Historical Novels: Engaging Student Teachers in K-10 History Pre-Service Units

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The teaching of history from grades K-10 in Australian schools underwent a massive change when Julia Gillard, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, addressed the National Press Club in Canberra on 24 February 2010. Justine Ferrari in *The Australian* reported all states and territories would be forced to follow a set curriculum in English, history, science and maths. 'Announcing its release … [Gillard] said the curriculum set out the essential content for each year of learning as well as the achievement standards students should be expected to perform. "It will be a comprehensive new curriculum, providing a platform for the highest quality teaching" '. Full national implementation was scheduled for the start of 2011 (Ferrari, 2010, 25 February). Soon after the announcement of the national history curriculum, Dan Harrison in the Melbourne's *The Age* alerted readers, 'history teachers are warning that the national history curriculum could be a failure if the subject is placed in the hands of bored or ill-trained teachers' (Harrison, 2010).

Of course, Gillard's announcement and Harrison's warning came as no surprise to the History Teachers' Association of Australia (HTAA). In its February 2010 Newsletter the HTAA 'expressed concern about the capacity of current pre-service training programs to prepare history teachers capable of successfully implementing [the] new national courses. The HTAA reminded its members this concern is 'shared by Professor Stuart Macintyre … imminent historian', and Professor Barry McGaw, Chair of (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority) ACARA, had expressed the same concern (HTAA, 2010, February) In its March Newsletter, the HTAA reiterated its concerns, adding:

> The proposal for new national history courses relies on the assumption that teachers will have a sophisticated grasp of significant knowledge, historical understandings and historical skills. It could also be argued that history is a 'passion thing' and that this passion is built on confident expertise. Indeed, particularly with history, if a teacher is not a passionate expert there is the danger that any teaching of a mandatory subject will be counter-productive. If we are developing ambitious national history courses, there must be a focus on teacher qualifications. Since the start of the process in 2008, HTAA has been voicing concern about the urgent need to address the issue of teacher pre-service training … (HTAA, 2010, March).

There is no empirical research to show the level of preparedness in Australia's teacher education schools and faculties for the delivery of the new history curriculum for K-10 student teachers.

At the time of Gillard's announcement, in primary schools in all Australian states and territories, except New South Wales, the teaching of history was imbedded in Study of Society and Environment (SOSE). Leadbetter (2006) shows that SOSE/HSIE (Human Society and its Environment) varies from educational jurisdiction to educational jurisdiction. For example, in New South Wales, HSIE is derived from a more disciplined-based curriculum framework, and is taught as a stand-alone subject in Years 7-10, whereas in Tasmania and the Northern Territory SOSE is developed from a more integrated curriculum, connected through a

constructivist-inspired Essential Learnings curriculum. Australia's pre-service teacher education institutions had been preparing teachers for SOSE/HSIE curricula since the 1980s, and for its predecessor, Social Science or Social Studies, since the 1970s. Consequently, from 2011, when the new history curriculum is to be introduced nationally, there are at least two generations of teachers, particularly in primary schools, untrained in history. And there is a strong probability they were never taught the subject at school.

The very complexity of SOSE/HSIE pedagogy and content, and the various national systemic demands on schools and teachers, had prompted Tony Taylor, author of the Commonwealth Government-commissioned publication, *An Overview of Teaching and Learning of Australian History in Schools* (2006) to comment:

> there is the problem of generic SOSE or Essential Learnings curriculum in which history can lose its identity as a unique and complex discipline. In that context, the permissive nature of the generality of primary school teaching means that individual teachers call the shots about what exactly is taught and when. This means that tracking Australian history in almost all primary schools as a defined sequence of key topics would be an impossible task. This issue is extending into the lower reaches of secondary education as the middle years curriculum takes hold in an increasing number of schools (Taylor, 2006, p. 33).

Taylor then mentions the systemic demands on teachers that may have led them to lose focus on history teaching. An example of this may be the stress that schools come under from NAPLAN results as shown on MySchool: Key Learning Areas such as SOSE/HSIE increasingly pale in importance to greater demands in literacy and numeracy. Then Taylor reminded readers of the perennial problems associated with teachers' professional preparation, both primary and secondary, teachers who have had little pre-service or professional development in history curriculum.

Leadbetter (2006) paints an even bleaker picture of the teaching of history in our schools: 'very few people, including teachers, know what SOSE really is. I have to explain it in some detail to my trainee teachers, and they're quite taken aback by the complexity of it' (Salusinszky (2006, cited in Leadbetter, 2006). While SOSE/HSIE pedagogies and curricula varies from one Australian educational jurisdiction to another, Leadbetter (2006) highlights a central difficulty with history teaching in the SOSE/HSIE curriculum: 'history is not readily extractable from SOSE, as historical concepts are embedded within the learning area, and in turn the learning area seeks to develop concepts and processes which empower students to be their own historians, or sociologists, or geographers' (Leadbetter, 2006).

In his long-standing and widely used SOSE/HSIE textbook used by teachers and undergraduate teacher education students across Australian universities, Marsh (2008) contends the subject is poorly received by students in schools. He suggests 'perhaps, one of the reasons is that teachers prefer to use only a limited number of teaching techniques – ones that they have experienced or with which they are most comfortable – and these may not be very challenging or exciting for students' (Marsh, 2008, p. 70). Marsh then draws our attention to some research done by Yeager (2000, as cited in Marsh, 2008, p. 70) to suggest further that 'teachers may believe that they are varying their teaching, but their students see it as stultifying routine'. How are teacher educators to engage pre-service teachers in history curricular?

This paper aims to illustrate how the historical novel may be used as an engaging teacher/learning strategy for undergraduate student teachers in pre-service teacher education units, the vast majority of which simply provide for a single 10-credit point unit in order to prepare student teachers for the classroom. First, this paper will argue the historical fiction narrative is an engaging medium. It will then attempt a brief survey of the wider popularity of historical fiction in society-at-large and the way in which this is associated with the popularity of memory literature in general. It will then attempt an analysis of how historical fiction can assist in developing student teachers' appreciation of 'historical literacy'. But what sort of historical literature should we encourage student teachers to engage in? Social norms and values are constantly changing, so how do readers and critics interpret historical novels written years ago? In response to this question, the paper shall examine the issue of interpreting historical fiction, and what does literary interpretation mean? But how much faith should student teachers be encouraged to place in the veracity of historical fiction? This question is examined in conclusion to this paper.

Maxine Greene (1995, p. 36) writes of the importance of imagination in 'the lives of teachers as it is in the lives of students', partly because an imaginative teacher with a passion for her/his subject matter will excite and motivate students in the same way. Teachers have a special role in connecting their students with creative literature, but they must themselves be first connected to creative literature. Herein is the special role for historical novels in awakening in children a passion for history.

This paper does not argue that all teaching of history curriculum in pre-service units should be based on the use of historical novels as a stimulus, nor does it argue for a particular percentage of the use of historical novels in such units. It simply seeks to argue the case for this particular approach, leaving the amount of time devoted to the use of historical novels in history curriculum units to the professional expertise of the lecturers responsible for the units.

Engaging the audience in historical images and memory through the narrative

Narrative, as Frederic Jameson (1977) argues, is a socially symbolic act, a 'form of reasoning' about experience and society, whose task it is to produce fictional resolutions to real social contradictions (Jameson, 1977, as cited in Dixon 1986). Narrative is a personal engagement between the author and the reader, often embracing real and perennial social contradictions, such as injustice and betrayal, love and revenge. Often these spring from an author's own world-view and value system.

A work of fiction is complex in its public meaning. First, it is 'a *public* utterance, telling a story about characters' emotions … mediates *private* experiences to make it *public*' [my emphasis] (Cohen & Shires, 1998, p. 1). Thus, the narrative of fiction provides the audience with a private statement that is able to communicate its meaning by *engaging* its audience, and bringing the audience into what amounts to a private discussion. In this way, the 'paradigms of a language maintains its operation as a system by keeping its conventions stable and continually recognisable to users of the language – so stable and recognisable, in fact, that one is rarely conscious of the elaborate grid of similarity and difference which the paradigmatic marking constructs for language use' (Cohen & Shires, 1998, p. 17). Indeed, it is the 'smoothness' – the seamlessness – of that grid that makes for memorable fictional narrative.

According to Cohen and Shires (1998, p. 24), a 'language system does not prescribe right and wrong uses for discourses, so much as it establishes possible

conditions of significance, metaphorical coherence, and thematic unity … [and] define[s] an agenda for reading which has political and social implications in what it excludes as well as includes'. Thus, fiction generally, and historical fiction in particular, provides a double layer of meaning: first, there is the present and everyday meanings providing an entrè into the past; then there is the past that is used to interpret and add greater and more poignant understandings to the present.

Cohen and Shires also argue 'the narrative system often appears totally to determine a given text's meaning by containing the play of narrativity within a closed structure, thereby centering it through a story, or point of view' (Cohen & Shires, 1998, p. 52). But of course, the values underpinning the narrative are always imbedded in those contemporary socio-cultural values in which the narrative is written.

The foundation of the rapport between author and audience – the shared memory of the past, if you like – is essentially contextual. Davies writes, 'in establishing the meanings of a work, the artist also fixes the identity. If the meaning of the work is unchanging, so is its identity' (Davies, 1996, p. 20). The meaning of the narrative is contextual in the sense that the reader will interpret in light of generational changes in attitudes and values. Davies puts it this way: 'interpreters can explore what the work means to us in the *present*, taking account not only of the circumstances of its creation, but different social context, of discoveries and theories that post-date the work's origin' (my emphasis) (Davies, 1996, p. 22). Thus, for example, a reader of Kate Grenville's, *The Lieutenant* (2008) will need to make different intellectual 'shifts' when the same reader reads Mary Durack's *Keep Him My Country* (1950). The latter is written during Australia's literary colonial era, while the former is a post-colonial work. Thus, 'the meaning of a work is generated by hypothesising intentions authors might have had, given the *context* of the creation, rather than relying on their actual intentions' (my emphasis) (Davies, 1996, p. 21).

Author and reader, then, are united in a common bond of values and concepts, uniting them in a common social experience. In the case of historical fiction, this is a shared memory of the past, an addressing of the social images that bind a society. But the sensitive reader may condemn, for example, Durack for her colonial literary views of First Nation Australians. Moreover, 'the original context theory can also match the intuition that the meaning of a literary work lends itself [in respect] to autonomous, multiple interpretations – even conflicting ones' (Davies, 1996, p. 36). It is precisely this that provides the many-layered meanings that exist in the narrative form, providing multiple meanings in the communication between the author and reader over the decades. But, has historical fiction any special role in this narrative?

Cohen and Shires contend that in fiction a 'narrative recounts a story, a series of events in a temporal sequence' (Cohen & Shires, 1998, p. 1). However, in non-fiction 'language represents reality in a transcription, whereas fictional language represents it in facsimile' (Cohen & Shires, 1998, p. 2). In a very real sense, historical fiction does both – and it does neither – remaining both history, or non-fiction, and non-history, or fiction. Perhaps, this is why this genre fascinates the general public.

The rising tide of popularity for historical fiction

In 2008 Richard Nile wrote in *The Australian*: 'today, historical novels massively outsell even the finest history, and readers continue to learn from their imaginative journeys into Australia's past'. (Nile, 2008). In accounting for this nation-

wide interest in Australian historical fiction noted by Nile, of course, readers can reflect upon the nationalistic upsurge in a general interest in the Australian past as reflected by the massive increase in attendance at such events as the Anzac Day Gallipoli dawn service, treks along the Kokoda Trail, or expeditions to Flanders Fields. But, there is more appeal for historical fiction than simply referring to attendance at passing cultural events.

Historical fiction is that in which real-life historical figures appear, or have been represented diaphanously cloaked, along with depictions of historical consciousness. George Lukacs takes this further, reminding us that the groundbreaking historical novels of Sir Walter Scott 'portray the struggles and antagonisms of history by means of characters who, in their psychology and destiny, always represent social trends and historical forces' (Lukacs, 1937/1963, p. 34).

But, of course, when Nile (2008) writes of readers learning from 'imaginative journeys' through their readings of historical novels, he suggests there is some worthwhile knowledge to be gained. What sort of knowledge is this, and whose knowledge is it? Is the acclaim for the historical novel universal?

Indeed, student teachers and teachers would be aware the enormous growth in the publication and sales of Australian fiction is not universally acclaimed. For example, Delia Falconer (2006) laments the decline of the Australian novel with a contemporary setting, complaining 'since early 2002 this anxiety about the state of the art has centred on the content of Australian literature and its apparent failure to confront the present'. Of course, she was able to find supporters for her cause. She wrote 'in the *Bulletin* (2002, 13 November) Hannie Rayson called for a 'theatre of engagement', while in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Malcolm Knox (2002, 21 January) and Drusilla Modjeska (2002, 8 August) took the Australian novel to task for its retreat from modern life' (Falconer, 2006). But as any bookseller can testify, there is no denying the public demand for memory literature, in either its fictional or non-fictional form.

The historical novel and the 'memory' literature

Perhaps, associated with the baby-boomers, and imbedded in the rising tide of electronic media, there has been a proliferation of 'memory' literature since the 1980s. And historians long have taken memory as the raw material for history, as a means to getting at the truth of the past. Internationally, the memory literature of recent years is connected most intimately with traumatic events such as the Holocaust, the Cultural Revolution in China, or refugees. Witness such publishing phenomena as Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1982) and its movie version, *Schindler's List* (1993). Clearly, the boom in memory literature is concomitant with the rising tide of the new postcolonial and postmodernist historiography and has engendered memory with a greater status.

Continuing this theme, Arif Dirlik (2002, p. 76) writes:

> Memory may serve different purposes under different circumstances for different groups. … An event such as the Holocaust, Hayden White writes, may 'escape the grasp of any language even to describe it and of any medium – verbal, visual, oral, or gestural – to represent it, much less of any historical account adequately to explain it' (White, 1996). Memories of the experiences of traumatic events may in such cases well accomplish what history is unable to capture or explain. Memories may also serve to

> capture glimpses of the past for groups who have been erased from history. On the other hand, they add moral force to history in the case of groups (such as the Japanese-Americans interned during World War II), seeking for recognition of their grievances.

In support of Dirlik's contention, witness the recent popularity of John Boyne's *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* (2006) written for an adolescent audience.

Publicly stated memory serves to bolster the self-images of newly empowered groups seeking to overcome their images as victims in history. This is certainly the case with First Nation Australian memory literature, such as the *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), based on Doris Pilkinton's biography, *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* (1996). But other than engaging its readers, how else can the use of historical fiction as a teaching/learning strategy with student teachers in universities assist in developing an appreciation of history?

Teaching Historical Literacy Through Historical Novels

Earlier this decade, at the National Centre for History Education, Taylor (n.d.) addressed the issue of developing 'historical literacy' in our school students. Rightly, he first examined what comprised 'historical literacy'. For him, the following elements are part of this literacy:

- Events of the past – knowing and understanding historical events, using prior knowledge, and realising the significance of different events.
- Narratives of the past – understanding the shape of change and continuity over time, understanding multiple narratives and dealing with open-endedness.
- Research skills – gathering, analysing and using the evidence (artefacts, documents and graphics) and issues of provenance.
- The language of history – understanding and dealing with the language of the past.
- Historical concepts – understanding historical concepts such as causation and motivation.
- ICT understandings – using, understanding and evaluating ICT-based historical resources (the virtual archive).
- Making connections – connecting the past with the self and the world today.
- Contention and contestability – understanding the 'rules' and the place of public and professional historical debate.
- Representational expression – understanding and using creativity in representing the past through film, drama, visual arts, music, fiction, poetry and ICT.
- Moral judgement in history – understanding the moral and ethical issues involved in historical explanation.
- Applied science in history – understanding the use and value of scientific and technological expertise and methods in investigating past, such as DNA analysis or gas chromatography tests.
- Historical explanation – using historical reasoning, synthesis and interpretation (the index of historical literacy) to explain the past. Historical understanding is incomplete without explanation (Taylor, n.d.).

It is clear that historical fiction relates directly to many of these elements of historical literacy. Indeed, Ruth Reynolds (2008) draws our attention to the fact that Taylor and Young (n.d.) have historical narratives as a teaching/learning strategy

running through many of the points in the above paragraph. These are stories 'about issues and values that count across time' (Reynolds, 2008, p. 5).

Crawford and Zygouris-Coe (2008, p. 197) endorse these points by arguing, 'the use of historical fiction within the curricular context promotes a stronger engagement between the reader and the text than does use of the traditional social studies textbook'. The authors go on to argue, 'this type of viewpoint can make a tremendous difference not only in readers' understanding of historical events, but also in their understanding of the social consequences of these events'.

Clearly, however, the establishment of historical literacy must start with student teachers in universities undertaking history curriculum units. This is one of the reasons why the author of this paper chooses to use historical novels written for an adult audience in his history curriculum units with his undergraduate student teachers. This is the kind of novel that many of these students would choose to read, outside their university study.

Not surprisingly, we have come to understand immersing children in a rich variety of narratives, both fiction and non-fiction, enhances their development of historical understanding as described by Sansom (1987). This is supported by researchers such as Routman (2003) who reports that when students read a text, they develop a number of metacognition reading strategies to infer understanding, including making connections between the text and their life, other texts and world experiences.

With this research and understanding in mind, recently in the United States, historical fiction has begun to dominate major children's book awards. Rycik and Rosler (2009) have heralded this development in an article describing the values of using high-quality historical fiction in the classroom. They also present different ways to respond to this genre, including using modern technology. Adams (2001) has argued selecting historical fiction as a teaching/learning strategy provides a literacy-rich environment, which is meaningful, authentic and an engaging approach for students (and we might add, student teachers) to learn about historical issues and events according to Adams (2001).

An American fifth-grade teacher, recognized by the National Council for the Social Studies as 'Elementary Teacher of the Year', Terry Lindquist has several reasons why she teaches with historical fiction:

- it piques kids' curiosity about historical events;
- provides them with everyday details that a textbook would miss;
- gives students multiple perspectives on events; and
- assists students contemplating the complexities of an issue.

Although Lindquist (1995, p. 48) uses many teaching methods in the social studies classroom, she refers to historical fiction as the 'spice' which triggers student inquiry into the facts that drive the fiction.

Lindquist (1995) finds the advantages of historical fiction lie with its ability to unfold the events in history in layers where the reader understands the values, actions and behaviours of historical characters. As a result, students are motivated to find out the why? This distinguishes historical fiction from the traditional textbook where historical events are usually summarised in a matter of words; therefore, historical misconceptions and stereotypical attitudes are more likely to develop. Consequently, teacher/student discussions are vitally important in this teaching/learning process, where the teacher needs to question extensively and be alert to historical misconceptions. These are experiences student teachers undertaking history curriculum units in universities should have, and develop an understanding for.

Crawford and Zygouris-Coe (2008) argue the authenticity of the language used in historical fiction to communicate to the reader is closer to everyday language than a textbook, and therefore is more engaging. This results in students developing abilities to connect historical events and values to their lives, and critically reflect on histories past, present and future. In addition, students' connection with the text encourages empathy towards the characters; this motivates students to engage positively in learning about historical events, issues and people.

Reynolds has argued for the use of historical fiction as a teaching/learning strategy in primary grades in order to greatly enhance values education: 'the study of historical fiction allows for a study of different cultures, separated by time – not necessarily place – and as such allows for student involvement' (Reynolds, 2006, p. 28). Stories can be used to integrate history with civics education. For Reynolds (2008) stories are mentioned often in Taylor and Young's (n.d.) account and provide a link between the teaching of history and civics:

- Stories behind contemporary issues and the context through which students make meaning of current events and develop perspectives on the future.
- Narratives behind Australia's civic past so that students gain a sense of change, time, continuity, causation, motivation and heritage.
- Insight into human experience in other times and societies which provide a basis for evaluating students' own life experiences.
- Individual stories and models of citizenship which enable students to understand decision-making processes and choices made by individuals when confronted with challenges.
- Development of skills and abilities and a means of understanding and valuing principles of democracy, social justice and ecological sustainability (Reynolds (2008, p. 6).

Reynolds (2008) argues the gateway that historical fiction opens provides students with the opportunity to experience vicariously the emotions of the characters, thus creating a deeper connection between past and present historical perspectives. For students (and surely, also student teachers), there is an element of 'safety' or 'non-threatening nature' in the narratives of the past: 'historical fiction's ability to display solutions and accommodations to conflicting situations in the past – allowing for safe distancing for children to explore similar situations in their own lives – that is its great contribution to citizenship understanding' (Reynolds, 2008, p. 7).

Reynolds (2008, p. 7) shows how this 'distancing' that comes with the use of historical fiction as a teaching/learning strategy is also important for teachers, who may need to 'distance issues when dealing with sensitive matters that may generate strong feelings or polarise students'. Reynolds goes on to argue 'historical fiction deals with some difficult citizenship issues'. She shows that historical fiction is accessible, motivational and increasingly it examines 'social themes and views on citizenship issues' (Reynolds, R. 2008, p. 7). But, surely, lecturers, themselves, in history curriculum in universities need a considered understanding of the historical novel. How do we interpret historical fiction?

Interpreting historical fiction: what does literary interpretation mean?

Social norms and values change over the decades, so how do readers and critics interpret historical novels written years ago? Davies (1996, p. 20) contends: 'if,

as is so often demanded, the context of a literary work should be considered in interpreting it, which context is that? Is it the past context within which the work was created, or, rather, the different context in which the book and interpreter presently is located?'

First, for Davies, is the need to pay 'homage to the efforts of the creators of the works, and the second showing the meaning the work presents to the critic's contemporary audience' (Davies, 1996, p. 20). So, how should we interpret, for example, nineteenth-century historical novels espousing First Nation Australians in Social Darwinist terms as a 'fossil race', doomed to extinction according to the 'laws of the survival of the fittest'? Clearly, it is anachronistic to condemn the author, because of the strong currency of Social Darwinism during the late nineteenth century. But, one would not expect such views being espoused by characters in late twentieth-century historical novels. Thus, to return to Davies' point, he maintains that there are two basic ways in which a work of fiction can be interpreted: either from the fixed point of view of the author at the time of writing, or from that of the audience, a point of view that is subject to change with succeeding generations.

Here student teachers can ask whether historical fiction provides contemporary interpretations when it purports to do so? However deeply a historical novel is set in the past, the question continues to loom: how could a historical novelist of 2010 ever *actually really know* what life was like, in say the 1880s – a time when he or she could not possibly have known, only through contemporary primary sources or through secondary sources. According to Davies, 'interpretation should concern itself with the meaning of the author's work. In discovering the meaning of the work, interpretations must refer and confine themselves to the conventions and practices, both of language and of literature, within or against which the author worked' (Davies, 1996, p. 22). It follows that the 'meaning' of the historical novel is tied to what the author knows, and has experienced in his lifetime – through readings of historical sources – including contemporary interpretations of the past through secondary sources. As literary works, historical fiction is 'reshaped, renewed and reconstructed by their later reception and interpretation'. As with all 'cultural artefacts, the work is changed by its social environment'. Thus, because historical fiction is 'like a living thing, the work changes from time to time, while remaining self-identical' (Davies, 1996, p. 23).

Indeed, at the time of the writing of this paper, the level of public discourse on the historicity of historical novels appeared to be gaining in momentum, almost at a parallel rate of the increase in the public's interest in the genre. For example, writing in *The Weekend Australian Review* on 14-15 November 2009, Cassandra Pybus (2009) reviewed two historical novels: Kristin McKenzie's *A Swindler's Progress* (2009) and Gerald Stone's *Beautiful Bodies* (2009). Pybus posed the now often-asked question: 'why, with the option of historical fiction at their disposal, do writers present unfounded speculation as fact?' (Pybus, 2009, p. 16) Recognising 'the reading public seems to have an inexhaustible appetite for stories about the past, as long as they are told in an engaging and accessible style, with plenty of evocative description and a seamless narrative arc', Pybus (2009, p. 16) goes on to question the historicity of both novels: 'these are both intriguing stories that suggest potential material for a book to explain the current enthusiasm for popular history'. For Pybus,

> Not even a master of the popular history genre, such as Simon Schama, can construct a past world as rich and satisfying as the parallel universe the novelist can imagine, nor create characters who are revealed to us in their intimate moments and private thoughts. The historian remains

> irrevocably tied to concrete evidence, which is patchy at best and never allows access to the inner workings of the human psyche (Pybus, 2009, p. 16).

Pybus argues 'the thrill of the historical novel is in the resurrection of the dead; the capacity to breathe vibrant life into the static characters frozen in the formal portrait, official documents, newspaper articles or court reports that are the stable evidence of the historian' (Pybus, 2009, p. 16).

While commentators such as Pybus have spoken of the historical novelist seeking to breathe life into personages and events in order to engage the audience in historical images and memory through the narrative in a manner that normally would be beyond the license of the author of non-fiction, one may well ask exactly how much license can the historical novelist take in this act?

'History as Fiction': 'If the past is another country, historical novels are forged passports'

So wrote Frank Campbell in *The Australian* in 2008. He began his article by pointing out that the debate of the veracity of historical fiction has been in the public discourse for at least a century. He shows that 'perceptive American critic, Brander Matthews, said in 1897: "the historical novel is aureoled with a pseudo-sanctity in that it purports to be more instructive than a mere story. It claims ... it is teaching history" ' But it is not history: we cannot reproduce what has passed (Campbell, 2008).

'How can we know the past?' Campbell asks. But most first year university psychology students learn that even simple events are reported inaccurately by multiple observers. 'Aren't there as many realities as witnesses?' Campbell reminds us. 'If present matters of fact are opaque, how can we possibly re-create the culture of a Manchester police station of 1973, or 19th-century naval life, let alone the world of Claudius or Spartacus?' (Campbell, 2008).

But we have uncertainty of the present, also, Campbell counters. Indeed, 'how do we know that we exist at all? … I might exist, but the evidence for you is unconvincing. One more drink and we'll all be phenomenological postmodernists, whose grip on reality depends entirely on the next coffee' (Campbell, 2008).

Campbell reminds us of the argument that 'historical fiction is said to tell us more about the present than the past. Historical novels are really lectures about how the present sees the past. He uses the example of *Gone With The Wind* (1936), and how it stereotyped 'the antebellum American south and still shapes perceptions' (Campbell, 2008). But while the historical novel often has been dispatched to the rubbish pile, it re-emerges with the vigour and popularity the genre enjoys today.

Kate Grenville once quipped: 'as a [historical] novelist, my relationship to history has always been pretty much the same relationship the Goths had to Rome. History for a greedy novelist like me is just one more place to pillage' (Grenville, 2005). She suggests a recklessness about her historical research, and a general disregard for convention. Do the spoils of that 'pillage' – the historical knowledge gained from reading her historical novels – offer any general worth? Or to put it another way: how much can the knowledge gained from historical novels be of value to the general populace, or indeed, in school curricula?

Yet, Grenville was not being at all reckless. Indeed, she confessed to an abiding regard for historical truth:

> When Jill Roe said of history 'Getting it right means you can't make it up', it was a reminder to novelists like me that, although we might use history, we also have to respect it. It's all very well to play fast and loose with historical truths, but there comes a point when we have to get it right, or try at least (Grenville, 2005).

Of course, Grenville is addressing an important issue in the writing of history, an issue that historiographers for decades have been addressing. The historical novelist need not be 'playing' with history any more than the professional historian.

Generally, historians take their craft very seriously. They even have gone to 'war' over substantial issues in what they perceive to be appropriate recording of history. Many students will be aware of the term 'history wars'. It was coined in the United States in 1994, to describe the argument between those who favoured a triumphalist account of American achievement and those urging a more muted and critical stance. Australia had its own 'history wars' beginning sometime around 2000 (Windschuttle, 2002).

When Grenville (2005) claimed her *The Secret River* (2005) would rise above the parochial squabbles of the then raging history wars by getting 'inside the experience' of the past, she provoked a strong response from some academic and professional historians. As Collins puts it: 'this ire was particularly surprising in the case of Mark McKenna and Inga Clendinnen, two leading historians noted for the eloquent reflective, literary quality of their respective books on the intimacy between Indigenous and settler Australians' (Collins, 2008).

Set amidst the raging debate of the 'history wars', Clendinnen (2003) and McKenna (2002) questioned strongly Grenville's views on the role of her historical novel *vis-à-vis* her claims to historical truth over that of their own profession. Indeed, it is this very jousting over the province of historians and historical novelists to historical truth that has led Gay Lynch to assert, 'historians would be better placed to study King Canute than attempt to prevent fiction writers working in their field' (Lynch, n.d.). Yet, serious professional historians do feel aggrieved about the various raiding parties of historical novelists into their perceived traditional territory.

Nevertheless, who can deny the anger historians feel about their conflicted place in the production of Australia's cultural identity? In 2006, Clendinnen claimed that 'novelists have been doing their best to bump historians off the track' (Clendinnen, (2006, p. 23, cited in Lynch, n.d.). She claimed she was on the lookout for historical fiction writers who 'show attitude (exuberant confidence, insouciant exploitation of fragments of the past), lack historical professionalism (the collapsing of time, opportunistic transpositions, and elisions) and show off their subjective petticoats' Clendinnen p. 23, cited in Lynch, n.d.).

All of this public literary jousting brought Lynch to ask: 'have the battered protagonists in the history wars tried to throw off the cheerful trailing historical fiction writers doing business in their own way?' Lynch then reminds readers what was said at the close of a 2007 Sydney Writers' Festival panel ('Making a Fiction of History'). Here, according to Lynch (n.d.), Clendinnen conceded some 'fictional truths'. For Lynch (n.d.), Clendinnen's 'consistent message might be: stay behind your lines and you won't get hurt'.

However, clearly Grenville's *Secret River* (2005) has invited serious questions about the relationship between history, literature, and public ethics in contemporary Australia. While attracting praise and criticism for its representation of early

Australian frontier history, McKenna, has decried the positive reviews of the book as symptomatic of '[a] cultural space [that] has opened up into which writers of fiction are now more commonly seen as the most trustworthy purveyors of the past.' Similarly, John Hirst considered the book was an expression of a misguided and ill-informed contemporary liberal imagination (Lynch, n.d.).

But the developing public stoush seemed to be as much about professional territory as anything else. Had writers of historical fiction any right to trespass into the work of historians? In reviewing Grenville's next novel, *The Lieutenant* (2008), Stella Clarke reminded readers of what McKenna had said about Grenville 'of getting above herself, of thinking she was doing history better than the professionals'. As Stella Clarke wrote, 'it was fine for novelists and historians to jog along on their separate tracks, on either side of the ravine (this is tough terrain) that separates truth from untruth, but Clendinnen thought Grenville had somehow moved over and tried to 'bump historians off the track' (Clarke, 2008).

For Clarke, Grenville's success in explaining her point of view 'raised the disquieting possibility that the river of fiction had burst its banks, threatening to submerge facts'. A flood of debate resulted 'that might clumsily be termed the history and fiction wars' (Clarke, 2008). Grenville's response was convincing, and apparently won over many doubters to the cause of historical fiction. Thus, her 'decision, in *The Lieutenant*, to keep trekking through the hazardous landscape of early colonial history, where every shadow conceals an armed historian, suggests she also felt in danger of being "bumped off the track", and is now standing her ground'.

But with all this stoushing between writers of historical fiction and professional historians, exactly what type of historical knowledge is at stake here? How does the knowledge gained from reading historical novels, and that just described by Grenville, fit with the kind of knowledge that Prime Minister John Howard yearned for back on the eve of Australia Day 2006 to the National Press Club?

> Too often, [history] is taught without any sense of structured narrative, replaced by a fragmented stew of 'themes' and 'issues'. And too often, history, along with other subjects in the humanities, has succumbed to a postmodern culture of relativism where any objective record of achievement is questioned and repudiated (Howard, 2006).

Of course, here Howard yearns for a history that advances a kind of eulogy of Australia's past, one in which there is a steady advancement of the nation, highlighting advancement. This is often labelled evolutionary idealism.

Curthoys and Docker (2006) draw attention to the work done by Butterfield (1931) in drawing criticism to evolutionary idealism, or a Whig interpretation of history: 'history should not be written as a story of progress. Butterfield not only argued against triumphalist tendencies in historical writing, but also raised doubts about the possibility of objective history itself' (Curthoys & Docker, 2006, p. 98).

But how does this triumphalist-cum-evolutionary-idealist view of history translate to those authors of historical fiction? The very sort of statement made by Howard in such an influential national forum regarding Australian's understanding of our nation's past has influenced writers such as Louise Wakeling (1998, pp. 16-17) who, in regard to the writing of historical fiction, has stated:

> New Historicists, in particular, have questioned the kind of totalising, transcendent and coherent narratives which have given meaning to (or rather imposed meaning on) past events, and hence their arguments are of considerable relevance to any writer who aims to recreate some aspect of

> the past in fictional mode, as in the historical novel. The question at issue here, for the writer of fiction, as for the historiographer, is not so much the truth or falsity of one view of history or another, but rather '*Whose* history is it anyway?' (emphasis in original).

It is the very question of evolutionary idealists' interpretation of history – historiography – that has motivated Wakeling (1998) to look to Hayden White (White, 1982, pp 17-18, as cited in Wakeling, 1998, p. 17), who more that most in post-colonial history, has been influential in persuading writers of history, in both fictional and non-fictional forms to question their values in interpreting history. First, writers need to recognise that history is chaos, and according to White's view, 'the chaos of phenomena in the past that constitutes the most meaning of "history" is, in its very ordering and setting down, made meaningful within the particular non-contradictory, unitary world-view or ideology' of the evolutionary idealist. And for Wakeling (1998), reflecting on White's work, 'this is true for both factual and fictional history. Historical discourses derive their form from whatever moral, political, social or aesthetic values have in society, and sometimes in opposition to them'. There can be no agnostic, innocent view of historical interpretation – all writers of history are bound in an ideology of one form or other: 'there can be no "history" without ideology' (Wakeling, 1998, p. 18).

Conclusions

How do we engage student teachers in the many and complex aspects of historical knowledge, understandings and historical skills? Of course, most people involved in pre-service teacher education, generally, and those specifically in preparing teachers for the new national history curriculum are alert to meeting the many challenges of its introduction.

This paper has argued for the use of historical novels as a stimulus for teaching/learning in pre-service teacher education history curriculum units. In doing so, it has argued from the point of view of student teachers being prepared for K-10 teaching. This paper has noted Lindquist uses the historical novel in her classroom as a 'spice', and because the historical novel engages her students as no other medium can. After all, the teaching of 'history is a "passion thing" and that this passion is built on confident expertise' (HTAA, 2010, March). Certainly, that 'confident expertise' is not entirely associated with a teacher's residual historical knowledge.

As Taylor (n.d.) at the National Centre for History Education showed, teacher competence in the history curriculum is more about developing historical literacy, and this has multiple facets, many of which are underpinned by values. So developing trainee teachers' expertise in the history curriculum will have as much to do with developing passion and values as it will have with skills and knowledge. As Leadbetter (2006, p. 9) showed, 'stories and story-telling have a critical role here in the acquisition of such information by young minds'. This paper has argued that to develop this understanding, student teachers in history curriculum units at universities need to understand the value of narratives in their teaching of history. The role of historical novels in the professional preparation of teachers is very clear. And it is certainly a common reading experience of many Australians.

This paper has sought to alert readers' attention to the rising tide of popularity of historical fiction amongst book buyers, far outweighing the sale of historical non-fiction. Added to this, is the fact that increasingly children's book awards are being

bestowed on historical fiction. Remembering what such commentators as Pybus have written concerning the literary strengths of historical fiction *vis-à-vis* that of historical non-fiction, it is not surprising students in history curriculum units, in the experience of the author of this paper at least, have reported strongly and positively on the use of historical fiction in their SOSE curriculum units. While some readers may have doubts concerning the historical veracity of historical fiction, this paper has drawn on authors such as Wakeling (1998) to show that historical fiction reflects a no-less chaotic view of the past than does historical non-fiction.

Through their readings of historical fiction, student teachers develop an appreciation of the powerful and engaging medium of historical narrative, and one that is in tune with its rising popularity in our society and culture.

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