

BOŻENA KUČAŁA: Of what is passing: Present-tense narration in the contemporary historical novel

Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2023. 282 pp. ISBN 9788323374770;
e-ISBN 9788323374763

DOI: 10.31577/WLS.2025.17.4.14

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“Before this can happen the king has to talk to Katherine; he can’t always be hunting somewhere else, while she waits for him, patient, implacable, his place set for supper in her private apartments. It is June 1527...” (Hilary Mantel *Wolf Hall*, 2009, 73)

This passage from one of the most celebrated recent historical novels in English reads as unexceptional, to experienced readers, though on reflection it seems illogical. It is *not* 1527, nor was it 1527 when Hilary Mantel wrote these words. It *was* 1527 when Henry was dealing with a no-longer-wanted wife. *Wolf Hall* is one of the texts Bożena Kučala focuses on in *Of What Is Passing: Present-Tense Narration in the Contemporary Historical Novel*, a group she identifies as “novels which are situated at the intersection of two tendencies in contemporary fiction: the evolution of the historical novel and the rise of present-tense narration” (11).

Here is a topic that has needed a thorough, theoretically subtle, richly exemplified and lucid treatment, and Kučala, who is a specialist in the neo-Victorian novel, has supplied that need.

She begins with a lengthy discussion of “Temporality in Narrative: Mimetic and Anti-Mimetic Approaches”. Supplying many examples, she discusses theoretical insights into temporality in fiction by others who have dealt with the topic, for instance, Meir Sternberg’s treatment of surprise, curiosity and suspense and their relationship to temporality, or Gerard Genette’s discussion of slowdowns and accelerations, as the time

of reading and the time of the action do or do not coincide. In the category of anti-mimetic approaches, Kučala includes circular narration, backward narration, and the rare hypothetical narration.

The role of verb tenses in relation to narrative’s temporal status is then addressed and here, as throughout the book, the many illustrative passages reinforce the points the author makes as well as demonstrating the persuasively wide range of primary reading on which her analysis is founded.

“The prevalent view,” she writes, “is that the past tense is the natural choice for narrative since its semantic value reflects the real-life temporal disjunction between experience and the narration of it. Indeed, the supposed inevitability of this tense is often taken for granted” (54). In contemporary English-language fiction, it should be said, the past tense has not felt inevitable for quite some time, as it often seems that present-tense narration is the distinguishing feature of stories written by creative writing students. But her focus is on the historical novel, in which this change has been much less pronounced.

As for why authors use the present tense in fiction, Kučala notes the somewhat traditional suggestion that it adds vividness or immediacy, citing Charles Dickens in illustration, but she notes Dorrit Cohn’s commonsense observation that the use of the present tense for vividness requires it to be intermittent. Its deviation from the overall pattern of past-tense narration produces its defamiliarizing effect.

Having addressed the typologies of others who have offered explanations for the use of the present tense, the author provides her own, dividing such novels among those written almost entirely in the present tense (for example, Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* trilogy about Thomas Cromwell, 2009–2020) and those which mix the present with other tenses; these are mostly present tense novels with past tense embeddedness (e.g. Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, 1996) and – very rarely – combinations of present and future. This tripartite division among times and tenses shows the brilliance of her chosen title from Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" which speaks "of what is past, or passing, or to come" (William Butler Yeats: *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 1933, 224).

In every case the author provides a deep and illuminating analysis of the novel's structure and function as an example of present-tense historical fiction. One revelation is the not at all well-known novel that demonstrates how present and future tense can in-

tersect, George Garrett's *The Death of the Fox* (1971).

In a summary comment, Kucala identifies present-tense narration in historical fiction as part of "the intention to offer the contemporary reader an illusion of immediate access to the past" (245) which has characterized historical novels from the beginning.

Of What Is Passing: Present-Tense Narration in the Contemporary Historical Novel is a rich book, thought-provoking and subtle. The subject is an important one, and Božena Kucala's wide and sensitive reading and thoughtful analysis give it the attention it needs. Anyone who reads historical novels – or really, anyone who has a curious interest in how fiction works – will benefit from reading the book.

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