

## CFP “Narrative ethics and character in the representation of the past in Contemporary fiction”

Event 2: Friday 16th and Saturday 17th June 2023, University of Portsmouth UK

Guest speaker: Novelist Patricia Duncker

Following on from the success of Event 1 in Caen in October 2022, this conference further explores how the past is a key component of contemporary literature. Current years have seen an increased return of history and of the historical novel in mainstream fiction, from the historiographic metafiction of the 1990s to the “fresh commitment to what we might call the reality of history” (Boxall 2013) in 21st-century novels. Considering that character remains central to the novel, this two-day conference jointly organised by the Universities of Portsmouth and Caen wishes to address the issue of the past in contemporary fiction through the question of the choice of protagonists and their representation. Indeed, if we believe with Paul Ricoeur that narrative is the foundation of textual memory, if “narrative imagination is an essential preparation for moral interaction” since it develops compassion and understanding in the reader (Nussbaum 1998), then the question that begs to be asked is: can one write anything about the past in the name of the freedom of fiction and art or is there an ethical limit to representations of the past in contemporary fiction?

Echoing Edward Said, Robert Eaglestone evokes a contrapuntal approach to the past in fiction that “appropriates the past knowingly and rewrites tropes, narratives, identities from the past” (2019), granting a place and visibility to figures previously omitted from historical records and fictional accounts. For novelist Sarah Moss, “Historical fiction, then, is able to imagine the stories missing from popular history” (*The Irish Times* 20 July 2016). Re-creation of the past may depart from fact without any self-reflexivity to alert the unknowing reader or viewer. The stance adopted by works of fiction regarding the past, through their selection and treatment of characters, has a significant impact on the collective imagination and thus calls for scrutinising.

This conference aims to examine how and to what effect contemporary representations of the past display or ignore a commitment to ethical causes in particular through their use of character.

We welcome abstracts of 250 words outlining papers of no more than 20 minutes focusing on all aspects of this.

Particular attention could be paid to:

- Fictional vs factual ‘historical’ characters
- Setting the scene for the past
- Authors on their historical research
- New trends in depictions of certain historical trends
- Publishing pressures on authors of historical fiction
- The influence of literary prizes on historical fiction
- Narrative empathy, emotions and reader identification or alignment.

Abstracts (with a short biographical note) are to be sent to Dr Armelle Parey (ERIBIA, Université de Caen, France) at [armelle.parey@unicaen.fr](mailto:armelle.parey@unicaen.fr) and Dr Christine Berberich, University of Portsmouth, UK) at [christine.berberich@port.ac.uk](mailto:christine.berberich@port.ac.uk) by **March 10th 2023**. Notifications of acceptance or rejection will be sent within the following fortnight.