

Review Article

***The Nineteenth Century Revis(it)ed: The New Historical Fiction* by Ina Bergmann**

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The nineteenth century is a crucial phase in America's history. Key features such as geographical expansions, the industrial revolution, development in science and technology, and America's emergence as a super power, after the American Revolution and the War of 1812, mark the century. The Civil War becomes the most important historical event of this phase that will impact the lives of Americans in the years to come. The century has literary importance also because, during this phase, forerunners of American literature, like, Edgar Allen Poe, James Cooper, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, etc., come to the scene. Thus, the century as the setting has always been a literary choice for historical novelists.

Ina Bergmann, in this book, traces and evaluates the journey of contemporary American historical novels set in nineteenth-century America. She identifies that historical novels in America have grown popular these days due to the Book clubs and TV shows that recommend titles to the voracious readers. Also, the genre is more popular nowadays among readers and critics, with more authors getting Pulitzer and National Book Awards. Bergmann takes up twelve contemporary novels produced within twenty-five years and set during the nineteenth century, produced across geographical locations for discussion. She argues that the new historical novel is a product of the new realism and new historicism guided by postmodernism in the American literary world. The book strives to answer questions like the reason behind the authors' interest in the past, especially the nineteenth century, the role these novels play in shaping the historical sensibility of the readers, their political, ethical and emotional connotation, and the impact of postmodernism on the new form etc.

The book is divided into six chapters, in which three chapters focus on the discussion of a range of historical fictions exclusively. The introductory chapter titled "History, Fiction and the USA" is the book's eye-catching and most vital part. Bergmann focuses on literary and theoretical aspects of historical fiction as a literary genre and its various aspects in this chapter. The chapter has fourteen subsections that ponder over pertinent questions, such as the fact/fiction dichotomy, master/micro-narrative, the question of veracity that arises in one's mind about historical fiction. The author argues that in the new historical novels, the potential for illusion is the most

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noteworthy and distinctive quality, and to enjoy, readers must willingly suspend their disbelief. The sub-sections on "New American Historical Fiction", "Academic History vs Pop History", "Nineteenth-Century Historical Romance as National Literature" introduce the readers to the deliberations on the reception of historical novels in America in contemporary times. She argues that the new historical fictions propagate the cultural memory of the nineteenth century, an era of immense transformation in all spheres in America.

Apart from these, Bergmann drafts the purpose and her approach in this book. Unlike Engler and Müller, who argue that there are neighbouring genres that occupy historical fiction, Bergmann treats historical fiction as a whole genre under which all these adjacent genres lie. She categorizes the novels taken up for discussion under four broad headings in the book. They are "Historical Crime Fiction", "Multi-time-level historical novels", "Historical Biofiction", "Reanimated Classics". What makes Bergmann's research unique is that she has focused mainly on female authors of historical fictions, thus bringing them to the forefront. Her study also includes representations of African American and Native American history and a nod toward feminist, queer and subaltern issues.

The core three chapters of the book that focus exclusively on the discussion of novels begin with a section of theoretical conceptions, which Bergmann refers to for the discussions of the novels. In chapter two, Bergmann focuses on the genre of Crime Fiction. The three novels she discusses in this chapter are Caleb Carr's *The Alienist* (1994), Matthew Pearl's *The Dante Club* (2003), and Erik Larson's *The Devil in the White City* (2003). Her readings of the novels draw significant parallelism between the past they represent and the contemporary present. She reads the novels as a critique of social condition, focusing on the inequality of women, immigrants, gays, and native and African Americans. She argues how social factor, childhood trauma and negative conditioning create a serial killer. Bergmann relates Pearl's novel to contemporary issues of war in the Middle East, religious, racial and sectarian conflicts. US engagement in Iraq parallels the War of Florence in the Middle Ages and the American Civil War in Pearl's novel. She focuses on the striking analogies between attacks on the World Trade Centre building and the devastating fire in the Cold Storage Building when reading Larson's novel. It reads as cultural enactment where both the events parallel and thus historical crime fiction manifests the past in the present and vice versa. She argues that these novels are instruments of socio-political critique representing society's ills then and now.

Bergmann uses Giambattista Vico's and Mitchel Foucault's notion of the spatiality of history presented in *Scienza Nuova* (1725) and *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972) to approach *The Great Divorce* (1994) by Valerie Martin, *Specimen Days* (2005) by Michael Cunningham, and *The 19th Wife* (2008) by David Ebershoff in the third chapter. She argues that these novels create parallel versions of the past, present, and future. With a revisionist approach, these novels dig out the histories of the subaltern and aim at historical lessons by interrogating nineteenth-century history. For instance, Martin's novel presents three interconnected stories that depict women's crisis through animal imageries. With a revisionist approach, Cunningham's novel focuses on the victims of the industrial revolution, the immigrants, labourers, and workers. Ebershoff's novel, Bergmann argues, is a feminist revision of historiography.

Bergmann's appreciation of women in history and women historical novelists are apparent in the fourth chapter titled, "Historical Biofiction". She argues that the historical biofiction, centring on women, started only in the 1970s. In this chapter, she takes up Lauren Belfer's *City of Light* (1999), Diane Glancy's *Stone Heart: A Novel of Sacajawea* (2003), and John May's *Poe & Fanny* (2004) for discussion. These biofictions articulate women standpoint which is often missing in the traditional patriarchal historiography. Ina argues that revisionism and recovery are the hallmarks of these biofictions. Her reading of Belfer's novel shows how the novel's publication corresponds to the centennial anniversary of Buffalo's Pan-American Exposition and President McKinley's assassination, along with feminist issues. The novel raises issues like corruption, exploitation of females, sexuality, racial and human rights, environmental issues, etc., which are topical to date. Glancy's novel is a Native American historical novel representing the neglected facts about Sacajawea, a famous American female historical character. Bergmann reads *Stone Heart* as a revision of Sacajawea in history. At the same time, May's polyphonic novel rediscovers Frances Sargent Osgood's life, works and relation with Edgar Allan Poe. But, unlike revision, Bergmann argues it's a recovery of the poet from historical oblivion.

In the penultimate chapter, Bergmann reads Christopher Bigsby's *Hester* (1994), Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* (2001), and Geraldine Brooks's *March* (2005), which she categorized as "Reanimated Classics". The Reanimated classics refer to those novels where classic nineteenth-century novels have been reanimated and reconfigured. The first novel discussed is a prequel to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), where Hester is portrayed in an altogether different light. Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* (2001) is a slave narrative where Alice Randall reanimates the black slave characters of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (1936) in good light. The novel puts the slaves at the center and challenges the hegemonic discourse of slavery and race in America. Geraldine Brooks's *March* (2005) reanimates Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868). Bergmann considers the novel a civil war novel proper where war has been criticized and its cruelties and modern day terrorism have been hinted at.

Bergmann concludes the book by deliberating upon the nineteenth-century that has framed the American national identity. She argues that the historical fictions have kept alive the cultural memory that the Americans share. The new historical fictions aim at offering historical lesson by invoking the past rather than escaping from modern-day realities. The new historical novels are genre-hybrid and have taken the shape of multi genre-memory. The fluid nature of contemporary historical novels merges the realist and postmodernist features and defers from being categorized as historical romance, historiographic metafiction or any other categorical label. She concludes that the historical fictions nowadays have a revisionist approach focusing on the subaltern from all spheres of life; for instance, the works of female authors focus on identity construction and historical representation.

This book is part of the Routledge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and forms a significant contribution. It highlights the importance of historical fictions in proliferating cultural memory in contemporary America and focuses on the historical lessons that these novels set in the nineteenth-century offer. The only limitation I observe in the book is that the authorial voice and remarks seem missing at certain places where needed. For instance, the first chapter is so loaded with viewpoints of critics and scholars that Bergmann's standpoint goes missing. Similarly, the concluding remarks of the subsequent chapters are very abrupt, sometimes repetitive and

appear not to offer a cohesive critical discussion. In addition, rather than expressing the significance of the book's argument and new insights that readers can gather from the argument, the final concluding chapter again recaps what the author has already said in the book thus far. Bearing all these, the book is a novel contribution to the field of historical fictions in general and American historical novels in particular. Moreover, it offers new insights into the novels under discussion in the book that have been read traditionally otherwise. The book is extremely helpful to those interested and researching in the field of American historical novels, nineteenth-century America, etc.

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