Editorial: Recollection, Recontextualization, and Rereading: Part I

In a recent interview in *In 2 Print*, Philip Pullman lets aspiring writers in on one of his most successful storytelling techniques: "tell the reader something the characters don't know" — that way, the narrative will be more tension-filled and enthralling, he counsels. It seems to me that this is one of the things that makes historical fiction so absorbing: we usually know how the story ends or what the major climaxes will be for Father Brebeuf, Anne Boleyn, or Pocahontas, for example, but the poor protagonists don't. And so we cringe when they don't look over their shoulders or read between the lines. Therein lies one of the advantages historical fiction has over ordinary fiction — its emotional drama and vibrant affinity with "real life" — but therein also lies historical fiction's biggest drawback: many people, especially children and young adults, think it terribly boring to read about something that has already happened, about a period that has nothing to do with the present (or so it is often assumed), and about people who probably "talk funny" and so cannot be understood anyway. As many writers in these two issues lament, history receives scant popular attention, being overshadowed by its tawdry cousin, the movie-of-the-week docu-drama whose appeal rests not so much on the stability as on the sensationalism of truth.

As historians and educators will tell us, historical narratives have many virtues: they can spur curiosity about the past; they can offer training in historical consciousness by delineating the simultaneity of events (whether in different countries or villages), which encourages a "horizontal" view of history; they can help develop a concept of historical time by showing how a series of famous events took place during the *course* of an individual's growing up; they can help train young people to distinguish between what is true and what is invented; they can offer a framework into which historical information may be placed, and thus promote a sense of the continuities and discontinuities between one time period and another. Though we may all agree on these general educative and intellectual virtues of historical fiction over textbook history, what puts all of these virtues in serious doubt is our inability to agree on (1) the perspective from which to evaluate an historical event; and (2) the difference between historical writing and historical fiction. Do all records offer only a partial construction of "historical fact"? Does all historical writing perform the work of ideology, imaginatively constructing and not simply presenting the "real" or "true" story? And, finally, what should we teach children about the past and about history, then? Ultimately, our disagreements are productive and fascinating, as these special issues show.

Both this issue and the next issue of *CCL* are devoted to examining the border

between fiction and history, between the master narratives of history and the historically silenced voices; at the same time this issue is a celebration of the spirit that compels Canadians to rethink, revisit, and "rewrite" history. We include profiles of, and interviews with, writers whose perspectives on history have been influential (Pierre Berton, Barbara Greenwood, Joy Kogawa), writers whose perspectives on history are just beginning to be heard (Paul Yee, Sharon Gibson Palermo), and writers whose perspectives on history have been heard and generally ignored (Thomas King, Kent Monkman). Our articles examine the changes in emphasis and subject matter of historical fiction since the late nineteenth century, noting its popular permutations in action adventure, mystery, cautionary tale, problem novel and propaganda. Heather Kirk's article on Canadian historical fiction makes the rather disturbing argument that the "history" in recent "historical fiction" has gradually faded from view. And Lynes and MacGillivray, in their article on 1812 narratives, show us that whether a story is imbued with battle propaganda or moral revulsion at the prospect of war will depend on *when* it was written, thus noting how institutional history is dismantled by time and change.

We follow this section of contrasting views on historical writing and historical fiction with a series of lively author commentaries from Canada's leading historical fiction writers and illustrators who, with enthusiasm, took up one of the following questions: What is the most interesting problem you've encountered in your historical writing or historical fiction? Which of your books has been the most difficult to write? Why did you choose to write about a particular time/place/people? Has using fact and/or the past tied you down in a way that writing fiction in the present does not? As you will see, some of these artists see themselves as reporters, some as burglers, others as respectful looters. Some are enamoured of the material documentation of history and story, some are overwhelmed by it, and some are so self-aware of history and fiction as human constructs that that becomes the grounds for their rethinking and reworking of the past. These thoughts on retelling and rereading history are followed by a packed review section dedicated exclusively to the analysis of recent historical writing and historical fiction for young people. This section completes, we hope, what these special issues set out to achieve: the re-examination of "historical fact," the recognition of alternative historical narratives, and the investigation of the impulse to tell about the past. We recognize that investigating history participates in the larger reconstruction of personal and national identity that is familiar to Canadian readers — but that is another topic, for yet another issue.

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