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Making history: constructing fiction from varying, and often conflicting, accounts of history

Abstract:

‘The Initiation’ is the second chapter of the historical fiction novella titled *The last statue*. The scenes depicted in the narrative are underscored by themes of love, power and war, and describe an imagined history of events that are inspired by the ecological collapse of Easter Island. Most of the island’s indigenous oral history and written artefacts disappeared when the island’s population was decimated, and scholarly theories about the physical, social, political and ecological conditions at this time continue to be contested by those in academic disciplines including anthropology, climatology, geology and archaeology. Although this wide-ranging base of information provided rich source material for developing a creative narrative, validating and using this academically controversial material, even in a fictional context, raised personal concerns about the historical authenticity of the narrative and somewhat stifled the writing process. This paper addresses how, then, does a historical fiction writer guard against potential criticism by those invested in the historically accurate account of events while, at the same time, maintain their working practice to create imaginative fiction?

Biographical note:

Denise Beckton, BA Ed (ECU), Grad Dip PH (Curtin), Grad Cert CI (CQU), has a background in public health and education and is currently a tutor in Creative Industries at Central Queensland University (Noosa campus) where she is a research higher degree candidate, writing a novel and a related dissertation. Denise is the recipient of multiple awards in the fields of education and public health and has been published in a number of journals including *TEXT* and *MC*. Her latest publication centres on teaching pedagogy in the Creative Industries field. Denise was guest editor for the recent *TEXT* special edition on Young Adult fiction and is currently an associate co-editor for the international Write4Children journal.

Keywords:

Creative work – historical fiction – author’s note

Background

‘The Initiation’ is the second chapter of the historical fiction novella titled *The Last Statue*. The scenes take place on Easter Island during the historically contentious time of the Island’s ecological collapse (circa 1700 AD), (Bahn and Flenley 2011). Most of the island’s oral history and written artefacts disappeared when the island’s population was decimated, and this void continues to be filled with contentious, and often contradictory, theories about the physical, social, political and ecological conditions at this time.

In this excerpt, Kaia, a mute slave, witnesses the initiation of a baby boy from his village. It is the same ritual that, as a child, he failed. The outcome should have sealed his fate – banishment from the island, and death – but he has no memory of what, or who, saved him. As he watches the initiation of the new baby, the answers to these questions unfold and he begins to discover his identity and the importance of his salvation.

‘The Initiation’

Two rainless seasons passed without the birth of a child in our village. Each harvest yielded less food and the sun seemed to crawl its way across the cloudless sky. The drought spread like a contagion. Plants browned and curled, and receded, like a slow flowing current across the land – filling the space with empty fields, empty stomachs and empty wombs. As though the ground was grieving the absence of new life. So, when Nika’s baby arrived safely, a collective ripple of excitement spread through the village.

The boy grew strong on Nika’s milk and held onto life like a firm little mollusc on our world. His tiny limbs were plump and round, and looked strange next to our sharp bones. Sometimes, I could hear him from my cave. He squawked for food with the persistence of a chick in a nest, but we did not mind the noise, the unfamiliar sound of healthy lungs was a welcome song. The baby was unnamed, like me, and I felt a bond with him because of it – although he would have a chance of one of his own – if he passed the initiation test.

We fooled ourselves into believing that the baby was safe, that we had hidden him well, but no one can hide from the Matatahi, and as sure as the relentless tide, the priest was drawn to the child, as if the baby was the moon itself.

Matatahi came to initiate him in the middle of the night and I woke to the menace of warning drums that signalled a trespass on our land. He was an expected but unwanted visitor; the eldest of the three most important priests on the island – the Ivi Atua priests – who, together, yielded the most powerful magic and oversaw issues of justice on the island. Everyone knew, despite the excitement and ritual of the initiation ceremony, that if the baby did not pass, Matatahi had the power to banish him from the island.

There was a time when the initiation ceremony was a formality, where proud fathers delivered babies to Matatahi with eager hands and mothers watched with confident

smiles, knowing that their child would be handed back safely. Now babies were lucky to survive long enough to be initiated and, when they did, they were given over to Matatahi with stiff and reluctant arms.

I could hear the echo of voices rise up the valley to my cave as the villagers woke to the drums and I navigated the darkness to the exit to look. The houses were dotted here and there, as though they had tumbled down the mountainside to settle haphazardly on the valley floor below. Their thatched roofs shone like dull blue stars in the moonlight.

The drums echoed from the boundary posts, sounding a relentless, and dogged, warning into the clear night sky. The light from torches made long, orange smudges across the land as guards escorted Matatahi towards the village plaza. I could see our chief Ariki's and his white-feather headdress, tinged blue by the moonlight, as he stood in front of the seven great moai statues that marked the village entrance. His strongest warriors gathered behind him and carried sharpened, stone-tipped spears by their side. Their arrowheads shone like lacquered insect shells in the flickering torchlight.

People scurried between houses and their worried murmurs rose to meet me as I snaked my way down the valley slope. I entered through the back of the plaza and hunched behind a mound of coal where I could watch the ceremony, safely hidden from view. The seven statues were solemn and silent, watching, as always, our every move. Two young warriors climbed each of them, in turn, and placed white, pupil-shaped coral into the eye sockets so that, through them, the Gods could see. Others placed torches around the edge of the plaza, enclosing the space in a soft halo of light.

Matatahi was dressed in the image of the sacred Manu bird with grey, downy feathers around his arms and head. His body was lathered from head to toe with a thick white paste made from the bird's dung. Next to Ariki, who was more than a head taller than the old priest, Matatahi looked hunched and withered, like a walking corpse. But an aura of power surrounded him, as though magic alone was moving his old bones. People might have called him fine once, handsome even but, with only one eye, it took strength now to look at him straight on. Ariki led him to the plaza where, once the ceremony began, his poor eyesight would not be an issue. The Gods would guide his way.

Matatahi walked to the statues and lay prone at the feet of the largest one – Maka, the effigy of the first scout, sent by Matua, to find our island. When he rose, some time later, he was altered, as if in a trance. He swayed and stumbled into the plaza and turned to face the villagers around him.

'The Gods have blessed this village with a newborn child and only they can determine whether he will walk with us on this land between the heavens and the underworld. Only they can decide whether he will be returned to them. It is the way of our people and, even in these dark times, keeps us strong. It appeases the Gods.'

He raised his arms to the crowd and shouted, 'It is the will of the Gods,'

The crowd muttered their reply, 'Let the will of the Gods be heard.'

Matatahi faced the statues.

‘Who presents this child to be initiated?’

Tomuku wrapped his arm around Nika’s shoulder as they both stepped forward. Her long black hair covered one side of her face, and blanketed the baby in her arms.

‘You are the parents of this boy?’

They nodded. Matatahi took the baby from Nika’s arms and held him high above his head. The baby cried and his arms flailed as he tried to balance on the pedestal of Matatahi’s hands.

‘Let this child be marked with red earth to bind him to this land, with the sacred white lines that link him to our Gods, and the black of the underworld, to protect him from harm.’

He placed his open hand over the baby’s crying eyes and the child’s sobs turned to whimpers, then silence.

‘Should the Gods deem him imperfect, he will be taken to the island of Motu Nui to be carved again.’

Tomuku closed his arm a little tighter around Nika.

‘May the Gods find him worthy of your clan,’ said Matatahi. ‘This is the will of the Gods.’

‘May the will of the Gods be heard,’ recited the crowd.

Matatahi looked at the boy in his arms and frowned, and ran his finger down the baby’s face as if trying to capture every miniature feature and placed the baby on a woven mat, in the centre of the plaza. He began to dance around the boy in ever-faster circles. The red dirt lifted and spun, and stuck to his bony legs like pollen-covered stamens. Nika strained against Tomuku’s body and he held her wrist to the ground to stop her from running to her child.

The dust hovered above the baby, like an imminent storm, then floated back down to the ground. Matatahi lifted the boy, in turn, to each of the seven statues before laying him in front of bowls of red, white and black paste. Again, the baby cried. It was a good sign; the child’s lungs would not need to be checked.

I sunk further behind the coal pile at the thought of my own failed initiation. People did not speak of it although I had heard rumours and imagine that Matatahi did not need to paint much of my body before he found my silent flaw. Some say that when Matatahi touched my throat, a coral eye fell from the socket of one of the statues. Others say it was Ariki, himself, who saved me; that he would not allow me to be banished, and sent to the island of Motu Nui. But I do not believe it, what was I to him then – or now for that matter? It is far more likely that, as a slave, I was too insignificant to bother with, and was left to fend for myself.

The baby turned his head on Matatahi’s lap in an effort to find a soft place to close his heavy eyes. Matatahi paused to check each small nub of spine then ran a spear-straight line of red paste down the baby’s back. He marked the baby’s arms and legs

with white lines and, with two fingers, he scooped black paste from the last bowl and painted a mask around the baby's eyes. He had passed the final test. Tomuku released Nika's wrist and she ran to her child.

A gentle breeze swept through the village. Women hurried into the plaza to fuss over Nika and the baby. I was about to step out of the darkness when I saw Ariki walking towards me. I waited behind the coal pile, expecting him to discover me at any moment, but he did not and I heard his voice – someone had crossed his path. I peered from my hiding place and saw Matatahi's thin, dust-covered legs.

'We have much to thank you for Matatahi. This is the first baby to be born in our village since the rain stopped. We are grateful that he is healthy.'

'I am glad for you,' said Matatahi. 'Good outcomes are rare these days.'

Matatahi looked even more tired and shrunken than before the ceremony, as though the weight of his duties had withered his frame even more.

'I must admit, Ariki, I have come to despise these rituals which, more often than not, end badly. I have tried to put an end to them but any suggestion of change is overruled by the other Ivi Atua priests who are stuck in the past, in a time when we could afford tradition. What am I to do?' he asked.

Ariki placed a consoling hand on his shoulder and Matatahi looked past the crowd of women to the shadowy trees behind the plaza.

'I have delivered more babies to the island of Motu Nui in my time than I care to remember, Ariki,' sighed Matatahi. 'With the lack of rain and failing crops, we cannot afford to lose our young, if the practice continues there will be no young to replace the old and dying.'

'I agree with your concerns, Matatahi. Things are difficult everywhere on the island, even here in Ahu Akivi, and we are luckier than most. The valley soil is fertile and our local spring, together with water from mount Terevaka, supplies enough drinking water for the needs of the village. Even still, our crops have suffered and sometimes we barely have enough food to feed the village. The Northern tribes are peaceful, and we are all mindful to share our resources, but I worry about what will happen if the drought continues and water becomes scarcer.'

'You are wise to be concerned, Ariki – the south is not faring as well as the north. Although it is true that Rano Kau lake is substantial, and unlikely to run out of water, it is on Orongo land, and Koro, as leader of the Orongo, claims ownership to it.'

Ariki removed his headdress and rubbed his temple.

'Surely Koro would not deprive the Tupahotu and Ngaure's clans access to the lake, it is the only real source of fresh water close to them.'

Matatahi shrugged.

'I have just come from the south to your village and, yes, Koro has given neighbouring tribes access to lake Rano Kau, but I fear that it comes at a cost.'

'A cost?'

‘As you know Ariki, the southern rock-strewn homelands of the Tupahotu and Ngaure are the least fertile on the island. The soil is so coarse, and thin, that the tips of black bedrock poke through the dirt. Their nomadic lifestyle caters for this, to some extent, but they do rely on trade between clans and Orongo; and to lake Rano Kau, for water.’

‘Yes, but, this has never been a problem before,’ said Ariki. ‘Their hunting tools are unparalleled and their hunting and fishing skills have always enabled them to exchange food, water and the right to hunt on neighbouring lands. Has this changed?’

‘I believe it has. I have heard worrying rumours that Koro has been refusing to trade with either the Tupahotu or Ngaure tribes.’

‘But why?’

‘Without access to fresh water or crops, the Orongo are now in a better negotiating position, and the clans are at his mercy.’

‘But what would Koro want to trade that he does not already have access to?’

‘I do not know, but things have changed. I have seen it myself, during my last visit to Orongo. The Tupahotu and the Ngaure now live among the Orongo, in the village, rather than their usual nomadic shelters, and Tupa and Haroa, the chiefs of Tupahotu and Ngaure, follow Koro’s every step and act on his every will.’

Matatahi paused and watched as the crowd thinned around Nika and the baby.

‘Koro does not engage in negotiations unless it is guaranteed to favour him,’ he said, ‘so what have the Tupahotu and Ngaure agree to trade?’

‘I do not know Ariki, but I believe the naming ceremony comes at a good time. Koro will arrive, along with the other tribes, for the celebration. It will be interesting to see what comes from it.’

Ariki moved closer to Matatahi so that I had to concentrate to hear their words.

‘I have heard other rumours, Matatahi – talk about why the Gods are punishing us. People say that it is because the boy still walks among us, that his presence here reminds the Gods of his father’s treason, that he should have been killed along with his parents.’

Matatahi sighed.

‘It is far more likely that we are the ones being punished for discounting the prophecy as treason, simply because the boy’s father was not of royal lineage. Had we listened, and taken notice of the prophecy that he foresaw, we might not be in the position we are in now.’

Coldness spread down my body as if I had just dived into the icy ocean currents. I knew that the conversation was secret business, taboo business that I should not be privy to, but something held me to the ground – told me that it was important for me to stay – and I could not pull myself away.

‘You need to quash these rumours Ariki, before you lose the trust of your people. Hunger and uncertainty makes people tired and angry; idle talk can be as dangerous as a drought, it makes people unpredictable.’

‘Yes but what can I do? Any attempt to quell the talk, or punish villagers for gossip, would only create more, and serve to create the unrest that you feel is so important to prevent.’

A deep crease formed on Matatahi’s brow, adding another line to his already crumpled face.

‘You have only one choice Ariki – you must remove the boy from the village.’

Ariki’s arms tensed and his hands curled into fists.

‘I will not hurt the boy, Matatahi. I did not risk so much to save him, so many years ago, only to see him killed now.’

‘I am not suggesting that you kill the boy, Ariki, rather, that you remove him from the village until the situation calms down. The new baby’s naming ceremony will be a happy time, and your clan will be celebrating. Send the boy on an errand, and have him return in time for the naming ceremony – in two moons. The villagers will be busy with preparations for the feast and will have forgotten about the rumours by the time he returns.’

Matatahi clasped Ariki’s shoulder, the way a father might comfort a son, and they walked together to the far side of the plaza. They had gone but I could not will my legs to move. I knew nothing of prophecies, or the killings they spoke about, but their words triggered faint memories that were tucked away in a forgotten recess of my mind, memories of a different life; a life that was filled with sounds of birdsong and laughter, and the warmth and love of family. I somehow knew, instinctively, that this life and the boy that Ariki spoke of, were one and the same. And I knew I was that boy.

Research statement

Research background

Trease posits a ‘true’ historical novel as one ‘in which a faithful recreation of minds and motives is achieved’ (1972). Griffiths asserts this interrelationship is part of the ‘intriguing dance between fiction and history’ (2015). While some novelists such as Mantell argue that ‘all rules must give way before the simple need to communicate’ (2012), many others have been criticised for their fictional interpretations of historical events.

Research contribution

This creative work exemplifies the difficulties that fiction writers experience when there is limited and/or disputed historical information from which to draw creative inspiration. Authors of historically informed fiction often use what Tess Brady terms a ‘bowerbird’ approach (2000) to sift through versions of past events, and this speaks to the moral and cultural implications surrounding the writing of historical fiction. In this excerpt, these concerns inform the use of literary devices such as irony, in that the mute narrator speaks for the vanished peoples.

Research significance

This creative work contributes to the current discourses around the fictionalisation of history (Cosgrove 2015; De Matos 2015; Griffiths 2015; Grenville 2005).

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