



Sarah Waters is one of the most widely read glbtq historical fiction writers working today. Photograph by Flickr contributor Annie_C_2. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 license.

Historical Fiction

by Norman W. Jones

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Glbtq historical fictions creatively interweave fiction with facts in ways that have not only won them a large readership but also have offered that readership insightful illuminations of glbtq histories.

Broadly defined, historical fictions are stories set in a historical period prior to the writer's own time period. These stories mix fact with fiction in ways that often challenge readers to determine the line between historically documented events and a writer's imagination.

Critics sometimes accuse historical fiction of blurring this line; they claim such stories corrupt facts with fiction. These criticisms generally misunderstand the uses of fiction, especially the ways in which historical fiction can help illuminate the borders between what we know and what we do not know about history.

Sexual and Historical Mysteries

When it comes to glbtq histories, there is much we do not know for certain. We are faced with an unusually extensive lack of trustworthy evidence not only because sex has been viewed by so many people throughout history as intensely private (and therefore not documented in detail for posterity) but also because the kinds of non-normative expressions of sex and gender that are the focus of glbtq histories have been subjected to oppression and suppression. Thus, most of the surviving historical evidence attests directly only to oppression.

We know very little about how people who engaged in non-normative sex and gender expressions thought of themselves and their experiences. In addition to these historical mysteries, current research today demonstrates that sex and gender remain mysterious even when the "facts" about our sexual and gender behaviors are relatively clear: these are some of the murkiest aspects of human experience. Historical fictions can help us explore this murky mysteriousness in both the present and the past.

Consider the most common form of criticism leveled against glbtq historical fiction: some people claim such fictions tend to invite readers to identify anachronistically with figures from the past--to identify such figures as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer, despite the fact that these terms (according to the critics) connote modern psychoanalytic understandings of sex and gender that did not exist in the distant past.

In many instances, such criticisms pretend to know more than they actually do. Sex and gender conventions evince significant change and variability not only across different historical periods and settings but also within single periods and settings. As glbtq historical fictions tend to remind us, sex and gender are mysterious; even today the terms *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, *transgender*, and *queer* are used in a wide variety of ways that do not all imply psychoanalytic understandings of the self.

Narrative Understandings of Sex and Gender

Historical fictions generally do not place much emphasis on these or other categorical terms for sex and gender. Instead, they tend to rely less on single words than on their narratives as a whole to characterize their protagonists' experiences of sex and gender. They thereby suggest that categorical terms for sex and gender, while useful to some extent, constitute a form of shorthand marking the place of previously told, yet-to-be-told, or even missing narratives.

Put differently, they suggest that categorical terms for sexual desires constitute merely one point of entry for exploring questions they help define but cannot definitely confine.

Historians such as Carolyn Dinshaw acknowledge this insight offered by glbtq historical fictions. In her work on medieval sexuality, for example, she draws on Robert Glück's *Margery Kempe* (1994), a novel about the medieval English mystic that emphasizes not neat, rigid categories to describe Kempe but rather an experiential narrative.

Dinshaw values this narrative precisely for the "disorganizing" understanding it offers of Kempe: it presents Kempe as it were from a multiplicity of angles--as narratives typically do--whereas categorical terms tend to present a falsely organized, simplified view of people by defining just one set of traits, characteristics, and experiences as dominant while relegating all others to a secondary status.

The types of narrative conventions used by contemporary glbtq historical fictions to describe sex and gender experiences have roots far older than modern psychoanalytic concepts and terminology: they echo ancient Christian narrative conventions.

This historical lineage is evident not only in historical fiction but in many kinds of contemporary glbtq narratives--especially in coming-out stories and stories about glbtq people forming non-biological kinship groups. These stories have strong parallels with Christian narrative conventions of conversion and community-formation. By focusing on history, many glbtq historical fictions tend to emphasize the ancient historical roots of these narrative conventions more clearly than other kinds of glbtq narratives do.

Take, for example, Alicia Gaspar de Alba's fictional account of the famous seventeenth-century Mexican writer, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. *Sor Juana's Second Dream* (1991) reminds readers that (as Michel Foucault warns in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*) the psychoanalytic case history, which some take to be definitive of modern understandings of sexuality, has deep roots in the history of Christian confession.

Similarly, one of the most famous glbtq historical novels--Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982; there is also a film version directed by Steven Spielberg), which tells the story of a romance between two women in the early twentieth-century southern U.S.--pointedly interweaves a coming-out story with a conversion story, emphasizing the parallels between the two.

Another example is Tom Spanbauer's *The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon* (1991), which tells a coming-of-age story about a bisexual boy in early-twentieth-century Idaho who identifies with the American Indian berdache or two-spirit tradition.

By the end of the novel, the protagonist embraces a transgender role as a storyteller who tells his own life story. He insists that any terms or categorical definitions for sex or gender identities can serve only as incomplete references to far more complicated stories. Indeed, the novel portrays identification itself as a story that, above all else, is about creating kinship bonds with other people--a kind of kinship that does not necessarily have anything to do with biological bloodlines. The novel reminds its readers that this narrative understanding of identification-as-kinship draws on ancient Christian narrative traditions.

In addition to these three examples, there are many other glbtq historical fictions that echo ancient Christian narrative conventions often in less explicit but nevertheless significant ways. These echoes suggest that the kinds of narrative understandings of sex and gender characteristic of glbtq historical fictions cannot simply be dismissed as anachronistic. While such fictions do reflect the cultures in which they are written, this is true of all writing.

Historical fictions are therefore best viewed as exploring the relationship between past and present--much like nonfiction histories do, except that historical fictions undertake a far more extensive and artistic engagement with the borders of what we know about history. Indeed, their emphasis on narrative understandings of sex and gender can allow them to articulate these unknowns--the mysteries of sex and gender in both the past and the present--more accurately than historical accounts that rely heavily on categorical terms to define sex and gender experiences.

History of the Genre

Many scholars cite the success of Sir Walter Scott's early nineteenth-century novels (especially *Waverly*) as marking the advent of the historical fiction novel as a popular mainstay for English-speaking readers. One could argue for expanding the genre to include earlier texts--for instance, Christopher Marlowe's late sixteenth-century play, *Edward II*, might be considered a work of glbtq historical fiction.

If one adheres to the conventional definitions and history of the genre, however, historical fiction novels with clearly expressed glbtq themes began appearing in English by the 1930s. Maude Meagher's *The Green Scamander* (1933), set in the ancient Mediterranean during the Trojan War, centers on the legendary Amazon Queen Penthesilia.

In 1936, Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Summer Will Show* appeared, exploring a bisexual romance set in Paris in the mid-nineteenth century. That same year brought William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, which recounts a Civil-War-era romance between two young men in Mississippi. Another gay romance set in nineteenth-century Mississippi came out in 1950: Thomas Hal Phillips's *The Bitterweed Path*.

In 1951, Marguerite Yourcenar, one of the most sophisticated practitioners of historical fiction who described her historical novels as "passionate reconstructions," published *The Memoirs of Hadrian*. Recounting the second-century Roman Emperor Hadrian's intense love for the Greek teenager Antinous, the acclaimed novel is a long meditation on the idea of empire and conquest, whether military or erotic.

In 1956, one of the most enduringly popular glbtq historical fiction writers published her first glbtq-themed historical fiction novel, *The Last of the Wine*: Mary Renault (the pen name of Eileen Mary Challans) created a romance between two young men in Athens during the fifth-century B.C.E. Peloponnesian War.

Renault is best known for her subsequent novels about the fourth-century B.C.E. Greek emperor, Alexander the Great. In *The Mask of Apollo* (1966), a novel centering on the Greek theater, the boy Alexander is introduced as a person of unusual beauty and presence. *Fire from Heaven* (1969) chronicles Alexander's romance with his lifelong friend, Hephaestion; *The Persian Boy* (1972), his romance with Bagoas, a Persian eunuch. Carefully researched and engagingly written, these novels continue to attract general readers as well as glbtq readers.

Alma Routsong, writing under her pen name, Isabel Miller, self-published *A Place for Us* in 1969; two years later, the American Library Association honored the novel by granting it the first Gay Book Award. It was republished in 1972 as *Patience & Sarah*. This lesbian romance set in early-nineteenth-century Connecticut and New York quickly gained an extensive readership, becoming an important landmark of lesbian literature.

Recent Gbltq Historical Fiction

Today, one of the most widely read gbltq historical fiction writers is Sarah Waters: her novels about cross-dressing and lesbian romances in Victorian England--*Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), and *Fingersmith* (2002)--are so popular that two of them have been made into television mini-series. Similarly, Christopher Bram's *Father of Frankenstein* (1995), about the famous director James Whale became a highly acclaimed film: *Gods and Monsters* (1998), directed by William Condon and starring Ian McKellen.

Some recent gbltq historical fiction novels explore the lives of major literary figures. Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004) focuses on Henry James; Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* (2003), on Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, and their Vietnamese cook; Nancy Freedman's *Sappho: The Tenth Muse* (1998), on the ancient Greek poet, Sappho. Mark Merlis's *American Studies* (1994) offers a fictionalized composite of literary critics Newton Arvin and F. O. Matthiessen. Merlis later published *An Arrow's Flight* (1998), which draws on Homer, Sophocles, and Virgil to re-tell the story of the Trojan War from an archly campy perspective.

In addition to Waters, many other novelists also explore gbltq history in England. David Leavitt's *While England Sleeps* (1995) presents a window on gay life in 1930s London. Emma Donoghue's *Life Mask* (2004) goes further back, to eighteenth-century London; Maria McCann's *As Meat Loves Salt* (2001) goes further still, to the seventeenth century.

Historical fiction novels treat a diverse array of gbltq subjects and settings. David Ebershoff's *The Danish Girl: A Novel* (2001) tells the story of Einar Weigener (Lili Elbe), the first man to undergo sex-change surgery. Judith Katz's *The Escape Artist* (1997) chronicles lesbian romances among Jewish immigrants in early twentieth-century Buenos Aires. John Williams's *Clifford's Blues* (1998) recounts the survival of a gay African-American jazz musician in a Nazi concentration camp.

Lisa See's *Snow Flower and The Secret Fan* (2005) tells of a nineteenth-century lesbian romance in China. Jamie O'Neill garnered critical acclaim for *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001), a gay romance set during the 1916 Easter Uprising in Ireland. Earl Ganz's *The Taos Truth Game* (2006) recreates the relationship of novelist Myron Brinig and artist Cady Wells in the Taos, New Mexico artist colony dominated by Mabel Dodge Luhan in the 1930s.

These works of gbltq historical fiction represent just a fraction of the genre as a whole. While most of the works mentioned above are serious works of literature that have received critical as well as popular acclaim, one could also create an even more extensive list of popular gbltq historical romance novels. These typically range from subtly erotic to explicitly pornographic. While such novels can be just as formulaic as their heterosexual counterparts, many of them evince creativity and originality, and they continue to enjoy significant popularity among readers.

Conclusion

While certain gbltq historical fiction novels have been lauded by scholars, the genre as a whole remains underrepresented and underappreciated in gbltq scholarship. Nevertheless, the genre is popular and vibrant.

Whereas critics tend to focus unnecessarily on the bugbear of possible anachronisms, fans of these stories rightly find much to enjoy and appreciate in the genre. Gbltq historical fictions offer imaginative explorations of the past that are useful as well as enjoyable. They offer insights about the mysteries of sex and gender both in the past and in the present, illuminating these wonderfully murky and fascinating aspects of human experience.

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