## Christopher Ringrose

# A Journey Backwards: History Through Style in Children's Fiction

### Abstract

A.C. Black's *Flashbacks* series invites its readers to "Read a *Flashback* . . .take a journey backwards in time". There are number of ways in which children's fiction has encouraged its readers to engage with and care about history: through the presence of ghosts, through frame stories, time travel, or simply setting the narrative in the past. However, modern critical theory has questioned the validity of traditional modes of the genre. This paper defends historical fiction for children by arguing that, whatever narrative strategy is used, such writing stands or falls through its evocation of a historical sensibility--or what Raymond Williams calls a 'structure of feeling'. This is achieved through elements of style, both in the representation of dialogue and thought. Pastiche, sometimes thought of as suspect in contemporary culture, can often perform a similar evocative function. The paper is based on close readings of Alan Garner's *The Stone Book* from 1976, and 21st Century fiction by Kevin Crossley-Holland, Kate Pennington and Paul Bajoria. If these books do not overtly use the techniques of "historiographic metafiction", it may be because awareness of historiography is implicit in the very texture of their writing.

**Keywords:**

Children's fiction; historical fiction; histoiographic metafiction; style; Paul Bajoria; Alan Garner; Kevin Crossley-Holland; Kate Pennington

**Biography:**

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**Historical Fiction and Postmodern Debates**

At the start of the 21st Century, historical fiction written for children is a thriving, vibrant genre, attracting new practitioners such as Paul Bajoria and Kate Pennington, as well as established and celebrated authors like Philip Pullman and Kevin Crossley-Holland. It also maintains its educational mission, represented directly by attractive but more functional novellas such as those in A & C Black's *Flashback* series ("Read a Flashback . . .take a journey backwards in time. Each book in this series tells you what it was like to live at a different time in history" [Clarke, cover]). However, historical fiction has also been central to certain critical debates concerning postmodern writing, and misgivings have been expressed about both traditional and innovative versions of the genre. Significant aspects of these debates include Linda Hutcheon's advocacy of 'historiographic metafiction' and her response to Fredric Jameson's concerns about 'postmodern pastiche'.

Linda Hutcheon was one of the first critics to examine systematically those postmodern fictions in which authoritative versions of history, imbued with a sense of certainty about their accounts of the past, were undermined by postmodern scepticism, deriving from writers' awareness of the textual nature of history. In 1989, she coined the influential term "historiographic metafiction" to designate the work of those novelists, such as Salman Rushdie, Kurt Vonnegut and E.L. Doctorow, who had learned from Hayden White and other theorists to recognise the provisional and ideologically-influenced nature of historical narratives, and the shortcomings of realism. They adopted, she argued, "a questioning stance towards their common use

of conventions of narrative, of reference, of the inscribing of subjectivity, of their identity as textuality, and even of their implication in ideology" (Hutcheon Pastime 55). Since "historiographic metafiction . . . problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge" (55), realist historical fiction was no longer adequate to the task of representing the past. What are the implications for children's fiction of her influential preference for of historical fiction which "problematizes almost everything the historical novel once took for granted" (Hutcheon 69)?

Some critics do see contemporary historical novels written for children as formally conservative in comparison with historiographic metafiction. Deborah Stevenson, for example, has pointed to a divergence over the last 25 years between children's historical fiction and critically-acclaimed adult historical fiction. Despite the changes in the historiography of children's textbooks, whereby books such as Steven Jaffe's *Two Hundred Years of Reinventing American History* (1996) and Lori Lee Wilson's *The Salem Witch Trials* (1997) (the first in a series titled "How History Is Invented") examine the *process* of history-making and its provisional nature, she observes that "The genre [of historical fiction for children] seems unmoved by the newer currents in history. Effects of postmodernism are difficult to detect in juvenile historical fiction; the texts remain cohesive and constructed". (Stevenson 26-7) Stevenson's conclusion is that:

> Even while fiction makes its claim for a finite and knowable past, history asserts its subversive and shifting nature. Fiction tells the previously untold story, but nonfiction begins to address the problem

> of its quixotic task: telling the ultimately untellable story that is history. (28)

It is not to the credit of children's historical fiction, in her view, that it "offers certainty" (28).

The significance of pastiche and parody (as, for example, an important feature of historical fiction) has been viewed in different ways by Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon. In his essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", Jameson levelled at postmodern art forms the charge that they had lost a sense of the past, becoming "an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history" (171). They were able to offer only pastiche, an image of an image, just as the makers of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* could only represent the 1930s by copying its popular culture, in the form of Saturday matinée adventure films.

Hutcheon, preferring to use the harder-edged term 'parody', argued in *The Politics of Postmodernism* that Jameson had misunderstood the radical artistic potential of that form. Postmodern parody was "a way of acknowledging the history (and, through irony, the politics) of representation"; it was "both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation" (93, 98).

In what follows I argue that the genre of realist historical fiction can be defended against charges of naïvté and conservatism, and that children's writers have developed it in subtle ways, by devising varieties of stylistic

'strangeness' to invoke past subjectivities. I shall also propose that pastiche is intrinsic to historical fiction, and that Hutcheon's position on pastiche and parody is, at least in terms of the texts discussed here, more tenable than that of Jameson. The reading of historical fiction remains a legitimate and rewarding experience. I am less interested in its role as a transmitter of historical information, though that is an honorable feature of the genre. My concern is with pastiche and prose style, and the ways in which they can be used to establish a sense of the past and past ways of experiencing the world. The novelist's procedure in establishing such a world-view is speculative, of course, but then so are all our ways of inhabiting the past through artistic means. A fruitful account of the difficulties and rewards involved in the recreation of historical experience is provided by Raymond Williams in his study of British culture *The Long Revolution*. Writing about the problem of grasping a sense of how people thought, felt and experienced in the past, he devises the term 'structure of feeling':

> It is only in our own time and place that we can expect to know, in any substantial way, the general organization. We can learn a great deal of the life of other places and times, but certain elements, it seems to me, will always be irrecoverable. . . . The most difficult thing to get hold of, in studying any past period, is this felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living. . . . We are usually most aware of this when we notice the contrasts between generations, who never talk quite 'the same language', or when we

> read an account of our lives by someone from outside the community, or watch the small differences of style, in speech or behaviour, in someone who has learned our ways yet was not bred in them. . . . The term I would suggest to describe it is *structure of feeling*: it is as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity. (47-8)

One way to begin an engagement with how a *structure of feeling* might be evoked in historical fiction is through consideration of three objects displayed at the beginning of a celebrated example of the genre.

**Icons from the Past**

> A bottle of cold tea; bread and a half onion. That was Father's baggin. Mary emptied her apron of stones from the field and wrapped the baggin in a cloth. (Garner 11)

The opening of Alan Garner's *The Stone Book*, the tale which initiated his Q*uartet* of historical fictions, is an iconic moment in the representation of the past in children's literature. In that verb-free first sentence, three objects lie slightly forbiddingly on display, guarding the entrance to the book. They are at the same time resoundingly ordinary--a commonplace meal--and disorientatingly alien. The words have the defamiliarizing freshness of poetry, as conceived by the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky, for whom "the technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (12). They new-mint language like William Carlos Williams's presentation of the red

wheelbarrow, upon which "so much depends" (Williams 964), as well as embodying the slightly dusty insistence of objects in a museum. They are tangible and edible in the story, but they certainly belong to the past. It would not be quite true to say that we easily visualise them. Is that a stone bottle, or a glass one? What shape is it? Likewise, what shape is that "bread"--a slice or a small loaf? It would be brown bread presumably, to go with the rebarbative third item, with its pungency and challenge to the digestion. Their status is like that of Van Gogh's or Courbet's workman's boots, presented starkly to viewers who would probably never wear them, and proclaiming vividly the stories of their owners.

In its determination to honour the world of work and the largely unwritten history of working men and women, the first sentence of *The Stone Book* also has a history, or at least a historical moment. First published thirty-one years ago in 1976, it takes its place alongside other texts of the time which sought to honour, and increase the visibility of, the British working class, such as Charles Parker's 1960 Radio Ballad *Singing the Fishing,* E.P. Thompson's 1966 historical study of *The Making of the English Working Class*, or Jeremy Seabrook's 1974 account of changes in working class Northampton, *The Everlasting Feast*. Thus texts about history themselves become historical texts, with a dual relation to our need to "invent the past" (Lawson Lucas xiv).

Three other features of the opening of *The Stone Book* are striking in terms of its status as historical fiction. First, this is a family book; father and daughter are mentioned in the first paragraph, and mother (lying in bed

exhausted from picking stones) appears in paragraph two. One of the primary ways in which we encounter the past is through our families: there is the persistence of family names and the persistence, too, of amateur genealogists; we also draw on stories, diaries, anecdotes, family albums, cemeteries, certificates, and records of families migrating or staying put. (Such textuality is important in Paul Bajoria's *The Printer's Devil*, as we shall see.) Second, the only linguistic archaism in the paragraph, "baggin", is also the only repeated word. "Baggin" is not footnoted in the text, and is fairly easy to decode in this context (where it is defined as a bottle of cold tea, some bread and a half onion), but it represents an acknowledgement of the fluidity of language, which is one of the greatest challenges to anyone writing historical fiction.

Third, the symbolism of the apron, the stones and the cloth suggests that this will be an elemental text, in which gender, work, stones, and food will have their place. Its action, in fact, revolves around the binary opposition between the ascent of a church spire and the descent into an underground chamber. One might note a fourth thing about the paragraph: it does not give the reader a date, to locate the action. This is true of the book as a whole. Location in time is largely established by implication: by careful use of prose style, and by the artistic recreation, in Raymond Williams's terms, of a "structure of feeling" (48): a way of experiencing and responding to the world, which the reader is invited to associate with a particular time and place.

Alan Garner's approach to writing about history is both realist and poetic; the depiction of the environment is authoritative, despite his sophisticated use of free indirect discourse to represent Mary's perspective in the third person ("That was Father's baggin. . . . The new steeple on the new church glowed in the sun; but something glinted." [11-13]). Its achievement is to convey a world both alien and intimately-known: familiar and defamiliarised. The book is realist and poetic, then—but hardly "historiographic metafiction". In one sense, Deborah Stevenson's judgement, quoted earlier, is correct; there is no sustained tradition in children's literature to match postmodern fiction's impatience with realism, its determination to "break the frame" as the Russian Formalists put it, to inject a radical scepticism into the telling of historical fictions, much of which is discernible in novels as different as Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-5* and Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 101/2 Chapters*. In historical fiction for children the prevalent intention seems *not* to be to problematise historical knowledge by holding a mirror up to the past and then examining the mirror.

We can distinguish at least two phases in contemporary children's fiction about history, neither of which is strongly influenced by postmodernism, despite their concerns with the 'loss of history'. In the first, a number of important female writers counselled the spiritual and imaginative duty of re-attaching the young to a living sense of the past—one which was in danger of being lost. Adrienne E. Gavin has shown how, in the time-slip novels of Lucy M. Boston, Philippa Pearce, Penelope Farmer and

Penelope Lively, children gain some kind of magical access to history. In books such as Boston's *Green Knowe* series, or Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden*, modern child protagonists experience the past directly, often through rites of passage into a different dimension of a particular setting or house:

> In these houses the key with which the child character unlocks the door to the past is the imagination or memories of an older woman or women. These older women characters act as conduits to the past, and enable readers and the child protagonist to enter the past through the female imagination. (Gavin 163)

In this tradition, knowledge of the past is a liberating experience, which mimics the artistic experience itself, conceived not as a web of intertextuality and proliferation of provisional meanings, but as a form of understanding. Ideologically, the meaning of such books may be conservative, as in the almost feudal continuities of Green Knowe, but the way they invoke a sense of the past can be poetic and mysterious.

The second, more contemporary, strand of historical writing for children is more patently 'historical fiction' in the form that has become familiar since the work of Sir Walter Scott. There is less need for encounters with ghosts (like those who transmitted news from the past in Elisabeth Beresford's *The Ghosts of Lupus Street School*) or time shifts, gateways and transitions, since the characters belong to the past and the reader encounters them directly. Recent examples include Kevin Crossley-Holland's Arthur Trilogy, and its stunning sequel *Gatty's Tale* (2006), Kate Pennington's

*Tread Softly* (2003) and *Charley Feather* (2005), and Paul Bajoria's *The Printer's Devil* (2004). If these books do not display an overt metafictional awareness, or muse on their own fallibility as historical representations, that is not because children's fiction is epistemologically naïve and simply "offers certainty" (Stevenson 28). In fact, the books' negotiations with the problems of representing the past are an important part of their meaning. If they do not overtly use postmodernist devices of frame-breaking, generic hybridisation, narrative doubt and multiple perspectives, it is because these features are implied in the very texture of their writing. As with the opening lines of *The Stone Book*, a historical fiction's success is a matter of finding a stylistic strangeness through which to inhabit the past. Such a style can convince readers that the structure of feeling it conveys is authentic but other-worldly.

Since such a process of inhabiting other times is necessarily speculative, why should we read fiction about the past? It could be claimed that in reading historical fiction, the alternative world one is invited to enter has an additional dimension: one of time as well as space, which brings a richness of reference that deepens our own sense of identity. Of course, such novels, as we saw with *The Stone Book*, are of their own time as well as of the past. Kevin Crossley-Holland's *Gatty's Tale*, the story of a young girl's participation in a pilgrimage from the Welsh Marches to Jerusalem in 1203, deals in part with Western understanding of Muslim culture, and the long history of Christian-Muslim contact and conflict in the Middle East which is so central to world politics in the early 21st century. Like *The Printer's Devil*

(with its surprise gender-switch at the end, where the hero reveals 'himself' to have been a girl all along), and like the simpler narrative in *The Doctor's Daughter* by Norma Clarke (one of the A & C Black 'Flashbacks' Series), it features a plucky and resourceful teenage heroine and, throughout, foregrounds debates about gender difference and female education which extend back in the children's literary tradition to *Little Women* and beyond. In their liberal agendas these three texts remind one of James Kerr's precept that "the classical historical novel has as its object not history, but ideology" (cited in Stevenson 27). Kate Pennington's C*harley Feather,* with its cross-dressing hero-heroine living outside normal family and kinship structures in the criminal underworld of the eighteenth century, shares ideological concerns with works of contemporary historians like Linda Colley. Her book *Britons: Forging the Nation* also explores the complicated issues of identity, allegiance and nationality in that period. Yet the historical novel has another object, which is to recreate a different mode of subjectivity. In some ways this is a poetic rather than a simply ideological function, as we saw with the opening of *The Stone Book:* the historical setting encourages an experimentation with style, to suggest a certain *strangeness* of experience and subjectivity. Of course, this quality can be suggested by invoking different customs, knowledges and material processes (modes of travel, clothing, social relations), but it is also an effect of literary defamiliarisation, as a way of evoking a different world.

This kind of defamiliarisation is an important feature of the opening page of *Gatty's Tale*:

> 'Light of light! Oh, flight! Oh, flight!' trilled the early birds. In one corner of the cow-stall, the heap of dirty sacking shifted. Something buried beneath it made a sound that began as a gentle murmur and ended as a grouse.
>
> Then the cock crowed and that loosed the tongues of his disciples. Half the neighers and brayers and bleaters and grunters in the manor of Caldicot welcomed the day's dawning, chill and misty as it was.
>
> As soon as Hopeless joined in and mooed, the heap of sacking shrugged and then tossed. In one fluid movement, Gatty stood up, crossed herself, reached for her russet woollen tunic lying on a bale of hay, and pulled it on over her undershirt and baggy drawers. Loudly she yawned. She opened her mouth so wide she could hear all her little headbones cricking and cracking. Then she stepped round to the next stall.
>
> 'Greetings in God!' she said politely to her cow. She gave Hopeless a handful of grain, pulled up her three-legged stool and began to milk her.
>
> The air in the cowshed somehow smelt thick and fresh at the same time. Rank with gluey dung and musty straw, but also rinsed

with the cool, clean breath of late September, that time of year when the weather begins to sharpen its teeth. (Crossley-Holland 1)

The passage suggests how closely the poetic function of language is allied to the historical imagination. The startling opening is different in register from much narrative fiction. It is packed with allusions and contrasts, and with a sense of a structure of feeling different from our own—not so much in the experience of sleeping in the straw in the cowshed, but in the mode of thought. It begins almost like a creation myth, as though this were the first day of the world and simultaneously the first day of the book, with the birdsong echoing the Creed (the first of a number of religious references), the cock crowing and the "brayers and bleaters and grunters" taking up the refrain. These names themselves skilfully evoke a medieval bestiary or alliterative verse and remind one that Kevin Crossley-Holland has been a celebrated adaptor of *Beowulf* into modern English. This tapestried, radiant world is cunningly linked to the interior world of the heroine, so that the intimate feeling of the "little headbones cricking and cracking" provides an aural counterpoint to the world outside. And, human anatomy not having altered greatly since 1203, the reader is tempted to try the same yawn, and to observe similar effects—so the passage is both beautifully unfamiliar *and* totally present to us.

The subject matter of a pilgrimage works well within this framework of defamiliarisation. People still embark on pilgrimages, and in his 1984 volume *Station Island* Seamus Heaney wrote moving poems built around the power of images of pilgrimage for the late twentieth century: "I was a fasted

pilgrim,/light-headed, leaving home" (63). The thirteenth-century practicalities of pilgrimage to the Holy Land, in terms of the certainties of Christian faith and the arduous nature of the journey, make *Gatty's Tale* an unstereotyped form of adventure fiction. The nine pilgrims range from Lady Gwyneth de Ewloe to Austin her Priest, Everard the Cathedral Choirmaster and Snout the cook, heartbreakingly afflicted for life with a cleft palate which late twentieth-century surgery might have remedied shortly after his birth. There is also Gatty, the fifteen-year-old second chamber-servant who, like the readers of her own age, has so much to learn about life and the nature of the medieval world that she becomes their representative as the significant places hove into view: Crete, Cyprus, Jaffa, Jerusalem. Their names are easily recognisable within our own, different contexts; some of the places may have become familiar through tourism, but here they are arrived at after laborious travel and months of effort. The landfall at Acre in the Kingdom of Jerusalem is conveyed with all the gawping amazement of Marco Polo's traveller's tales, and all of Crossley-Holland's skill in making concrete the experience of travel in a small fishing-boat from Cyprus to Acre; the aching limbs coming from restricted movement and the contusions from contact with masts, spars and buckets:

> Late that afternoon, the little smack slipped into the harbour at Acre, capital of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, and by then Gatty and Snout were ankle-deep in squirming fish. Fish with wall-eyes and goggle eyes, gaping and pouting and dribbling and flapping, fish with ears, fish with whiskers, small as little fingers and large as shins. The air in

the boat was thick with their dying. Gatty and Snout were exhausted, salt-sticky, fish-slimy, covered in bumps and bruises. (268)

Such a text suggests that Deborah Stevenson's distinction between self-aware historiography and historical fiction that seeks only verisimilitude (”Even while fiction makes its claim for a finite and knowable past, history asserts its subversive and shifting nature”) is misleading, because it focuses on narrative authority and explicit acknowledgement of the problems of 'knowing history'. *Gatty's Tale* manages to link a fast-moving narrative to the poetic function of language, so that it is constantly advertising itself as *a way of* capturing Gatty's sense of the world. It is textually self-conscious, not in the explicitly self-reflexive mode of some postmodern fiction, but by playing out a sense of sameness and difference side by side. Things we think we know, casually, are being seen differently through a historical consciousness. Gatty's first singing lesson is a case in point:

'Sing me a scale.'

'A what?'

Everard plucked one string of the psaltery, and, making an open purse of his lips, sang Uuuuu-t . . .' Then, waving his delicate white hands, he signalled to Gatty to join in.

'Uuuuu-t,' sang Gatty, a whole octave lower than Everard. . .

Now Everard covered his upper teeth with his top lip, like a horse. 'Mi,' he sang. (50)

By the time Gatty coughs and runs out of breath, “her eyes were bright with excitement”.

Beyond the fairly obvious, but necessary, historical items here (the psaltery, the scale), the effect relies on the unusual metaphors from Gatty's world (the purse and the horse), as well as the aura of freshness spreading from her encounter with newness and privilege in a world where most things are comfortingly mundane.

It might be objected that what I am describing and valuing here is not so much a historical sense, or historical accuracy (even though *Gatty's Tale* is impeccably historically researched) but a kind of poetry. Crossley-Holland, as Shklovsky would say, makes the stone stony (17), stripping the film of familiarity from travelling or singing. In a way, this objection—that what historical fiction gives us is a freshness of vision rather than a vision incontrovertibly 'of the past'--is valid. In the inspired paradox of the title of another Seamus Heaney collection, *Seeing Things,* the writer makes us see things afresh, but playfully concedes that the literal-minded reader might see him or her as being taken in by the ghosts of the past. This ambiguous stance is unavoidable—the glory as well as the riddle of writing about history—as the eighteenth century knew, since at that time the term "History", like its French root *histoire,* was applicable both to accounts of the past and narratives such as *The History of Tom Jones* by Henry Fielding. A further complication, however, is that making sense of the past is difficult to separate from a tendency to pastiche the texts of the past. The appeal of the "brayers and bleaters and grunters" in *Gatty's Tale* is partly in the alliteration, and partly in the echoes of an existing literature (though how far

this kind of intertextuality is available to young readers is hard to determine).

**Style and Pastiche: History and Texts**

The need to use pastiche, therefore, might be construed as a strength or a weakness. As we saw earlier, Jameson and Hutcheon disagree about the creative potential of copying past literary and artistic styles, but it could be claimed that historical fiction has always needed to use a degree of mimicry. As Philip Pullman has shown in *The Ruby in the Smoke*, there are rich veins of parody and genre-blending available to the writer of historical fiction. Paul Bajoria's 2004 novel *The Printer's Devil* is an interesting test case in terms of the debate over postmodern pastiche. In his charming, lively account of the adventures of Mog, the printer's devil of the title, in the docklands of Victorian London, Bajoria makes deft and entirely legitimate use of the Dickensian mode. Bajoria deploys the familiar ingredients: the Oliver or Pip-like orphan hero; the child's first-person narration; the Bill Sikes-like villain who cannot outrun the law ("They hanged Cockburn in October" [292]); the grotesque ally (Mr Spintwice); the maze of streets; the series of surrogate mothers and fathers; the mystery plot with its enigmatic figures; the sense of everything being slightly more vivid, distorted and larger than life, like the reflections in the beer pumps at The Doll's Head pub:

> I watched Tassie moving briskly about behind the two great big polished pump handles where she pulled the beer. She always kept a cloth by them so that, whenever they got too grubby from all that

> pulling, she could wipe them down and they'd be as shiny as ever. "The shiniest taps in Clerkenwell," she always claimed, "and if you can show me shinier in all London, well, I'd like to see 'em. See your face in 'em, you can, and it'll never be otherwise, not while I'm on this good earth."
>
> You certainly could see your face in them, but they were such a funny shape that when you looked in them your face appeared extraordinarily long and bendy, as if someone had taken you by the topmost hairs on your head and yanked until you were stretched out like a piece of dough. (11)

The gravitational pull of Dickens is so strong that Bajoria has to work within that structure of feeling—and it is a rich and appealing one. In this respect the writer of historical fiction set after 1800 has a different context from the one dealing with earlier periods. The actual appearance of child protagonists in literature dates back only as far as the Romantic period, so Crossley-Holland's thirteenth-century heroine has to be created out of his sense of that culture, rather than out of a pastiche of earlier child-protagonists and their sensibilities. What Bajoria does, however, is to make a virtue of the rich textuality that comes down to us from the Victorian period. Dickensian description and dialogue are a part of this (even if the young reader has never encountered Dickens directly), but he cunningly uses others.

For example, the map which prefaces the text simplifies the street plan of the city, but in doing so re-locates the street names as signifiers of real activities and geographical features, so that we savour their history and

strangeness: Cripplegate, Cheapside, Bishopgate Street, Shoreditch, Fleet, Cable Street and India House. As a source of print culture, the printer's shop in which Mog works, and the materials it produces, is cleverly woven into the plot, but also provide ways of verbalising and imagining a world—for Mog and the reader. There is the stark, lurid poster that Mog sets in type at the start of the novel: "ESCAPED. COCKBURN. From our NEW PRISON at CLERKENWELL, the 14th day of MAY. The Public is ADVISED that this man is VERY DANGEROUS!" (2) with its odd, slightly off-key capitalisation and interpellation of "The Public". There are the advertisements for "MRS FISHTHROAT'S SPLENDID SYRUP 4d" (94) and for "CAMILLA THE PRESCIENT ASS: The only BEAST in the WORLD guaranteed to tell FORTUNES and Prophesise EVENTS with Perfect Accuracy" (95), both of which portray a world which is mock Victorian—or just conceivably authentic Victorian. Texts are everywhere in *The Printer's Devil*: notes, letters, fragments of messages, posters and, behind them all, the fiction of Dickens. For all its vividness and adventure plot, it is as a paper world that it subtly intimates the nature of the historical archive, without the need to be self-consciously metafictional. One of these texts is the letter from Mog's mother to her children, recovered near the end of the book. It is found in Mog's 'treasure box', which turns out to be a box of words:

> There was *Mog's Book*. There were the scrawled notes from the man from Calcutta; pages from newspapers; documents I'd stolen from Coben and Jiggs which we couldn't really understand, and which they

> probably hadn't made head nor tail of either. Only the list of names was missing . . .
>
> And there was the most important document of all: the letter, signed "your undeserving Imogen", which I'd brought from Coben and Jiggs's hideout. (282)

Through this letter from a dead mother, Mog discovers her past, finds a lost twin brother, and thinks about making the truth about her cross-dressing more public: "that I was a girl and not a boy" (287). That neat dénouement makes the reader ask whether they have read Mog/Imogen correctly throughout the book, and done their detective work as well as she has done hers. Paul Bajoria cleverly has Mog react to her mother's letter in such a way as to prompt the response of the reader to his novel: "I tried to blink back tears. Reading these two fragile faded pages had given a personality, a physical presence, to someone who had never existed for me before" (285).

**Then and Now**

It is not a coincidence that all the novels discussed above deal with gender in a way that places them squarely in the period after second wave feminism. Each of them features a spirited young woman who makes her own way in the world with fortitude and imagination: questing, journeying and playing a full role in the affairs of a world of men. Mary, Gatty, Mog, and Charley are designed to assume contemporary ideological responsibilities and, in that, they may seem to inscribe contemporary aspirations upon the past. Interestingly, two of them, Mog and Charley, turn out to be the cross-

dressers Imogen and Charlotte ("No-one is what they seem," muses Charley (29).) In this way they wittily confound those young male readers who might pass over a story with a female protagonist. Such characters are of 'the Now', and test cultural and historical expectations in ways to which modern readers have become accustomed.

However, the historical dimension of these books means that in the very areas in which they might be most vulnerable to criticism, their use of pastiche and their poetic and speculative recreation of the sameness-yet-strangeness of the past, they convey subtly and in the very texture of their writing many of the complexities which confront us all when we engage with 'structures of feeling' by trying to imagine 'life Then' whilst dealing with questions of historical difference.

(5,789 words)

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