

# **Ghosts that Sell Memories to Shadows: Postmodern Challenge of Historiography in Postmodern Canadian Fiction**

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Francis Fukuyama's 1989 essay on "The End of History?" and his subsequent book on this theme – widely popular as well as heavily critiqued at the time (they now seem to have come from another age) – were only one of many signs of a growing fascination with "history" in Western society, whether this concerned historicism and the crucial importance of historical context in the interpretation of texts of all kinds, historiography and the truth of written texts aimed at interpreting the past, or of course literature, where – in the English-speaking world at least – there was a steady and at times dramatic rise in the number of works of historical fiction (to use a general term) being written from the 1970s on. It is one particular literary manifestation of the interest in and uses of history that Vladimíra Fonfárová deals with in her work – postmodern fiction. Taking three differing texts by Canadian authors, she examines them in turn from the point of view of their relation to contemporary historiography and their thematizing of history, employing in the process in particular a specific theory of narratology..

In addition to a brief (seven pages) Introduction and a slightly longer (eight pages) Conclusion, the work is divided into six chapters.

The Introduction outlines briefly the content of the work: the rich debate on the nature of historiography in the 1980s and 1990s, the place of literary historians in this debate, the emergence of counterfactual history as a new historiographic tool, the aims of the work, various Canadian authors whose novels were inspired by history, and the defining features of the three works that will be analysed in the dissertation. This is done clearly and succinctly, though I would question the need for the very beginning, which speaks about the "unrecorded voices" of the First Nations in Canada; this does not seem to be relevant to the dissertation, and in fact the First Nations never appear again, except for a brief and rather perfunctory and speculative reference in the Conclusion. In addition – though this is minor point – it is odd that Rudy Wiebe's name is missing from the list of writers of contemporary historical fiction: he was one of the Canadian pioneers and many of his works are remarkable examples of the genre.

Chapter 1 gives an overview of the development of the debate on historiography in the twentieth century, from the first implicit challenges to scientific objectivity through the dominant figure of Hayden White to various historians who followed (La Capra, Munslow, Jenkins and others). This is fairly brief, which is fair, given that the focus of the dissertation is on literature, not history itself. However, it would have been helpful to remind the reader what kind of historiography was being challenged – that more or less created by Leopold von Ranke, which aimed to show history “as it actually happened” – and to point out that the work of White and his followers is, in a way, a “return of history”: certainly neither Gibbon nor Macaulay nor perhaps any historians before the mid-nineteenth century would have thought of their work as not being literary texts, with all that this entails.

In the following chapter, Ms Fonfárová focuses on the relationship between fiction and history, which is of central importance for her dissertation. Here she deals in particular with the views of the American literary scholar Dorrit Cohn and the Czech-Canadian linguist and literary theorist Lubomír Doležel, especially their theories of narratology. Both are critical of postmodern claims that merge fiction with historiography; the reasons for this are explained clearly. This is followed by four sections in which Ms Fonfárová subjects four types of history-related texts to Doležel’s criteria for distinguishing between history and fiction: traditional fiction, historiographic fiction, historiographic metafiction and alternative historiography (“virtual history”). Her analyses are systematic, going through arguments and counterarguments for the various criteria. This makes her conclusion – that the division drawn by Doležel between historiography and the various other genres is in fact functional (except for some borderline cases) – convincing.

Chapter 3 closes in on Canadian literature itself and the texts that will be analysed in the succeeding chapters. After a presentation of Linda Hutcheon’s concept of “historiographic metafiction”, there is a discussion of how the Canadian texts in question fulfil some of the features Hutcheon sets out. In the second half of this chapter, we are introduced to the issue of the unreliable narrator. As this is a standard concept, what is given is a mere summary of various approaches to the issue. What is important, however, is Ms Fonfárová’s presentation of the narratology theory of the Czech literary theorist and narratologist Tomáš Kubíček – important because it will form the basis for later argumentation. This is done well: enough detail to show where his theory has developed from and to grasp the specific features of his approach, but not so much as to blur the main lines.



Margaret Atwood's novel *Alias Grace* is the subject of Chapter 4. Here Ms Fonfárová focuses on two aspects – Grace as narrator, and Atwood's use of actual historical material in the book. When dealing with Grace as narrator, she uses narratological theory to analyse in great detail and with considerable subtlety the two narratives that Grace constructs – one for Simon Jordan, a doctor who examines her during several sessions in the Kingston Penitentiary (for historical reasons I would question the use of the word “psychoanalysis” here), and the other for the (imagined) narratee. Her conclusion – that Grace is (in Kubíček's terminology) a complex mixture of a partially reliable narrator in the first case and an unreliable one in the second – is well argued. The second section of this chapter, an analysis of the various effects created by Atwood's juxtaposition of genuine historical materials, is effective in establishing just how thoroughly Atwood manages to question historical truth, and how this reinforces the effects achieved through Grace's narrative(s).

The subject of Chapter 5 is Kate Pullinger's *Weird Sister*. Here we have something very different – a twentieth-century Gothic refashioning/re-incarnation of figures involved in a sixteenth century series of witch trials. Here history is especially elusive – there is only one account of the trials, and it is written from the (in all likelihood) biased viewpoint of one of the two families involved. As well, in the present, the main protagonist is someone of whose own history, in the course of the novel, we get to know nothing at all. From the point of narratological analysis, the situation here is more complex than in *Alias Grace*, with both homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrators, but the result is not very different: Ms Fonfárová shows the unreliability of all the narrators as well as the unreliability – even the danger, in naïve hands – of written texts. She goes on to deal with the use of symbols in the novel, and how they thematize history, showing it as both shifting and empty, ultimately irretrievable.

The last work dealt with in the dissertation, Carol Shields's *Mary Swann*, forms the subject of Chapter 6. The novel does not deal with any historical event or historical character, and so differs considerably from the works treated in the two previous sections. Its subject is a fictional character, an Ontario farmwife of whom nothing is known except a collection of poems which, after her death, lead her to be hailed as a great poetess; what we follow in the novel is the efforts of a number of individuals to “create” her – through reminiscences, biography, literary criticism and publication of the poems. Like *Alias Grace*, then, this is a search for identity. Ms Fonfárová shows the various ways in which the characters reconstruct

the person of Mary, all of them false and self-serving. She also gives a good account of how the irretrievability of historical fact is thematized. I do have a bit of a problem, though, in Ms Fonfárová having included this novel in the dissertation at all. This is because the past that is present in the novel is very different from the past that is present in the other two works dealt with in the dissertation and, more importantly, because it seems to me that much of the novel is not concerned with this relation of past to present. Rather, it is a satire – on literary pretension, on inflated reputations, on Canadian nationalism, on the very obsession with the past. Certainly one of the inspirations for the work must have been Paul Hiebert's *Sarah Binks*, a Canadian classic dealing with the same theme (the celebration of a tenth-rate poetess) whose author actually, by coincidence (?), taught at the same university as Shields. Of course Shields does deal with themes that are well analysed here, but to my mind, at least, for a different purpose.

Finally, in her Conclusion Ms Fonfárová sums up the various themes treated in the previous chapters. This is done briskly and clearly, making more explicit comparisons between the works than were possible in the individual chapters themselves.

To conclude, the various critical comments made above are not intended to detract from the overall quality of this thesis. The work exhibits wide reading and concentrated thinking on the subject. Though based on theory and employing theory for its insights, it avoids the all too common mistake of treating the phenomena to be analysed – in this case, the three works of fiction – as though they were fodder to prove the theory; instead, the theory here is always used to illuminate the phenomena. Formally, the writer has managed to deal clearly and convincingly with a complex topic, presenting the results of her research in a form that is critically astute and yet highly readable: the absence of technical critical jargon for its own sake makes the work easily accessible to a wider audience. To sum up, in her thesis Ms Fonfárová has employed a creative approach in her research on the topic of the relationship of contemporary historiography and postmodern Canadian fiction, and has written a thesis that fully meets the standards expected in the field.

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