheira further argues that Chevalier's

novels are neo-historical in the sense that history is secondary to the plot and the characters.

In the final essay in the collection, “Ali Smith’s *How to Be Both: History and Art in Dialogue*”, I analyse Ali Smith’s questioning of particular versions of history through the process of narrative, the depiction of alternative identities and the rewriting of myths. I argue that through her fiction Smith challenges the way history precedes us and shapes us. In the novel, history is also reconsidered in terms of gender. The Renaissance fresco depicting the *Allegory of March: Triumph of Minerva* in the “Hall of the Months” (Salone dei Mesi) in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara, triggers the two intriguing narratives that unfold. The reproduction of the image of the fresco – which also appears as a paratextual element in Smith’s novel – enhances the chapter and would not have been possible without the kind permission granted. In this quintessentially postmodern work, questions of metanarrative arise and the reader is constantly faced with the enduring conundrums of the author’s intentionality, the autonomy of the work of art and the relationships between art and reality, fiction and reality.

Narrative Strategies in the Reconstruction of History brings together thoughtful analyses on the fiction of individual contemporary British and Irish authors. Although varied and distinct, the literary works of A. S. Byatt, Pat Barker, Anne Enright, Tracy Chevalier and Ali Smith share a vital interest in what Linda Hutcheon, (a follower of theorist and photographer Victor Burgin), calls the “politics of representation” (Hutcheon 2002: 3). In pursuing their own goals, their fiction continually challenges traditional narrative models, contributing to the debate on the various frameworks that help to shape our worldview: historiographical theory, feminist thought, postmodern art, poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory and cultural studies among others.

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CHAPTER ONE

HISTORY IN A. S. BYATT, NOVELIST AND CRITIC

CELIA WALLHEAD

Introduction: history and story, fact and fiction

If we look for a definition of “history” in the dictionaries, the majority will concur on the most basic concept, something like “the branch of knowledge dealing with past events.” So history covers almost everything except what is happening at the present moment, which only lasts exactly that: one moment. Thus all novels except those with a futuristic setting, or with a narrative developed in a long, stretched-out present, are going to be historical novels. But by historical novel we generally mean one which re-creates a past era or deals with an important, often political, event or series of events. They are more obviously historical, or they are examples of Linda Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction¹, if the novelised versions of events reach out of the framework of the fiction to refer to or include real historical characters and situations, which are fictionalised. Orlofsky coined the term “historiografiction” to “denote treatment of persons or events from the past” (2003, 47), though with the emphasis on the fictionalising of the historical characters: “historiografiction is primarily concerned with character, perhaps secondarily with theme; historical fiction, on the other hand, is activated by plot, setting, details, or lifestyle” (*ibid.*).

But the ground of the connection between history and fiction is not as even and simple as it might appear. First of all, the concept of “history” is unstable. In his 2009 novel, *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*,

¹ In historiographic metafiction “the theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs [...] is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past.” (Hutcheon 1988, 12)

Julian Barnes declares the following in the half-chapter, the “Parenthesis” between chapters 8 and 9, where he discusses history and storytelling:

History isn’t what happened. History is just what historians tell us. There was a pattern, a plan, a movement, expansion, the march of democracy; it is a tapestry, a flow of events, a complex narrative, connected, explicable. One good story leads to another. [...] We make up a story to cover up the facts we don’t know or can’t accept [...]. (223–246)

This statement on the often polemical relationship between the so-called facts of history and fiction brings the juxtaposition of history and story to the fore, as if to say that history itself requires narrative. Barnes slips from “historians” to “we,” leaving the reader wondering if they are one and the same and if historians “make up” and give form to what they pass off as history, the facts becoming distorted along the way. In these postmodern times, when strategies for composition can be laid bare within the work itself, contemporary writers of historical fiction may give priority to the strategies of narrative, to the “story,” to use Barnes’s terms, to reveal the ways in which history can be “written.”

Not everyone agrees on what can be defined as historical fiction, since there is little consensus on what history is or on how it can be narrated. Back in the 1970s, Fleishman had required a sense of theory behind the presentation: “What makes a historical novel historical is the active presence of a concept of history as a shaping force” (Fleishman 3). Decades later, perhaps this is much to ask, since concepts of history multiply rapidly and a novelist may not necessarily come down on the side of just one. Our novelist under study, A. S. Byatt, is notably all-encompassing as regards literary theory, and by extension, is flexible in her attitudes to the use of history in fiction.

Marcó del Pont begins his article “The Contemporary Historical Novel and the Novel of Contemporary History” with the question “What is historical fiction?” (2016, n. p.). He shows how it has often been the organizers of literary prizes who have established what we might call time zones into which works have to fit to be deemed historical. For example, the M.M. Bennetts Award for historical fiction stipulates that books must be set more than fifty years in the past to qualify, while another says sixty years, and in yet another prize, 1950 is seen as a threshold that divides time between history and the contemporary (*ibid.*) An interesting point is that “split-time novels” are eligible, but only as long as the majority of the story takes place in the past (*ibid.*). Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990) would qualify as a split-time novel and as a historical novel, as the greater

part of the novel is the nineteenth-century part rather than the contemporary story-line, and is set a century before.

Byatt, creative writer, academic and critic, quoted the passage by Julian Barnes with approval in her book *On Histories and Stories* (2000, 49–50). She would obviously agree not only with Barnes about the unreliability of so-called factual historical accounts, but also with Marcó del Pont that the views of the prize-givers are “restrictive” and that historical fiction requires “a much wider temporal scope” (2016, n. p.). The relations between so-called “fact” and fiction and how they are conjoined through narrative strategies are discussed both explicitly and implicitly by her in her writings. In this study, we will examine what she has to say explicitly in her critical, theoretical essays and then implicitly in examples of her fiction. Her consideration of how to treat historical material, how to transform it into story, is sometimes explicit even in her fiction, however, as she is a practitioner of self-conscious artistic discussion in her stories, the strategy being the use of a writer protagonist.

Gillian Polack on history and fiction

But first, let us consider the recent contributions to the discussion by another novelist-critic, Gillian Polack, as we will apply some of her key ideas to areas of Byatt’s production. For her recent book *History and Fiction* (2016), Gillian Polack interviewed many writers for their views on the issue of how to transform history into story and placed them within a wide theoretical framework, from the most philosophical, drawing upon such as Michel Foucault, to more pragmatic and popular theories. She emphasises the contribution such writers make to culture:

History is not only an academic discipline, with its own method and theory, but in its broader sense it is also an array of cultural narrative (as established by Hayden White, notably in *Metahistory* [1973]), drawing on popular or learned understandings of the past. Writers are integral to the development and maintenance of these cultural narratives. (8)

Polack’s mention of White reminds us that he wrote that in the 1980s there was “an extraordinarily intense debate” going on over the question of writing history and over the nature of narrative and discourse in history (1984, 1). Byatt was a well-established writer by then and as an academic too, she would not have been unaware of this debate as she made her way through the composition of her *Frederica Quartet* about the contemporary period. White’s argument is particularly relevant here:

The form of the discourse, the narrative, adds nothing to the content of the representation, but is rather a simulacrum of the structure and process of real events. And insofar as this representation *resembles* the events of which it is a representation, it can be taken as a true account. The story told in the narrative is a “mimesis” of the story *lived* in some region of historical reality, and insofar as it is an accurate imitation it is to be considered a truthful account thereof. (1984, 3, emphasis in text)

White's ideas, however, were soon to be modified, challenged or even undermined by those of the philosophers and narratologists, the semiologically-oriented literary theorists such as Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Todorov, Julia Kristeva, Genette, etc., and while Byatt was sufficiently fascinated by their work as to create a narratologist character, Gillian Perholt in *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (1994), her polyvocality makes her shun opting for any one of their approaches. A striking example of how Byatt can present an array of perspectives, in which some are more acceptable and appropriate than others in the context, is the group of academics who gather together at the end of her best-selling neo-Victorian/contemporary novel *Possession. A Romance* (1990).

One of Polack's main conclusions concerning the relationship between history and novel-writing foregrounds the importance of the way history is narrated in order to convince readers of situations they can no longer access because of the temporal and often geographical gap:

The key conclusion is that writers place history in the service of story. The type of story is critical to how history is used in fiction, and the nature of the writer's interest in story influences the type of story chosen. (173)

An author creates his or her narrator(s) to guide (or challenge) the reader, so within the choice of writing technique and the structuring of the narrative, the voice chosen is crucial, whether it be that of the narrator or of other characters presented by the narrator. The voices are evidently of vital importance in how history is conveyed as they help create the “world building” Polack speaks of, “the creation of the world of the novel” (4) when it is a chronologically distant world. Polack got her interviewees to discuss how their methods might differ from those of professional historians. She summarises their ideas as suggesting that the historian's approach is more monolithic:

Writing techniques are only part of the story. More central to the ways in which history is incorporated in fiction is understanding the difference

between the mechanisms of the historian's narrative and how they are different from that of the novelist. (4)

In chapter five of her book she explains how she asked her subjects to consider the question of their approaches "in terms of four key factors: research, interpretation, responsibility and transparency" (4). She picked upon these key factors because, although they belong to the sphere of the historian too, she believes that the application of the first two and respect for the latter two by a novelist may be the space where difference can creep in: "These are used within the creation of the world of the novel, whether it is perceived by the writer as historical, or whether it is an entirely created world based loosely on history" (4). This closeness or otherwise to the "facts" of history is what seems to differentiate between "historical novels" and what one might call fantasy novels with a historical base, in terms of the degree of liberty taken. Even as Byatt was composing her contemporary historical novels, the *Frederica Quartet*, which covered the 1970s to the end of the century, other writers were pondering the issue of history in fiction: in *Waterland* (1983), Graham Swift writes "history merges with fiction, fact gets blurred with fable" (208). In his facet as critic and theorist, novelist Malcolm Bradbury wrote in the last decade: "Among novelists, as among historians themselves, the question of the nature of history and history-writing was at issue" (1993, 406). The leading British experimental novelists of the last two decades of the century were concerned with portraying the present moment and the past as recaptured in that moment and how it is transformed, or how its impact in itself transforms the present.

As we examine the novels based in the past written by A. S. Byatt, Polack's four factors will be taken into account. But first, it is interesting to see what she herself has to contribute to the theoretical side of the question.

The contribution of A.S. Byatt to the discussion of history in fiction

A.S. Byatt is best known for being a writer of novels and stories that hark back to times past: *The Virgin in the Garden*, the first novel of the *Frederica Quartet* (1978), looking back to the period of the first Queen Elizabeth, and *Possession* (1990), *Angels and Insects* (1995) and even *The Children's Book* (2009) looking back to the Victorian and Edwardian ages; but she is not so well-known as a critic of literature. She has always written on her favourite authors, and while some are or were contemporary, like Iris

Murdoch, others are from the 19th century. Thus she wrote a book on the Romantic poets and indeed—though rather surprisingly—the award in 2016 of the Erasmus Prize was for her “inspiring contribution to life-writing” rather than for the purely creative work. Within the life-writing there is literary criticism and study of how the authors that interest her have dealt with historical issues in their fiction.

In her theoretical work on the subject, the collection of critical studies *On Histories and Stories*, she talks in her Introduction about the Richard Ellmann memorial lectures she was invited to give at Emory University on English novels about history. She notes critically the tendency for such study to fall only under the umbrellas of post-colonialism or feminism:

Writers are writing historical novels, but much of the discussion of *why* they are doing this has been confined within the discussions of Empire or Women, or to the debate between “escapism” and “relevance”. It’s not so simple, as I hope I’ve shown. (3, emphasis in text)

She does not reject this; she recognises “the political desire to write the histories of the marginalised, the forgotten, the unrecorded” (11). Indeed, Orlofsky’s historiografiction had been aimed at salvaging the marginalised or less important characters of history: “[...] these historiografictions go beyond telling a story from a previously unchampioned point of view—they also explore the limits of knowing” (2003, 61). But Byatt herself is not a feminist or a post-colonial writer: as she has said on more than one occasion, she finds one particular stance too limiting. She asserted in her book of critical essays, *Passions of the Mind*, that she was “a non-belonger of schools of thought” (1991, 2). She also regrets that since her early days at Cambridge—she did her first degree at Newnham College between 1954 and 1957—where her generation was “oppressed, as well as encouraged [...] by the moral expectations and moral authority of Leavis or Trilling” (*On Histories and Stories*, 6),² literary theory has come to be dominated by such as “Freud, Marx, Derrida, Foucault” (*ibid.*), which in itself is not to be criticized, but the effect is: “But it has led critics and theorists to make writers fit into the boxes and nets of theoretical quotations which, a writer

² For a full discussion of Byatt’s allegiance to but also cleaving from Leavis, see Christien Franken, “The Turtle and Its Adversaries: Polyvocality in A. S. Byatt’s Critical and Academic Work”, the first chapter of her 2001 book *A. S. Byatt: Art, Authorship, Creativity*. Also relevant is Kathleen Coyne Kelly’s discussion in the section “Cambridge and F. R. Leavis” (pp. 4–7) in her Twayne monograph *A. S. Byatt* (1996).

must feel, excite most of them at present much more than literature does" (*ibid.*).

In the first essay in the collection, "Fathers", she speaks of "the sudden flowering of the historical novel in Britain, the variety of its forms and subjects, the literary energy and real inventiveness that has gone into it." She goes on to pose two questions: "I want to ask, why has history become imaginable and important again? Why are these books *not* costume drama or nostalgia?" (9, emphasis in text). In answer to these questions she puts forward the following hypothesis: "The renaissance of the historical novel has coincided with a complex self-consciousness about the writing of history itself" (*ibid.*). This sounds like George Eliot's enquiries about how to study history and how to revitalise the past for the present-day reader. The author Byatt cites for attracting attention to the problem of how to write history is Simon Schama, while those she examines who write fiction imbued with historical fact and manifest traits that focus upon the question of the status of text are novelists who produce apparent life-writing, like Peter Ackroyd and his biography of Dickens, all of these mixing invention and speculation, producing a hybrid form with self-conscious narrative devices. She herself was to write a novel, *The Biographer's Tale* (2001), about the difficulty of writing historical lives.

As she notes that recent historical novels cover time from the Neanderthal to the Second World War, she says "It could be argued that the novelists are trying to find historical paradigms for contemporary situations" (11), which George Eliot had done in *Romola* and she herself did in *The Virgin in the Garden*. An example she gives is of Rose Tremain, who "has said that she sees the England of the restoration of Charles II as an analogy for Thatcher's Britain", also, "novels about the French Revolution may have something to say about the revolutionary atmosphere of the 1960s. It may be argued that we cannot understand the present if we do not understand the past that preceded and produced it" (*ibid.*).

Another reason she gives for writing the past, which she calls less "solid", is "the aesthetic need to write coloured and metaphorical language, to keep past literatures alive and singing, connecting the pleasure of writing to the pleasure of reading" (*ibid.*). This may be related to her decision to create protagonists who are writers or artists and who have to make their way with or without the help of their families and communities. As she says: "I became interested in the slippage between personal histories and social or national histories" (12).

As regards approach and form there is, according to Byatt, another reason for postmodern writers turning to history:

Freud's work, and Rivers's, is about the constitution of the Self, which was the great theme of the modernist novel. I believe that postmodern writers are returning to historical fiction because the idea of writing about the Self is felt to be worked out, or precarious, or because these writers are attracted by the idea that perhaps we have no such thing as an organic, discoverable, single Self. We are perhaps no more than a series of disjunct sense-impressions, remembered incidents, shifting bits of knowledge, opinion, ideology and stock responses. We like historical persons because they are unknowable, only partly available to the imagination, and we find this occluded quality attractive. (31)

So, in answer to her own question, she has offered four different explanations: a new self-consciousness about the writing of history, the finding of historical paradigms for contemporary situations, the enjoyment of reading discourses from the past, even if they are recreations, and a turning away from the Modernist emphasis on the self towards an exploration of more mysterious complex personae, difficult to access through being shrouded in the past.

If we look more closely at the comparisons and the lacunae or gaps and how writers at the end of the twentieth century have dealt with them, it is interesting to note a comment Byatt makes at the beginning of her second chapter, "Forefathers." She cites two famous opening lines of novels: those to Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* ("It was the best of times, it was the worst of times [...]") and the "Proem," or prologue, to *Romola*, and finds similarities:

Both these novelists, in a kind of biblical rhetoric, emphasise samenesses and continuities between the past and the present. Both were writing close to historical texts that had moved them—Carlyle's French Revolution, and Sismondi's *History of the Italian Republics*. Both believed they could know the past through its analogies with the present, and both wrote very Victorian books, instantly recognisable Victorian books, about their chosen historical crises. Walter Scott's projects were more complex, and his historical intelligence sharper. (37)

It is tempting to go into Scott's "greater complexity and sharper historical intelligence", but our focus here is on contemporary women writers, so it would be more appropriate to mention Hilary Mantel, whose work has received much acclaim—indeed, Mantel's *Wolf Hall* pipped Byatt's *The Children's Book* to the post for the Man Booker Prize in 2009. Byatt compares historian Simon Schama's version of the French Revolution, *Citizens* (1989), with Mantel's *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992) and says that the latter "tells what Schama cannot tell, because he

cannot know it, although both writers use the same evidence.” (54) Mantel writes “conventional” realist historical fiction on the surface, but underneath there are “many new and admirable things” in “the juxtapositions of events, the gaps, the angle of narration [...]” (55) Both Mantel and Pat Barker were influenced by George Eliot’s “knowledgeable narrators” (*ibid.*).

Gillian Polack discusses this idea of knowability or otherwise: “When writers think about any period or place in history, they are really thinking about a mediated set of narratives about places and time that are unreachable” (8). To overcome this unattainability, her interviewees told her that they have recourse to reconstructions through contemporary references such as chronicles and make analyses by analogy. Writers of fiction “take what is historically ‘known’ (that is, interpreted) and they weave their own story [...]” (8). Byatt celebrates the freedom writers have demanded in their reconstructions of the past:

There has been a general feeling during my writing life that we cannot know the past—often extended into the opinion that we therefore should not write about it. The sense we have that Eliot’s Florence and Dickens’s Paris mob are part of their Victorian English vision has contributed to this, whilst postmodernist writers like Jeanette Winterson have felt free to create their own fantasy pasts from odd details of names, events and places. If we can’t know, we may invent, and anything goes. There has also been a complex discussion of the rhetoric of historical writing itself, which has included both political discussion of the priorities and cultural assumptions of the historians, and structural analysis of their narrative and language. (*On Histories and Stories*, 37–8)

One way round this problem of authenticity is to accept inauthenticity and acknowledge invention in creating accounts, with differing degrees of fidelity to apparently factual versions. The problem is not new, but has been faced in the past by writers, perhaps the most important being George Eliot.

Byatt and George Eliot

Byatt was fascinated by Eliot’s concern with history and how to embed it in the novel in the nineteenth century. Eliot herself admired and was influenced by the “father” of the historical novel: Walter Scott. It may be that from these masters, Byatt learned the art of interpolating real historical characters in a context along with fictional ones, as in Scott’s *Rob Roy* (1817), and of juxtaposing a past age with the present. Byatt is particularly interested in how her predecessors have conceived of the

possible place of history in fiction. Eliot's aims and strategies are discussed by the editor of the 1996 Penguin Classics edition of *Romola* (1862–3), Dorothea Barrett. In her Introduction, she analyses the public and private in Eliot's reworking of history:

It is in difference rather than sameness that the historical setting and the parallel stories become meaningful. Savonarola is a male historical figure, and his conflicts take place in the public sphere; Romola is a female fictional character, and the problems that beset her are in large part private. Had *Romola* been an actual Renaissance Florentine, her story would not have come to George Eliot and to us as has Savonarola's, because, as that of a woman acting in the private sphere, it would not have been recorded and preserved. On the other hand, George Eliot's writing of *Romola* has in a sense placed *Romola*'s story in history, albeit literary history. In the act of writing "historical fiction" (the phrase itself is an oxymoron), George Eliot erodes the distinctions between "history" and "narrative"; by juxtaposing *Romola* with Savonarola, she both highlights their differences and dissolves them. (xi)

Barrett goes on to comment upon the high-Victorian fascination with the Renaissance, placing *Romola* in a context of the works of Ruskin and Pater, but also argues for Eliot's being influenced by Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*, which she read shortly after its publication in 1840. Manzoni's technique was to intersperse purely historical chapters with fictional chapters, and Eliot does this in *Romola*. Another similarity with Manzoni is a sense of artifice and self-consciousness about the rewriting of history. As Barrett says:

As is obvious by this point, I wish to maintain that George Eliot is interested in the history she is studying, but she is even more interested in the studying of history, which sheds some light on her choice of Renaissance Florence as the setting. Bardo and Baldassarre [Romola's father and father-in-law respectively] are both doing what George Eliot herself is doing—they are trying to revitalize the distant past. George Eliot has chosen the historical period most remarkable for its interest in history. To say that *Romola* is a novel about Renaissance Italy is to suggest in the author and betray in oneself a rather unproblematic sense of what "history" is. Rather, *Romola* is a novel about the writing of novels like *Romola*; it brims with unspoken questions such as "Why are we interested in history?", "How do we know whether or not it is true?", "Does its importance depend upon its literal factual truth?", and "If not, what is the difference between history and literature?" (xii)

Two final points that Barrett makes are that Eliot draws parallels between situations and problems in Renaissance Italy and Victorian England, indeed, she “creates an entire network of correspondences between the time of its setting and that in which it is written” (xiii). And as an extension to this: “there is a correspondence in the status of women at the time of the setting and the time of the writing of *Romola*” (xiv).

Applying this to Byatt, we see how she has learned strategies from Eliot. In her third novel, *The Virgin in the Garden*, not only is the new Elizabethan age of the early 1950s compared with the first Elizabethan age of the 16th century in several respects, as we shall see later, but the protagonist, Frederica Potter, struggles to make her way in post-war northern England, demanding her right to an education equal to men and to enter professions previously closed to women, but doing so successfully, owing to the advances in women’s rights achieved over the previous century. Thus Byatt has much in common with the model she admires.

Byatt’s strategies for dealing with history in fiction

To return to Polack’s four key factors: research, interpretation, responsibility and transparency, it is obvious that Byatt does much research³ and that she is responsible to the spirit of the generally accepted facts of history. Her versions are usually transparent and not obfuscated for any reason, but from what she affirms and from her own creations, one would have to say that she applauds the right to interpret, though again within the limits that would make her work credible or otherwise. As she has said:

Historians have become suspicious of history which concentrates on the fates and motives of individuals. [...] Recent historians like Simon Schama have made deliberate and selfconscious attempts to restore narration to history [...]. This new interest in narration can, I think, be related to the novelists’ new sense of the need for, and essential interest of, storytelling, after a long period of stream-of-consciousness, followed by the

³ Her research for “The Conjugial Angel” is set out in her essay “True Stories and the Facts in Fiction” in *Histories and Stories* 91–122: “Once I had a framework and characters I simply immersed myself—over a period of years—in a disparate set of texts. Biographical texts about Hallams, Tennysons, and Swedenborg. Swedenborg’s writings. Angels in dictionaries of angels, and the Book of Revelation. Victorian theories of the afterlife. *In Memoriam*, again and again [...].” (107)

fragmented, non-linear forms of the *nouveau roman* and the experimental novel. The idea that “all history is fiction” led to a new interest in fiction as history. (*On Histories and Stories*, 38)

This claim to a certain freedom has the result of producing eclectic forms of historical account. According to her:

There are many current forms of historical fiction—parodic and pastiche forms, forms which fake documents or incorporate real ones, mixtures of past and present, hauntings and ventriloquism, historical versions of genre fictions—Roman and medieval and Restoration detective stories and thrillers, both in popular literature and serious writing. The purposes of the writer can be incantatory, analytic, romantic, or stylistic. Or playful, or extravagant, or allegorical. Even the ones apparently innocently realist—Pat Barker [...] or Hilary Mantel [...]—do not choose realism unthinkingly, but almost as an act of shocking rebellion against current orthodoxies. (38-9)

These “current orthodoxies” may be the theoretical paradigms that have dominated historical fiction in recent years, such as Linda Hutcheon’s “historiographic metafiction”⁴ or Gyorgy Lukacs’s Marxist perspective.⁵ As in the varied group of academics in *Possession*, Byatt can make reference to different possibilities, but as we saw, she insisted on being “a non-belonger of schools”, so we will not find in her writing, for example, a seriously and singly projected Marxist view of the historical context.

It goes without saying that much research is required before one can recreate events where the main details are well-known, in order not to err in the description or narration. Care obviously must be taken in the use of sources too. Marcó del Pont cites in his article two cases of careless use of sources which were translated into accusations of plagiarism, the best-known being Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, where acknowledgement at the end of the novel of the usefulness of a certain memoir did not protect him from being accused of plagiarism (2016, n. d.).

⁴ For Hutcheon, such works are “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 1988, 2), amongst which she includes Byatt’s *Possession*.

⁵ For a collection of essays that attempts to break out of the strait-jacket of these orthodoxies, see *The Return of the Historical Novel? Thinking About Fiction and History After Historiographic Metafiction* (2017), edited by Andrew James Johnston and Kai Wiegandt. The question mark in the title is telling, as the essays show the need to interrogate given approaches and be more inclusive, tolerant and diverse, willing to acknowledge “other histories.”

Equally, research has to lay the foundations for pastiche, which attempts to create a convincingly accurate version of the type of discourse used in the real situations. In their discussion of the novella “Morpho Eugenia” from *Angels and Insects*, Antonija Primorac and Ivana Balint-Feudvarska explain Byatt’s textual pastiche:

As a postmodern narrative device, pastiche carries connotations of playfulness and ironic distancing. However, Byatt’s use of pastiche seems to be more conservative. She recreates the Victorian era respectfully – her pastiches are used to highlight the inner life of her protagonists, showing them as sincere and earnest. She does not do it for the purpose of parody or irony, but to playfully and creatively give them life, i.e. to tell a story. She recreates the Victorian era structurally and lexically, but it is only the (kind of) life she breathes into her characters that distinguishes this novella from any Victorian one and makes it postmodern and metafictional. (2011, 223–4)

In a lecture at the University of Granada, Spain, in 1988, Byatt asserted that her work was infused with three important tendencies or factors: the old, the new and the metaphor. As far as history is concerned, both the old and the new are relevant: by the old, she means that she places herself in a tradition of writing, and thus must be very familiar with the work of her forebears. She was intimately acquainted with the poetry of Browning and Tennyson before she could invent the character of the poet Ash in *Possession* and write his poems. As regards the new, she said that in every piece that she writes, she must contribute something original, add something to what is generally known, and she likes to research a new aspect of a subject, not only to capture the interest of her readers, but to indulge her own curiosity.

In discussing Byatt’s own strategies, we could say that she uses all the means she mentions above, which take the form of pastiche, ventriloquism, etc. Perhaps *Possession* is the most obvious work where she applies them, as she herself says:

Possession [...] which is about all these things, ventriloquism, love for the dead, the presence of literary texts as the voices of persistent ghosts or spirits. I have always been haunted by Browning’s images of his own historical poems as acts of *resurrection* – he compared himself, in *The Ring and the Book*, both to Faust and to Elisha, who breathed life into a dead corpse. What I should like to say here about my own text is that ventriloquism became necessary because of what I felt was the increasing gulf between current literary criticism and the words of the literary texts it in some sense discusses. (45, emphasis in text)

Indeed, she lists all the narrative forms she has used in this novel in order to give play to history and storytelling:

Possession plays serious games with the variety of possible forms of narrating the past—the detective story, the biography, the medieval verse Romance, the modern romantic novel, and Hawthorne’s fantastic historical Romance in between, the campus novel, the Victorian third-person narration, the epistolary novel, the forged manuscript novel, and the primitive fairy tale of the three women, filtered through Freud’s account of the theme in his paper on the Three Caskets. (48)

The expression “play serious games” is interesting, as through it, Byatt insists on her right here to change, or at least manipulate, history, but any playing around with facts and figures (in both senses) will be serious, be it philosophical or metaphysical. By the word figure, I mean not so much numbers as famous people. Byatt’s interest in history seems to focus on figures, and perhaps more literary figures than political ones. Thus Browning makes an appearance in “Precipice-Encurled” (*Sugar and Other Stories* 1987) and Tennyson in “The Conjugial Angel” (*Angels and Insects* 1992); then the poet Ash is a reworking of nineteenth-century poets such as these, and in *The Children’s Book*, children’s writer Olive Wellwood is based loosely on E. Nesbit. However, in *The Virgin in the Garden*, rewritings of speeches by Queen Elizabeth I, delivered by the protagonist of the novel, Frederica Potter, in the role of actress, cannot be so fanciful, as the texts are known. In the rest of the study I am going to focus upon *The Virgin in the Garden* as an example of such intertextuality and *The Children’s Book* as a historical novel that compares a past age with our own.

The Virgin in the Garden and Queen Elizabeth I’s speeches

In her review of criticism of Byatt’s work, Louisa Hadley has the following to say about the first novel in the Quartet: “The titles of Irwin’s and Dinnage’s reviews hint at *The Virgin in the Garden*’s, and indeed the whole quartet’s, engagement with history” (2008, 26). Michael Irwin’s review for the *Times Literary Supplement* (3 November, 1978: 1277) is entitled “Growing Up in 1953” and Rosemary Dinnage’s in the *New York Times Book Review* (1 April 1979, 20) is “England in the ’50s.” Indeed, I myself have referred to the historical nature of the Quartet by placing the novels within the context of the 19th-century sub-genre “Condition of England Novel” (Wallhead 1997, 138). Going back to del Pont’s assertion that whether a novel is historical or not may depend upon the context in

which it is presented, for example, if it is presented for a prize that stipulates time zones, we would have to accept that no such contest would accept *The Virgin in the Garden* as a historical novel, since the temporal space in which it is set is a mere twenty-five years distant (1953 in a novel published in 1978). By now it has become historical, for almost forty years have passed since the date of publication. We could argue that it was conceived as a novel of contemporary history: what life was like for a lower-middle-class family in the north of England after the Second World War. By comparing the new age of the second Queen Elizabeth, crowned in 1953, with that of the first Queen Elizabeth, crowned almost four hundred years before, in 1558, Byatt points up several parallels. Firstly, though not at the time of her coronation, but thirty years later, in 1588, in the defeat of the Spanish Armada, England enjoyed one of the most famous military victories in her history. In the play enacted to celebrate the coronation of Elizabeth II, the drama focuses upon Elizabeth I and her speech to the troops before the engagement with the Spaniards. The common ground Byatt creates to unite Queen Elizabeth I and the actress who takes on the role, Frederica Potter, is the theme of virginity. Both females have to be brave in a patriarchal world. In both their lives, the social background is one of triumph in coming out of a war the victor.

The question of discourse and textuality in a historical novel poses the sort of problem Byatt loves to face. How is she to integrate the actual words of the Queen's famous rousing speech to the troops at Tilbury as they were about to face the Spanish Armada in August 1588 into a contemporary novel? In her essay "True Stories and the Facts in Fiction," (*Histories and Stories* 91–122) she tells her readers about how the words themselves are as important as the "facts":

This brings me to language. The journalist Chris Peachment interviewed various novelists about ten years ago about why they were writing historical novels, expecting some answer about paradigms of contemporary reality, and got the same answer from all of them. They wanted to write in a more elaborate, more complex way, in longer sentences, and with more figurative language. (95)

Elaborate, complex, figurative: this reminds us of what Byatt said about "the aesthetic need to write coloured and metaphorical language, to keep past literatures alive and singing [...]" (*On Histories and Stories*, 11). She goes on to add that she regrets the fact that children are not being taught history so much in schools today, only contemporary texts, to which they can supposedly better relate, while her own sense of identity "is bound up with the past, with what I read and with the way my

ancestors, genetic and literary, read, in the worlds in which they lived” (“True Stories,” 93). She declares that to her, in writing historical fiction, it is not enough to place the action in its historical context, she has to deal with the words:

I do believe that if I read *enough*, and carefully enough, I shall have some sense of what words meant in the past, and how they related to other words in the past, and be able to use them in a modern text so that they do not lose their relations to other words in the interconnected web of their own vocabulary. (94, emphasis in the text)

In their chapter “Writing the contemporary,” Alfer and Edwards de Campos relate Byatt’s sensitivity to this issue to two famous texts: Stephen Spender’s distinction between “Moderns” and “Contemporaries” and T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”⁶ To accommodate such distinctions and sensitivities, Byatt has placed layer upon layer of re-workings of the original script of the Tilbury speech in her novel:

The first Act ended on the tower speech. Wilkie’s mimicry of her tone-deaf intonation had strengthened a suspicion she’d formed after a suggestion he’d dropped, earlier, that this play was in fact a backsliding from Alexander’s true line in metaphysical puppetry, like *The Buskers*. She wondered if her speech were not dangerously pretty. She wondered how to excise the rhapsodic note from this very wordy renunciation of biology. She cut out the wheeling steps Lodge had instructed her in, stood blunt and heavy, was sardonic about the sealed fountain, gave a convulsive giggle and cut it all short. “I will not bleed.” Lodge shouted crossly “Never mind”, as she walked off. Alexander, who had begun by resenting her tampering with his stresses, ended by suspecting that his speech tripped too easily off the tongue, and that she was dealing with it for him. (*The Virgin in the Garden* 317)

In this description of Frederica Potter rehearsing her role as the young Elizabeth, the first layer consists of the speech itself; the second is the play that teacher/playwright Alexander Wedderburn has written on the subject to celebrate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth I’s namesake; the third is stage-manager Lodge’s instructions to Frederica on how to interpret the speech, with additional comments by Wilkie, the owner of the historic

⁶ Chapter 3 in their *A. S. Byatt: Critical Storytelling*, 2010. The Spender text is his “Moderns and Contemporaries” in *The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts*, edited by Irving Howe, NY: Horizon, 1967, pp. 43–9, and the Eliot essay of 1919 is to be found in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, edited by Frank Kermode, London: Faber & Faber, 1975, pp. 37–44.

building in which the play is to be represented; and finally, Frederica's own accommodation of the speech to herself, also a young virgin. This layered re-writing, which makes the reader think and question at each level of the re-working, is typical of Byatt's revision of figures from the past. Alfer and Edwards de Campos call it "a novel *about* history, a 'time-novel'" (39, emphasis in the text) – like *Romola*, one might add, especially given that it begins with a prologue where the main characters are gathered together in 1968 in the National Portrait Gallery around the Darnley portrait of the first Queen Elizabeth and are looking back fifteen years to the year of the Coronation in 1953 when the play about the Queen was put on. That fifteen-year gap now seems to be more of a chasm than the four hundred years between the reigns of the two Queen Elizabeths. *The Virgin in the Garden* is Byatt's third novel, and it is the third—and not the last either—in which at least one of her important protagonists is a writer. Here, Alexander Wedderburn is seen struggling over how to bring to life, in a play written in verse, well-known political events of over four hundred years earlier. As always, this writer-protagonist is a surrogate for Byatt herself, she uses him to discuss her own ponderings on how to portray history and make the strange language understandable and meaningful to her late-twentieth-century reader and the mid-twentieth-century audience she has created.

The Children's Book: Polack's four factors in the function of history in the novel

For this novel, which came out five years before the start of the centenary commemorations for the First World War, Byatt obviously did her homework, as usual. In the novel, "history" covers real international political events like the first global war, but because she has placed it in its European cultural context, she has also researched the cultural and artistic movements and innovations of the period. Her research counted on the help of certain experts in each field, and they are duly recognised in the *Acknowledgments* at the end. Her husband, Peter Duffy, is an expert on the First World War and shared his books with her (*The Children's Book* 616), while she sought help outside the family for a more specific aspect which would figure large in the novel, trench warfare: "I am indebted to Peter Chasseaud's splendid *Rat's Alley*, which is a comprehensive description of the trench names of the Western Front" (617). We have the old and the new here, but also metaphor, as the novel hinges upon the theme of death underground and there are several thematic metaphors that feed into the discussion. The mud of the trenches is reflected in the clay of the pots

made by the fictional character, appropriately named Benedict Fludd. Byatt had a literally hands-on experience of research into pottery: “Edmund de Waal invited me to visit his studio, and allowed me to put my hands into a wavering clay pot” (616).

Byatt sets her novel in the context of warfare between cousins, as Britain’s King George V and Kaiser Wilhelm II (both grandchildren of Queen Victoria) and even Tsar Nicholas were all first cousins. This historical international situation is reflected on a small scale in the fictional characters, where half-siblings find themselves on different sides in the war. Dorothy Wellwood discovers (346) that the man she had always considered to be her father, Humphry Wellwood, was not in fact her progenitor, but that her mother had accidentally fallen pregnant to Anselm Stern, a Jewish puppeteer based in Munich. Her half-brother Wolfgang, a puppeteer like his father, survives the war, while his anarchist brother Leon is killed fighting for his ideas.

During the war, Dorothy works as a doctor, for Byatt has used the historical context to develop ideas on the place and rights of women. She has researched the suffragette movement and women’s education at the beginning of the 20th century. Again, she has a family member to thank:

My daughter, Antonia Byatt, when director of the Women’s Library, helped me with the history of women’s suffrage and introduced me to Anne Summers, and to Jennian Geddes whose generous provision of information about women in medicine at the time of my novel was both fascinating and extraordinarily helpful. (616)

Before we leave this discussion of Byatt’s research, we just need to touch upon a disadvantage of doing serious and patient study of information to make the novel appear committed and accurate: if the details are not well integrated and digested, the result may be that the author comes over as giving us a history lesson. Byatt has been accused of this, indeed, in the review of the novel by Marie-Luise Kohlke, in an otherwise laudatory analysis, the critic sets out her caveat:

Admittedly, there are some stylistic problems with the scope and complexity of the novel. Intermittently, didacticism compromises Byatt’s superlative storytelling capability, when she injects extended summaries of socio-political events which, however informative, read too much like gently condescending history lessons for under-educated readers. Chancing upon the odd hitherto unknown fact does not quite compensate the reader for resultant delays in the story proper or for the disorientation of finding her/himself periodically ejected from the novel into a virtual schoolroom. (Kohlke, 268)

It does seem that Byatt is more successful in incorporating factual material in her short fiction than in the long “living encyclopaedias” which novels like *Possession* or *The Children’s Book* seem to be. Earlier, in her review for *The Spectator* of *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (1999), Katie Grant used this expression, “living encyclopaedias,” and went on to explain that in the framework on a smaller scale, Byatt managed to combine facts, historical or scientific or otherwise, with her own imaginative embellishment to produce “a rare balance.” (54) But another critic, Alex Clark, found a “display of writerly erudition” even in some short stories, which could leave readers feeling inferior (1994, 21). The Byatt style is intellectual, her themes are the great themes of life and death, identity, vocation and profession, so that is not going to change, and in the face of this problem, perhaps it is worth the risk of appearing to preach or appearing “school-marmy” rather than put readers off or lose them for lack of knowledge of the situations referred to. I would argue that while she provides background information of a general nature, she does then usually make it relevant and pertinent by showing how these socio-political events affect ordinary (or not so ordinary) people, in the form of her fictional characters. A good example comes near the end of the novel, the beginning of chapter 54, where she wishes to remind the reader of the stage of the hostilities. We must remember too, that with hindsight, we know now that in 1917, there were not many more months to go in the war, but the participants did not know this:

The Belgian landscape is flat and watery, polders planted with corn and cabbage, claimed from the North Sea by a series of dykes. Further inland there are fields and houses resting on a thick bed of clay. There is water there too, water in ponds and moats, water running into little *bekes* (rivulets), water in canals. The land floods easily because the water cannot penetrate the clay and drain away. In 1914 the Belgians, having offered unexpected fierce resistance to the advancing Germans, had retreated towards the coast. The Belgians opened locks and sluices and flooded the land, letting in the North Sea, and creating impassable water plains between the Germans and the coast. The villages around the sandy ridges that offered height to an army had been battered by the guns into dust, which was worked into the clay, by churning wheels and hooves, by marching men and limping, hopping, crawling wounded. (605)

Here we have background information on the state of the battlegrounds in Belgium at the beginning of the war. Byatt is building up to explaining to the reader how and why the confrontation there developed into trench warfare with some of the most inhumane conditions ever experienced by soldiers:

In the summer of 1917 General Haig commanded his armies to advance. In the early autumn, when the generals agreed to make a push against the Passchendaele ridge, it rained. The sky was thick with cloud, and no air reconnaissance was possible. The rain blew chill and horizontal across the flat fields and liquefied the mud, and deepened it, so that movement was only possible along duckboard planks—the “corduroy” road, laid across it. The men at the front crouched in holes in the ground and the holes were partly filled with water, which was bitterly cold, and deepening. The dead, or parts of the dead, decayed in and around the holes, and their smell was everywhere, often mingled with the smell of mustard gas, a gas which lay heavily in the uniforms of the soldiers, and was breathed in by nurses and doctors whose eyes, lungs and stomachs were damaged in turn, whose hair was dyed mustard yellow. The peaceful polders had become a foul, thick, sucking, churning clay, mixed with bones, blood, and burst flesh. (605)

These two extracts I have quoted from one opening paragraph, and Byatt starts with that strange word, polder, and comes full circle, ending with it. Before the war, the polders were clean and innocent, but towards the end, they are full of broken human bodies. The next paragraph begins: “Geraint and his gun crew were manoeuvring their gun on the corduroy road, between snapped and blackened tree stumps, over mud and pools of filthy water. He had had letters from unimaginable England” (605). Thus after the lesson in trench warfare, where we may learn new terms like polder, *beke* and “corduroy” road, the effects of the harsh conditions are seen upon the fictional characters.

After this review of Byatt’s research for *The Children’s Book*, let us look at Gillian Polack’s second factor, interpretation, in the novel. Byatt does not interpret the First World War here in terms of whether it was accurately reported or not, or who should have won, but puts the emphasis, as we have seen, on the utterly unbearable conditions of the trenches and the shelling and the seemingly arbitrary killing. Geraint Fludd, son of the incestuous potter, who was referred to immediately after the explanation of the mud in the trenches, dies beside his gun, and Humphry and Olive Wellwood lose two sons, Robin and Harry, also another Robin, the illegitimate son of Humphry (see figure 25 of Wallhead 2011, p. 177). Given that “Of the eleven male children in the story who go to war, only four return alive” (Wallhead 2011, 167), I have suggested reasons why these four were “reprieved” by Byatt.⁷ The statistic of survival here is considerably higher than the real one. The Headmistress of Bournemouth

⁷ In the final section, “The sacrificed and the saved” (167–8) of “Using GenoPro to Create Family Trees: The Example of A.S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book*” in Wallhead 2011, 159–179.