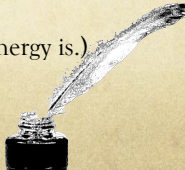


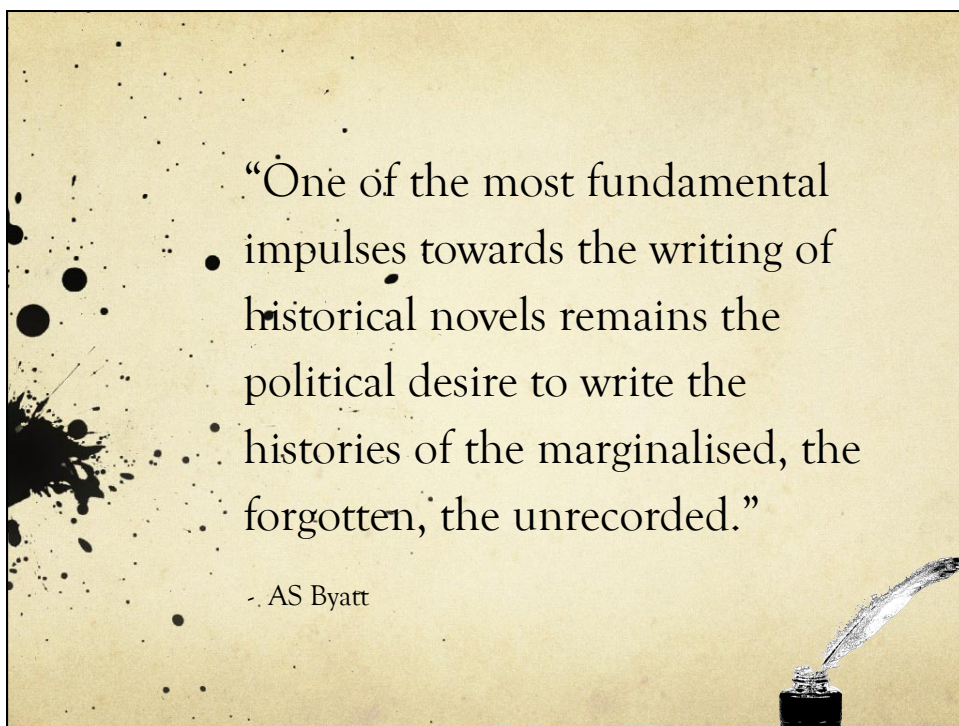
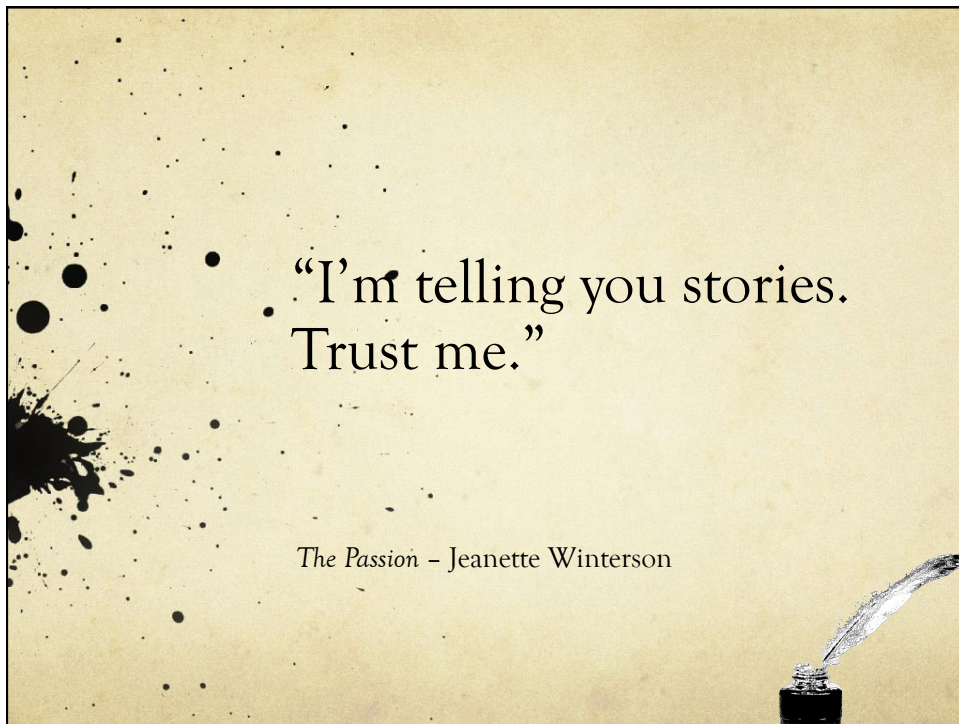


Going down in history
Writing historical fiction



The Rules of Writing Practice

- **Keep your hand moving**
(it stops the 'editor' from interfering with the 'writer')
 - **Lose control** (say what it is you really want to say)
 - **Be specific** (not car, but Cadillac. Not tree, but Sycamore)
 - **Don't think**
(you want to capture first thoughts, not second or third thoughts)
 - **Don't worry about spelling, punctuation or grammar**
 - **You are free to write absolute junk**
 - **Go for the jugular.**
(If something scary comes up, go for it. That's where the energy is.)
- 



“I’m a feminist and have a keen interest in women’s history. I’m a micro-historian, interested in private lives... I’m interested in ordinary people doing extraordinary things – that, to me, is what history is about.”

- Philippa Gregory

“...it’s the very things that *aren’t* mentioned that inspire the most curiosity in us. *Why* aren’t they mentioned?”

- Margaret Atwood

Questions to ponder...

- What are our responsibilities as historical novelists?
- What status are we claiming for our stories? What is their relationship to 'truth'?
- How do we deal with the gaps, the lost voices, the silences?
- How are our ethical considerations expressed in the creative decisions we make?



Creating a lexicon

- Start building a lexicon of words for your novel
- Words you like – good words, juicy words, concrete words.
- Words for colours, words for objects, words for food and drink and clothing
- A vocabulary associated with the time and place and character and activity of your novel.
- For fun – take a passage from a novel you love and list its most quirky and interesting words.



Lunch



Research methods

- Internet research
- Travel to the location/setting
- Archival research - original documents
- Primary research - interviews
- Research via existing materials and books
- Research via contemporary materials - books and magazines of the period
- Creative research



Tom Griffiths

“When a novelist takes a real historical person or event and re-imagines them freely, what responsibilities do they observe?”

History and the Creative Imagination - Tom Griffiths



“The only requirement is for conjecture to be plausible and grounded in the best facts one can get.”

- Hilary Mantel



Margaret Atwood - ethics

“I devised the following set of guidelines for myself: when there was a solid fact, I could not alter it; long as I might to have Grace witness James McDermott’s execution, it could not be done, because, worse luck, she was already in the penitentiary that day. Also, every major element in the book had to be suggested by something in the writing about Grace and her times, however dubious such writing might be; but in the parts left unexplained – the gaps left unfilled – I was free to invent. Since there were a lot of gaps, there is a lot of invention. *Alias Grace* is very much a novel rather than a documentary.”



Getting clear

- What are you claiming – or appearing to claim – about your novel and its status as history?
- Do you have a respect for demonstrable facts?
- Do you have the willingness to spend the research time to ensure the facts are as good as possible?
- Do you have grounds for plausible conjecture?



How do we approach these questions?

- Novelists who are conscious of these tensions can reflect on and challenge ideas about truth, memory, history, fiction through the narrative techniques they choose.
- They draw attention to the nature of the fiction and invite the reader to become aware of how a historical narrative is created and presented, and its sometimes problematic relationship to “truth”.



Jeanette Winterson

In the first chapter of *Sexing the Cherry*, one of the narrators, Jordan, reflects that:

Every journey conceals another journey within its lines: the path not taken and the forgotten angle. These are the journeys I wish to record. Not the ones I made, but the ones I might have made, or perhaps did make in some other place or time... I discovered my own life was written invisibly, was squashed between the facts.



Sarah Waters



“The Night Watch's structural engine is a reverse chronology that recedes from the exhausted present of 1947 back through the intense bombardments of 1944 to the apocalyptic atmosphere of 1941. Thus we leave her characters as we meet them; and it is we, not they, who feel older, wiser and sadder at the novel's end.

Waters's topsy-turvy time scheme is an elegant and profound device which imbues much of the novel with a poignant dramatic irony and turns every incident, however humdrum, into a revelation that helps to illuminate how her characters became the people they are.”

- Review by Justine Jordan, *The Guardian*



Margaret Atwood – Alias Grace

“In my fiction, Grace, too – whatever else she is – is a storyteller, with strong motives to narrate but also strong motives to withhold; the only power left to her as a convicted and imprisoned criminal comes from a blend of these two motives.

What is told by her to her audience of one, Dr. Simon Jordan – who is not only a more educated person than she is but a man, which gave him an automatic edge in the nineteenth century – is selective, of course. It is dependent on what she remembers; or is it what she says she remembers, which can be quite a different thing? And how can her audience tell the difference? Here we are, right back at the end of the twentieth century, with our own uneasiness about the trustworthiness of memory, the reliability of story, and the continuity of time...”

- Margaret Atwood interview.



How do we express our ethical positions and ideas about history?

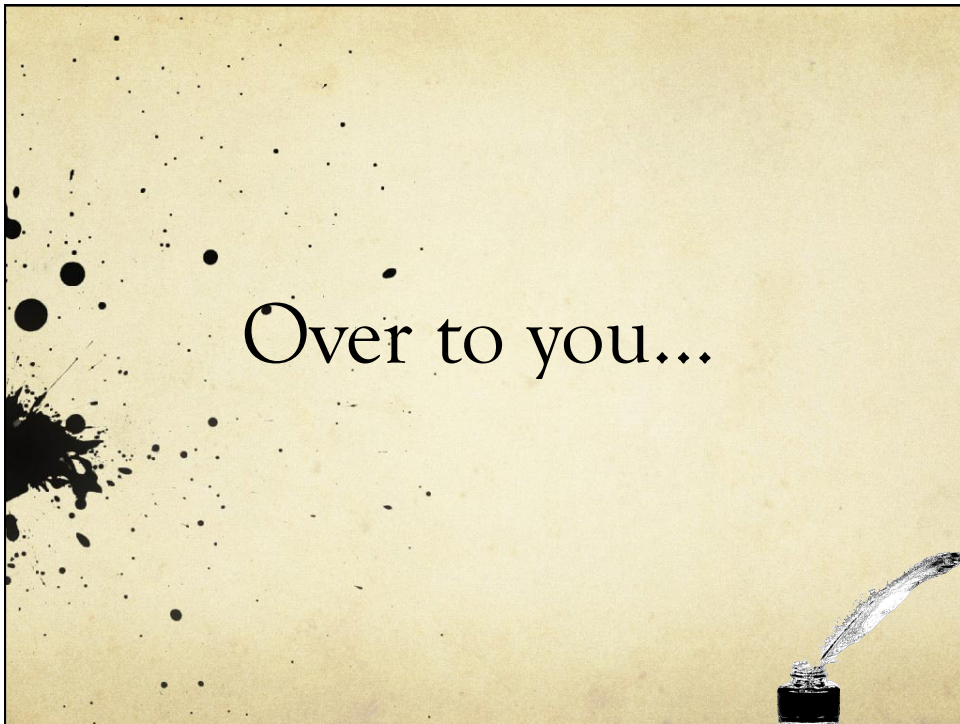
- Through creative choices about structure, character, plot and narrative devices to draw attention to the creation of the fiction.
- Through expressing our own personal code of ethics (a creative choice)
- Through forewords, afterwords and footnotes
- Other?



“I am not claiming authority for my version; I am making the reader a proposal.”

- Author's note, *Bring up the Bodies* (2012), Hilary Mantel.





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A QUEEN AND
HER QUEEN OF SCOTS
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