

Believing the Unbelievable:
Supernatural Elements in Historical Fiction
by
Melissa Gansler

Believing the Unbelievable:
Supernatural Elements in Historical Fiction

by

Melissa Gansler

A thesis presented for the B.A. degree

with Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Winter 2012

For my father, who sparked my interest in both literature and history.

Acknowledgements

I first want to thank my thesis adviser, Eileen Pollack, for her endless support and guidance. I am so thankful for her insight in shaping this thesis and her commitment to making this experience a meaningful one. Eileen not only taught me how to refine my writing, but also how to ask pointed and thoughtful questions. I remain inspired by her work and am grateful to have had the opportunity to work with her.

I also want to thank Jennifer Wenzel for her insightful comments and commitment to helping me with this project. Professor Wenzel has guided me through all of the steps of this project, and she offered support to the entire cohort over the course of the year. I admire her enthusiasm and attentiveness to our work and sincerely thank her for all of her efforts.

I am thankful for all of the professors who have inspired me. I especially want to thank Lucy Hartley for introducing me to literary theory and pushing me to write to the best of my ability. I also thank John Rubadeau for teaching me the art of rewriting.

I am endlessly grateful to the members of the 2011-2012 Honors Thesis cohort. I appreciate your support, advice, quick-wit, and ability to make me laugh. I am so thankful to have gone through this process with you all and for your valuable feedback. Thank you for sharing your work with me as well.

I am indebted to my family for supporting me in all of my endeavors and offering words of encouragement. You are always there for me, and thank you for believing in me. I couldn't have completed this project without you. I also thank my friends for always making me smile.

Lastly, I thank Elizabeth Kostova and Kurt Vonnegut whose works inspired me to write this thesis.

Abstract

Historical fiction is a literary genre that tells stories depicting the past, often set among actual events or an actual period of history. Authors can choose among a wide range of options when writing fiction that purports to be historical. Some novels alter the course of history while others seek to factually reflect the times they describe. This thesis seeks to identify a subgenre of historical fiction that has been neglected, that of supernatural historical fiction.

This subgenre may initially sound problematic. Historical novels with supernatural elements attribute agency to some force that is beyond scientific understanding or the laws of nature, which undermines historical and consensual reality. History, after all, is a field concerned with facts and the chain of events that has led to the present. The subgenre of supernatural historical fiction is unique because it unites two seemingly contradictory topics. The supernatural in this subgenre, however, serves a purpose that surpasses mere entertainment. Through analysis of Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, I hope to demonstrate that the supernatural is an effective device for achieving literary truth.

Chapter One of this thesis will define the subgenre of supernatural historical fiction. To do this, I must address the precursors to the subgenre and genres of overlap. I will first discuss the rise of the novel and its emphasis on realism, relying on the work of the literary historian Ian Watt. I also discuss magical realism as a genre that greatly overlaps with the topic of this thesis. After discerning what is notable about supernatural historical fiction and the expectations of this subgenre, I will analyze how the supernatural works within my primary texts.

Chapter Two addresses the role of the supernatural in *The Historian*. In her novel, Kostova brings the historical figure Vlad Tepes (also known as Dracula) back to life, asking us to consider whether history or the supernatural is more horrifying. Chapter Three focuses on Vonnegut's novel. The historical crux of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the actual firebombing of Dresden in 1945. The novel details not only the fictional character Billy Pilgrim's experience as he witnesses the terrible events in Dresden, but also his experience traveling through time and visiting the imaginary planet of Tralfamadore. Although the supernatural works differently in each of my two primary texts, these novels ultimately both depict the evils of real historical events and human nature.

The Conclusion of this thesis addresses the successes, as well as the pitfalls, of this subgenre. The texts of supernatural historical fiction are entertaining, but they also have much to teach their readers. The intermingling of history and the supernatural ultimately commentates on our world and not that of the imaginary.

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Staking out the Genre Field.....	7
I. Realism in the Novel.....	9
II. Realism and the Fantastic.....	13
III. Supernatural Historical Fiction.....	17
Chapter Two: The Supernatural vs. The Historical in <i>The Historian</i>	21
I. The Structure of <i>The Historian</i>	21
II. Making Sense of History and the Supernatural.....	23
III. History vs. The Supernatural.....	32
Chapter Three: Time travel, Truth, and Tralfamadorians in <i>Slaughterhouse-Five</i>	37
I. The Supernatural in Vonnegut's World.....	37
II. Billy Pilgrim's Journey Through Time.....	41
III. So it goes.....	46
Conclusion: Supernatural Historical Fiction and its Future.....	53
Works Consulted.....	57

Introduction

The line between literature and history is often a wobbling one.
--Elizabeth Kostova¹

What happens when we write about history? In the phrase above, Elizabeth Kostova emphasizes the interwoven nature of literature and history. The boundaries between the two fields may not be as distinct as we would like them to be. According to Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, history is a “subject primarily concerned with the crafting of narratives,” and much of what we know about the past originates in written works (98). Writing about history brings the past alive through the telling of the story. The past though is never completely lost, since “what allows historians to historicize the medieval or the ancient is that very fact these worlds are never completely lost” (Chakrabarty 112). Indeed, the “writing of history must implicitly assume a plurality of times existing together, a disjuncture of the present with itself” making “humans from any other period and region ... always in some sense our contemporaries: that would have to be the condition under which we can even begin to treat them as intelligible to us” (Chakrabarty 112). Historical narratives depict the past of the world that we too inhabit, depicting our collective history. What happens then, when the line between history and literature is blurred?

Historical fiction is a literary genre that tells stories depicting the past. Critic Thomas Mallon writes that novels of such genre “consist of plausible stories that have been grafted onto enduring historical facts” yet are populated with fictional people or set in fictional places (n.p). That this genre is considered to be “fiction” means that these novels are not fact, or, solely fact. Rather, historical fiction leaves room for the use of the imagination and exaggeration in the

¹ Elizabeth Kostova, *The Historian* (New York: Little Brown, 2005), 288.

narrative. A historical novel cannot be defined as an authentic document or transcript, yet may draw on or contain such documents. Yet the literary effect of realism often dupes us into believing it is “real,” particularly when readers recognize their own world within the world of fiction. Historical fiction, then, is a complicated genre. It grounds itself in history, in the actual chain of cause and effect that has led to the present, yet its status as fiction relieves it of representing facts, or facts alone. There is room for experimentation in this genre. The author is free to take liberties of his/her own, transforming the past in a narrative rather than merely constructing it as Chakrabarty discusses. Authors have various choices when they write fiction that claims to be historical, and these choices represent a broad spectrum within the genre of historical fiction.

Along this spectrum, some novels radically rewrite the course of history, or seek to reflect accurately the times they describe. The subgenre of alternate-history-fiction, for instance, “has the power not only to retouch individual destinies but to save entire civilizations,” changing the course of history (Mallon n.p.). Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*, for example, imagines that Charles Lindbergh won the 1940 presidential election rather than Franklin D. Roosevelt, while in Monica Ali’s *Untold Story*, Princess Diana fakes her own death to start a new life. On the other hand, a historical novel like Edward Jones’s *The Known World* depicts the actual conditions of slavery in an imaginary town in Manchester County, Virginia.

The subcategory of historical fiction on which I will be focusing is one that I find to be captivating and problematic all at once – historical novels with supernatural elements. Rather than changing the course of history or fabricating a particular setting within a familiar chronology, this subgenre asks us to cope with that which is impossible – the supernatural, which can be defined as some force that is beyond scientific understanding or the laws of

nature.² This category may initially sound paradoxical. Supernatural forces undermine historical and consensual reality. The field of history is concerned with facts and the chain of cause and effect that shapes time periods. Incorporating the supernatural in a historical novel breaks all of these rules for most readers – the supernatural lacks validity and cannot be proven or substantiated by evidence. But I will argue that the supernatural serves a purpose in these novels that surpasses mere entertainment or excitement.

In this thesis, I will first delineate a subgenre of historical fiction that has been neglected. I will refer to this subgenre as supernatural historical fiction. Defining the subgenre, though, is not enough. Historical fiction that incorporates the supernatural gives rise to many questions, such as why write fiction in this manner at all? The two texts I will be discussing that exemplify this subcategory are Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. What works about these novels and what does not, what problems arise? Both novels incorporate that which is implausible, the supernatural. Yet at their core these novels retain a persisting degree of realism.³ Realism is the literary technique that conventionally gives historical fiction historical verisimilitude. Indeed, readers recognize a familiar world in these novels, the world that precedes the readers' present. So what happens when the supernatural and realism are placed side by side? Problems indeed arise, but a major component of the thesis will focus on how effective the unconventional, supernatural devices of this genre are. Breaking away from convention, after all, is by no means negative, just different. The realistic novel conveys verisimilitude but is no more "true" than any other genre (Watt 31). Realism is a

² Although there are varying interpretations, I will be defining the supernatural in this thesis as that which is "beyond scientific understanding or the laws of nature." (*New Oxford English Dictionary*)

³ In the following chapter, there will be a discussion in length of Ian Watt's description of formal realism in *The Rise of the Novel*.

literary effect that does not validate the contents of a novel as reflecting the world of which the reader too belongs. The supernatural, I believe, can be just as effective at achieving literary truth as the realistic novel.

The supernatural, though, works differently within each of my two primary texts, so, following the discussion of my subgenre, I will dedicate chapters to each book, starting with Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian*. This novel is a multilayered journey into the past, an adventure into the pasts of fictional characters but also the factual histories of cities and nations. A historical figure appears in the text, Vlad Tepes, "the 'Impaler' of Wallachia, a feudal lord in the Carpathians who tormented his subjects and prisoners of war in unbelievably cruel ways" (Kostova 12). Vlad Tepes was an actual ruler in the fifteenth century, the prince of Wallachia, who came to be known as Dracula in folklore. Actual history is not only at stake here, but literary history as well. In Kostova's novel, Vlad Tepes remains alive, existing as an "undead" vampire since the time of his rule. This novel assumes that the reader will accept the presence of the supernatural. At no point does the novel question whether the supernatural can exist, but rather focuses on the question of how the characters react.

The Historian takes us across Europe in search of Vlad's tomb; along the way, there are confrontations with vampires and battles with silver daggers, but also much discussion of historical figures such as Stalin and Hitler and the bloody events that constitute Eastern European history. Kostova completed ten years of research while working on the novel. Rather than focus on what is fact and fiction within the novel, I propose to ask: Why did Kostova use a supernatural horror for her novel? Which is more horrifying, the supernatural elements or the

history?⁴ I believe the role of the supernatural in this novel is to raise questions about the believability of history.

The next chapter will discuss Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The historical crux of this novel is the firebombing of Dresden in February 1945. Vonnegut himself witnessed and survived this firebombing as an American Infantry Scout and Prisoner of War. Vonnegut thus includes his own history in Dresden, and his biography coincides with world history. The novel details the fictional character Billy Pilgrim's experience in Dresden, but also Pilgrim's experience time traveling and being taken captive to the planet Tralfamadore. The supernatural is thus rendered differently in this text than in *The Historian*. Instead of invoking a historical figure with a factual basis like Kostova, Vonnegut deals with made-up planets and aliens, concepts that are truly out of this world. This novel, however, does not assume the acceptance of the supernatural. Billy Pilgrim incurs trauma during the war and survives a plane crash in which he hits his head. The supernatural is never fully attributed to these occurrences; the reader is allowed to decide for him/herself what to believe. What further distinguishes this novel from *The Historian* is that the supernatural works in tandem with the historical to convey an anti-war message and the notion that human beings are capable of great evil.

Both novels ultimately depict the evils of history, utilizing the supernatural to demonstrate so. The culminating chapter of this thesis will discuss both texts; how successful are these novels at invoking the supernatural? Are there aspects of the genre that succeed under certain circumstances and not others? I hope to demonstrate that this is a subgenre that demands literary discussion. These novels are entertaining and exciting, but they also have much to teach

⁴ I owe much gratitude to Professor Eileen Pollack for helping me clarify these questions central to my discussion of this novel.

about the world we live in. Indeed, these impossible depictions of the past illuminate the possibilities of our present.

Chapter One

Staking out the Genre Field

Genre shapes the way we read literary texts, interpret language, and approach different works. A genre can loosely be defined as “a category of artistic composition, as in music or literature, characterized by similarities in form, style, or subject matter” (*New Oxford English Dictionary*). In his book *Genre*, John Frow writes that generic structure “both enables and restricts meaning, and is a basic condition for meaning to take place” (10). A genre is a framework for constructing meaning, specifying “certain kinds of tone and certain effects of verisimilitude: the presentation of the text is in a ‘literal’ or a ‘figurative’ mode, its manner is elevated or modest or somewhere in between, and a certain kind of subject matter corresponds to these stylistic choices” (74). Generic categories, therefore, are crucial, functioning at the level of semiosis and reader expectations. Frow asserts that “our experience of a text always is organised in advance – by expectations about what *kind* of text it is, if nothing else” (27). The expectations and mindset with which we approach a text can hugely shape our understanding of it.

Genre influences the experience of both the author and reader. Indeed, as philosopher Tzvetan Todorov asserts, ““on the one hand, authors write in function of (which does not mean in agreement with) the existing generic system ... on the other hand, readers read in function of the generic system, with which they are familiar thanks to criticism, schools, the book distribution system, or simply by hearsay”” (qtd. in Frow 69). Genre influences the way we read a text, functioning at the level of creating “effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility” (Frow 2). Frow gives an example of how genre functions by citing that genres of discourse “set within a recognisable world,” such as historical fiction, are distinguishable in that

the thematic content will be kinds of action, the kinds of actors who

perform them, and the significance that accrues to actions and actors.

Actions will be of different kinds: they may be world-historical occurrences, or sustained adventures, or one-off events; they will have different sorts of duration and intensity, and actors will be recognisable characters, human or non-human, belonging to the genres more or less limited repertoire of character-types. Together, actions and actors form a world with a particular organisation of space and time and a particular mode and degree of plausibility: it will be presented as historically true, or as possible, or as probable. (Frow 76)

As discussed in the Introduction, readers expect historical fiction novels to tell “plausible stories that have been grafted onto enduring historical facts” (Mallon n.p.). Historical fiction presents a recognizable world and is expected to maintain a degree of plausibility, typically representing “world-historical occurrences” as described in the quote above. This does not mean, however, that all historical fiction novels fulfill this expectation. Furthermore, not all novels fall neatly within particular categories, and authors are not obligated to cater to a reader’s expectation. A genre may be defined as a “category,” but these categories are not concrete, rather, they are quite messy. In every system, “principles are mixed, and there are anomalies and ambiguities which the system sorts out as best it can” (Frow 52). A text, therefore, “is never fully defined by ‘its’ genre,” for “even the simplest of genres ... has the capacity to cite other genres, or to parody them, or to incorporate them, or to reflect upon its own structure” (17 and 23). The boundaries between genres are fluid and not fixed. Indeed, I will be identifying a subgenre that combines aspects of familiar genres in a distinctive way. First, I must touch upon

the novel and its emphasis on realism, a fundamental precursor to supernatural historical fiction. The genre of the realist novel itself exemplifies how various genres can be woven together.

I. Realism in the Novel

The novel represents a “fusion of other genres” (Frow 44). Frow cites theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s description of the novel as “incorporating such genres as the confession, the diary, the letter, travel notes, and biography ... Each of these genres possesses its own verbal and semantic forms for assimilating various aspects of reality. The novel, indeed, utilizes these genres precisely because of their capacity, as well worked-out forms, to assimilate reality in words” (qtd. in Frow 44). Ian Watt, in *The Rise of the Novel*, details how the novel distinguished itself from previous fiction in the eighteenth century through the way it presented reality. As a genre, the novel is concerned with the effect of verisimilitude, or “the appearance of being true or real” (*New Oxford English Dictionary*). Readers of the eighteenth century sought texts that conveyed the familiar, or “the impression of fidelity to human experience” through works that focus on individual experiences set in a recognizable world (Watt 13). The individual experience was believed “to replace collective tradition as the ultimate arbiter of reality” (14). It is no surprise then, that the novel places great emphasis on realism. The realism of the novel does not depend on “the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it” (11).

The emergence of this literary genre followed the “rise of a more objective study of history and therefore of a deeper sense of the difference between the past and present” (Watt 24). The objective study of history is significant because it pervades the novel, and the novel at its birth is linked to this new approach to history. The novel’s plot is notable for its “use of past experience as the cause of present action: a causal connection operating through time replaces

the reliance of earlier narratives on disguises and coincidences and this tends to give the novel a much more cohesive structure” (22). The novel relies on an understanding of time delineated by the past and present, and events working in a chain of cause and effect. Indeed, a new conception of time becomes the shaping force in the novel.

Time, in ancient, mediaeval, and renaissance literature, “is certainly very different from that in the novel” (Watt 22-23). Classical works “focus attention ... on the supremely timeless fact of death; their role is to overwhelm our awareness of daily life so that we shall be prepared to face eternity” (23). In contrast to classical works, the novel concerns itself with the “detailed depiction of the concerns of everyday life” (22-23). Realism is the literary effect of a representation that is recognizable from the standpoint of everyday life. Depicting everyday life relies on “power over the time dimension” (22). The novel begins to reflect the world that actually exists, that is familiar to its readers. This focus on the familiar world means that readers will more readily notice when reality is misrepresented.

To exemplify the importance of the time dimension, Watt cites the work of Daniel Defoe. Watt acknowledges that "It is true that the time scales of his novels are sometimes both contradictory in themselves, and inconsistent with their pretended historical setting, but the mere fact that such objections arise is surely a tribute to the way the characters are felt by the reader to be rooted in the temporal dimension" (24). Readers of the eighteenth century recognized that novels grounded themselves in the world that they too belonged to, guided by the force of time. An awareness of time meant an accompanied awareness of the discrepancies in a novelist's portrayal of it. Watt further expands on the contradictory notion of time in Defoe's novel by explaining, "We obviously could not think of making such objections seriously to Sidney's *Arcadia* or *The Pilgrim's Progress*; there is not enough evidence of the reality of time for any

sense of discrepancies to be possible. Defoe does give us such evidence" (24). Furthermore, "at his best," Defoe "convinces us completely that his narrative is occurring at a particular place and at a particular time" (24). Defoe's work exemplifies the emphasis on particularity in this literary genre. Indeed, "the characters of the novel can only be individualised if they are set in a background of particularised time and place" (21). Space, after all, "is the necessary correlative of time" (26).

Watt cites the novelist Samuel Richardson to exemplify the emphasis on the particularity of space crucial to the novel. Richardson "added a new dimension to the representation of reality" since the "pace of the narrative was slowed down by minute description to something very near that of actual experience" (Watt 25). Richardson literally tries to simulate reality through the pace of his words. "Pace" relates to the way we move through space and how we actually interact with the world. Watt explains the emphasis on pace as having an affect analogous to that of the close-up in film, offering a detailed depiction of the space a character inhabits. Knowledge of a particular space helps ground us in reality; "we cannot easily visualise any particular moment of existence without setting it in its spatial context" (26). Immersing characters in a physical setting had a greater purpose, that of creating verisimilitude.

Verisimilitude is a literary effect; it is the appearance of being true or real and the core of realism. According to Michael McKeon in *The Origins of the English Novel*, verisimilitude creates the effect of a work being "history-like, 'true' to ... external reality" (120). The novelist sought to create a text that "purports to be an authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals ... the adaptation of prose style to give an air of total authenticity" (Watt 27). Watt's words are carefully chosen here, the prose style gives the novel "an air of total authenticity." An air of total authenticity, however, does not mean the prose actually describes something "real" or

"true." It is certainly plausible for a novelist to specifically describe a time and place that has no actual existence; the prose describes something that *might* exist. The prose style that enables this mode of description is "clear and easy" and "much better adapted to the realistic novel than had been available before" (26). The language of the novel refers to a world outside of itself, that which is familiar or easily imaginable to the reader.

In sum, the novel "presents us, essentially, with a developing but unplanned aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places" (Watt 31). Watt's most useful analogy in expressing the novel's desire to report the truth is that of a jury in a court of law. He explains that the expectations of a jury and "those of the novel reader coincide in many ways: both want to know 'all the particulars of a given case - the time and place of the occurrence; both must be satisfied as to the identities of the parties concerned, and will refuse to accept evidence about anyone called Sir Toby Belch or Mr. Badman ... and they also expect the witnesses to tell the story 'in his own words'" (31). These are highly specific demands, and the premise underlying Watt's comparison of a reader to a jury is that both parties must be swayed by evidence. These demands rely on believability, whether the identities and setting of the novel are plausible. These demands also constitute the convention of formal realism.

Formal realism relies on all the tenets outlined above that define the novel, and constitutes the "premise ... that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and is therefore under an obligation to satisfy its readers" through particularities and details and referential language (Watt 32). Realism is thus merely the appearance of being real. Watt clarifies that "Formal realism is, of course, like the rules of evidence, only a convention; and there is no reason why the report on human life which is presented by it should be in fact any

truer than those presented through the very different conventions of other literary genres" (32). What formal realism does allow is "a more immediate imitation of individual experience set in its temporal and spatial environment than do other literary forms" (32). This immediate and recognizable experience can be highly persuasive. Indeed, readers find "in the novel the literary form which most closely satisfies their wishes for a close correspondence between life and art" (33). This close correspondence meant the novel bred familiarity, and also a pleasure in recognizing this familiarity in a text. Readers expect familiarity in the novel, which bred other genres predicated on European realism. The genre utilizing realism that bears most significance in this thesis is that of magical realism.

II. Realism and the Fantastic

Magical realism is a genre that sounds paradoxical, much like the subgenre this thesis seeks to define. If realism is concerned with replicating the world that we inhabit, where does the supernatural fit in? Historical fictions that incorporate the supernatural constitute a subgenre that overlaps and bears much relation to magical realism. "Magic," according to Wendy B. Faris in her article "Scheherazade's Children," can be defined as "something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them" (163). The magic of these texts thus makes them seem removed from everyday life, which is the terrain of realist fiction. This genre, then, involves the supernatural. Magic removes the novel from a representation that is recognizable from the standpoint of everyday life, violating the expectations of realism expressed in the genre's title. Faris describes magical realism as combining "realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed"

(163). The “magic” in these novels is not presented to the reader as problematic, but rather as ordinary within the parameters of the novel’s world.

Realism was the precursor to magical realism. The "magical" aspect of this genre was an act of Latin American literature establishing its identity and distinguishing itself from European realism (Faris, "Scheherazade's Children" 164-65). Michael Valdez Moses, in his article "Magical Realism at World's End," writes, "The constitutive feature of magical realism is a powerfully appealing hybridism of the realistic and the fabulous" (109). These novels combine two seeming opposites, and “in terms of the text, magical things ‘really’ do happen” (Faris, "Scheherazade's Children" 163). Faris, in another work entitled *Ordinary Enchantments*, further explains that the magical elements are woven into the text so that they rarely cause “any comment by narrators or characters, who model such an acceptance for their readers” (8). The “magic” in this genre may still shock readers, but it is “real” within the fictional world of the text. This genre oscillates between the world that is familiar to readers and that of the fantastic.

To exemplify how this genre works, Michael Valdez Moses cites Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This novel "is at once a realistic novel, a family chronicle ... and a fabulous tale of marvelous events that would seem more akin to a Catholic saint's life, a biblical parable ... an Amerindian myth, African American folk tale, or fanciful family story passed down orally" (Moses 109). This description exemplifies Frow's notion of the flexibility of genre categories. Neither the genre of the realistic novel, nor the fantastic, can adequately define Marquez's novel. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* "neither settles comfortably into the secure realism of George Eliot or Gustave Flaubert, nor faithfully inhabits the realm of pure fantasy we associate with the works of J.R.R. Tolkien or Lewis Carroll" (109). Realism is never entirely abandoned in magical realist novels, but the magical events "cannot be assimilated

to a rationalistic worldview," making the identification of a new genre category necessary (109). Latin American novelists built upon already established genres in a distinctive way. Magical realism grew out of European realism, but it is also indebted to European romanticism.

The tension between the real and the fantastic in magical realism is "already to be found in a number of romantic works," such as the works of Heinrich von Kleist (Moses 119). According to Valdez Moses, this link is crucial because the historical romance and the magical realist novel "encourage their readers to indulge in a nostalgic longing for and an imaginary return to a world that is past, or passing away" (106). The magical realist novel depicts a world that is modern and inescapable, but encourages readers to "indulge in a nostalgic longing for and an imaginary return to a world that is past, or passing away" (106). The emphasis on the past also links this genre to historical fiction. Magical realism relies on the "continued felt distance between the reader and the natural world" (118).⁵

Like the supernatural in historical fiction, magic violates the rules of the objective study of history and the realist novel. The "irreducible magic often means disruption of the ordinary logic of cause and effect," but much of this genre is "an analogue for the atrocities of persecution and scapegoating in recent history" (Faris, "Scheherazade's Children" 168). Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, for instance, is a direct response to slavery and its aftermath (180). Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* are magical realist works that incorporate actual historical events. Wendy Faris suggests that the normative logic of cause and effect no longer enables us to adequately react to history. She writes, the "enormity of the historical events, the human suffering involved in them, and the dissatisfaction we feel at the traditional ways such phenomena have been integrated into cultural logic, cause us to question that logic as

⁵ By natural world, Michael Valdez Moses means the premodern world.

a result of these new fictional arrangements" (168). Maybe breaking the rules of logic is necessary to convey the recent horrors of the past.

The tension between the magical and the real plays with the notion that the “real” may not be so different from the “fantastic.” As Faris explains, "in light of reversals of logic and irreducible elements of magic, the real as we know it may be made to seem amazing or even ridiculous. This is often because the reactions of ordinary people to these magical events reveal behaviors that we recognize and that disturb us" ("Scheherazade's Children" 168). The magical may lead to recognition of the familiar and aspects of magic may bear an eerie affinity to reality. In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, for instance, the narrator Saleem describes Dacca under Indian occupation. Saleem witnesses “many things which were not true, which were not possible, because our boys would not could not behave so badly” (qtd. in Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 12). In reality, the boys *were* behaving that badly, behavior so bad Saleem thinks it cannot be true. The historical aspects of this text seem impossible but are actually factual. Normally, it is magic that we relate to the implausible. Reality, particularly historical reality, may be more shocking than the fantastic in these texts. The “magic” and the “real” are further intertwined in that this genre utilizes realistic descriptions to create a “fictional world that resembles the one we live in” but also "entices us with entrancing – magic – details” (Faris, "Scheherazade's Children" 168). Magical realist authors utilize the techniques of realism: “descriptions detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world – this is the realism in magical realism” (168). Still, “the magical nature of those details is a clear departure from realism” (168).

The magical aspects of the text are never fully assimilated into realism. A narrative may be written in such a way that “the natural appears strange and the supernatural appears

pedestrian” (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 12). This genre is not afraid to play with our conception of the world. Still, Valdez Moses asserts, readers are not “expected to believe in the literal truth of the magical episodes, though surely *some* do. The magical, the oral, the fantastic ... are present, but they are sublated, that is ... having been preserved, canceled out, raised up, and transformed in the historical present which is both rational and real” (115). The magical realist novel is thus written for “those who *would like to believe* in the marvelous” (115). What about readers who would like to read about history? Does the supernatural within historical fiction operate in a similar way as the magic of magical realism? Here, it is important to distinguish the subgenre of historical fiction this thesis seeks to identify.

III. Supernatural Historical Fiction

As expressed in the Introduction, this subgenre is notable for its incorporation of that which is implausible within the field of history. To some extent, this subgenre is an exaggerated version of historical fiction. The term “fiction” enables imaginary events and people to appear in these novels. The supernatural is not only imaginary, but also impossible in the field of history. The fiction of this subgenre is taken to the extreme. Magical realism and this subgenre bear much relation – both embody the intermingling of realism and the fantastic or the supernatural. That this subgenre defines itself as *historical* fiction differentiates it from magical realism, however. Magical realism can incorporate and critique historical events, but such engagement with history is not a necessary element of the genre. There is no obligation to historical fact within the genre of magical realism. Supernatural historical fiction is expected within the world of historical fiction to contain accurate, plausible depictions of the past.

History, and its place as part of the subgenre's title, is a complicating factor. Dipesh Chakrabarty, in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, asserts, "A madman's narrative is not history. Nor can a preference that is arbitrary or just personal – based on sheer taste, say – give us rationally defensible principles for narration" (98). Peter Novick claims that "objectivity is unattainable in history; the historian can hope for nothing more than plausibility" (qtd. in Chakrabarty 99). Novick's description of the historical method is inflexible, predicated on the "presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect" (qtd. in Chakrabarty 104). The historical method denies the attribution of an event to the supernatural. The "closed continuum" of the field of history means that "historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers" since this would "be an event whose cause did not lie within history" (Chakrabarty 105). Chakrabarty's concern is with the methodological problem that historiography can't deal with the supernatural; at a basic level, history and the supernatural are opposed. It seems dangerous, though, to think of history as a "closed continuum." Although history may be distant in terms of the temporal dimension, we cannot think of the occurrences of the past as remote. Historical fiction and this subgenre seek to remind us of the past, to hint that we need to continually remember it.

Chakrabarty too discusses the ramifications of a "closed" perception of history. The historical method "maintains a subject-object relationship between the historian and the evidence. In this gesture, the past remains genuinely dead; the historian brings it 'alive' by telling the story" (Chakrabarty 108). While the stories of the past indeed come alive in this fictional subgenre, the past does not remain genuinely dead. Kostova and Vonnegut both suggest that the past pervades our present. Kostova literally brings the past to life through an immortal

Vlad Tepes; in *The Historian*, the Wallachian prince refuses to be a horror of remote history. And time travel in *Slaughterhouse-Five* jumbles our perception of past and present. Vonnegut suggests that the moments of our lives, and those of history, are never quite lost. I believe that neither of these novelists would argue that the past is genuinely dead. As discussed in the Introduction, Chakrabarty also asserts that historical narratives are based on the “very fact these worlds are never completely lost” (112). My primary texts suggest that the past and present are not as neatly divorced as the historical method suggests.

As discussed in the previous section, magical realist texts regard the past with nostalgia. Supernatural historical fiction has a different agenda and attitude towards the past. There is no longing for the past in these texts. Rather, the past presents a threat, particularly in *The Historian*. The subsequent chapters will detail this threat. As is true of magical realism, however, these texts are grounded in realism. Kostova opens her novel in Amsterdam at a house in Raamgracht, a verifiable location. *The Historian* references countless recognizable people and places – Florence, Oxford University, Budapest, Bram Stoker, the Hagia Sophia, Bela Lugosi etc. Readers feel invested in the “reality” of the story.⁶ Vonnegut mentions Cape Cod, the University of Chicago, the Battle of the Bulge, and the destruction of Dresden. The individualized characters in *Slaughterhouse-Five* travel to particular, recognizable places at particular times. Each author provides the reader with the specific dates of occurrences, heightening the effects of verisimilitude.⁷

⁶ To clarify, by “reality” I mean readers recognize their own reality, or the familiar world of which they too belong, within the world of fiction.

⁷ Time works in a distinct way in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Even though Vonnegut plays around with the temporal dimension, he is careful to provide the dates and locations of his protagonist’s travels. Although time works differently in this novel, the readers is always aware of what exact time (in terms of the date and frequently time of day) it is.

The supernatural enters these novels, and supernatural historical fiction distinguishes itself from magical realism in that it does not grow organically out of the reality as represented in the novel. To reiterate what John Frow discussed earlier, expectations are crucial in the interpretation of a text. A magical realist text, especially by a well-known author, is *expected* to contain magic. This expectation does not hold in terms of historical fiction. As the title suggests, there is a historian in *The Historian* who grapples with the presence of the supernatural in his world. And characters in *Slaughterhouse-Five* believe Billy Pilgrim to be mad based on his declarations about foreign planets and aliens. In some cases, the supernatural becomes problematic. This means we must turn to the texts themselves to study how this genre operates. A greater awareness of this genre may eventually make it less problematic in terms of reader expectations. The combination of history and the supernatural is strange, but in the following chapters I hope to reveal the truth-telling aspects of the subgenre.

Chapter Two

The Supernatural vs. The Historical in *The Historian*

I. The Structure of *The Historian*

The Historian, Elizabeth Kostova's 2005 debut novel, begins with a note to the reader: "This is the story of how as a girl of sixteen I went in search of my father and his past and of how he went in search of his beloved mentor and his mentor's own history, and of how we all found ourselves on one of the darkest pathways into history" (xv). Readers embark on a layered journey into the past with an unnamed narrator who claims to write this text thirty-six years after "these events transpired" (xv).⁸ She warns us, "As a historian, I have learned that, in fact, not everyone who reaches into the past can survive it. And it is not only reaching back that endangers us; sometimes history itself reaches inexorably forward for us with its shadowy claw" (xv). This note is unsettling, primarily due to the strange notion of movement it suggests – a journey into the depths of the past accompanied by the forward movement of history to touch the present. This indeed is how the novel progresses.

The present of the novel is 1972 and the narrator lives with her father, Paul, a diplomat in Amsterdam. The journey into the past literally begins with a reach when our narrator grasps, "late one night," for a "translation of the Kama Sutra but also a much older volume and an envelope of yellowing papers" in her father's library (Kostova 5).⁹ The topmost of the papers is a personal letter dated to December 12, 1930, from Trinity College, Oxford. The letter itself, however, is mysterious, addressed to "*my dear and unfortunate successor*" (5). The author of the

⁸ Kostova's fictional narrator, who is also the author of the note to the reader, remains nameless throughout the text. I will simply refer to her as the "narrator" in this thesis.

⁹ Our narrator introduces herself to us with the fact that she is "mother-less," a topic her father "never spoke of" and was "too painful for him to discuss" (Kostova 3). We are initially led to believe that her mother is dead.

letter is not initially revealed, but it contains the line, “*I feel sorrow at bequeathing to another human being my own, perhaps unbelievable, experience of evil*” (5). The “*experience of evil*” becomes the reality of the story. These letters instigate the narrator’s journey into the past. Upon asking her father, Paul, about the letters, the narrator learns about his experiences in graduate school. As a student in the 1950s, Paul found a strange book in his carrel at the library. The spine of the book “showed an elegant little dragon, green on pale leather” (11). Furthermore, the center two pages contained “a great woodcut of a dragon with spread wings and a long looped tail, a beast unfurled and raging, claws outstretched” (11). Here, the claws of history begin reaching forward. In the claws of the woodcut’s dragon “hung a banner on which ran a single word in Gothic lettering: DRAKULYA” (11). Although the spelling is strange, this is a recognizable reference to the archetypal vampire Dracula.

The novel explains how Paul’s mentor, Professor Bartholomew Rossi, found a book with the exact same woodcut and discovered that “no one had ever looked in the Ottoman world for material on the Dracula legend” (Kostova 20). The Dracula legend is steeped in history, a history that the novel delves into as well. Indeed, the name Dracula “came from the Latin root for *dragon* or *devil*, the honorary title of Vlad Tepes – the ‘Impaler’ of Wallachia” (12). Kostova invokes the supernatural only when Rossi claims, “Dracula – Vlad Tepes – is still alive” (21). Following this shocking and seemingly implausible declaration, Professor Rossi mysteriously disappears.¹⁰ The novel unfolds as various stories told within this larger story. Paul details his journey in the 1950s with fellow student Helen Rossi to find Professor Rossi, a journey that takes

¹⁰ Professor Rossi disappeared while Paul was a graduate student. We learn of his declaration about Dracula through Paul detailing his own history to his daughter.

them through Eastern Europe and lands them at Dracula's tomb in Bulgaria.¹¹ There, they are forced to put a silver dagger through Rossi's heart to prevent him from fully transforming into a vampire. Indeed, vampires exist within the reality of this novel. Paul tells this story to his daughter as the two of them journey across Europe, to remote towns in Italy and France. Paul makes a disappearance of his own towards the end of the text, leaving his daughter with a note saying he has gone to search for her mother, whom our narrator had believed to be dead. The climax of the novel details a final confrontation with Dracula, in which various characters come face to face with Vlad Tepes, who has remained "undead" since the fourteenth century. Indeed, it is Dracula, the vampire of myth and folklore and literature, of whom everyone is afraid, rather than Vlad Tepes the historical figure.

II. Making Sense of History and the Supernatural

Now we must return to the appearance of the supernatural in the text. As I stated in the Introduction, Kostova's novel does not question whether the supernatural can exist. In the fictional world of her novel, an immortal Vlad Tepes is *real*. The question becomes then, how do the characters react? Dipesh Chakrabarty discusses how in the field of history, the supernatural cannot be granted agency. Many of the characters in Kostova's story are historians, which is not surprising based on the novel's title. Professor Rossi and Paul certainly are

¹¹ Helen Rossi is a fellow graduate student at Paul's University. She is Bartholomew Rossi's daughter but Professor Rossi is unaware of her existence. We learn that when Rossi was researching Dracula on his own, long before his disappearance, he met Helen's mother in Romania and had a relationship with her. He does not remember his relationship with Helen's mother due to a case of "amnesia."

historians, as is Helen.¹² Paul even says he “loved true stories even better than imaginary ones” because “the literary stories” led him to “some kind of – exploration – of history” (Kostova 11). One tension, then, is that the novel is based on characters who would be disposed to doubt the supernatural. A historian is a rational scholar who will have to cope with the presence of an immortal Vlad Tepes. We cannot forget, though, that these are fictional characters. These scholars are made up, originating in Kostova’s mind. Our author has made up the supernatural *and* the historians. An analogy for this novel would be a controlled experiment. Kostova is manipulating her participants, creating a fake scenario. She begins this scenario by plunging us into history.

The narrator accompanies her father on a business trip in which the historical aspect of this novel is emphasized. She and her father take trains through the Slovenian Alps; in a much later moment of narration; she reminds us that in recounting her adventures with her father, she is detailing her own history: “Now, in my fifties, I find myself wandering that direction every few years, reliving my first glimpse of the Slovenian countryside” (Kostova 6). The narrator reverts back to her voice as a sixteen-year-old in her declaration, “I suppose the Romans – who left their walls here and their gargantuan arenas to the west, on the coast – saw the same autumn and gave the same shiver ... For the first time, I had been struck by the excitement of the traveler who looks history in her subtle face” (6). This statement illustrates Chakrabarty’s assertion that the “writing of history must implicitly assume a plurality of times existing together, a disjuncture of the present with itself” (112). Our narrator feels the past pervade her present. She is aware that “humans from any other period and region ... always in some sense [are] our

¹² In the novel, Helen Rossi is an anthropologist. Her extensive historical knowledge and research though arguably prove her to be a historian. She even states that “you cannot study cultures without a knowledge of their history” (194).

contemporaries” (Chakrabarty 112). History is always in some sense alive in the novel, whether it is through our narrator sharing her own history or that of the landscape.

The Historian also establishes itself as a historical novel in its careful rendering of the pasts of the cities visited. The narrator and her father first visit Emona, the Roman name for a seaside village in the Burgas Province of Bulgaria. The narrative switches to a factual account of the city: “Emona was built on Bronze Age pilings along a river now lined with art-nouveau architecture” (Kostova 7). We learn about the Christian history of the city, how “Saint Patrick sent missionaries to this region” and of the city’s “chameleon past: Viennese Deco along the skyline, great red churches from the Renaissance of its Slavic-speaking Catholics, hunched brown medieval chapels with the British Isles in their features. Here and there an Ottoman element flared in doorways or in a pointed window frame” (7). Kostova delves deep into the past of the Roman city, rendering credible details in the voice of a historian.

Each location traveled to is discussed with historical detail and elaborate description, reinforcing the literary effect of realism. In Southern France, our narrator and her father travel to Les Pyrénées-Orientales, a mountain range “surprisingly close to Spain” (Kostova 60). They visit a monastery “built in the year 1000. Incredible – this little place carved into a rock, difficult for even the most enthusiastic pilgrims to reach” (60). The town below is Les Bains, a “large sand-colored rock village spread over one small peak. The great Pyrénées hung above it, shadowing all but its broadest lower streets, which stretched toward river valleys and the dry flat farms below” (60). Even if a reader has never been to Southern France, let alone heard of Les Pyrénées-Orientales, the detailed and plausible descriptions certainly make the place sound credible. Furthermore, Kostova is accurate in the location and description of Les Bains. In reading this novel, we learn about new places and landscapes. We travel to Istanbul where we

learn that “*Istanbul* is a Byzantine word that means *the city*. You see, even the Ottomans couldn’t demolish Constantinople, only rename it – with a Byzantine name, at that. It says here that the Byzantine Empire lasted from 333 to 1453. Imagine – what a long, long afternoon of power” (193). Our narrator is consuming and transmitting historical information. We are asked to think about the past, and Kostova is meticulous in her rendering of it.

The presence of the past serves another purpose, however: to detail the tragedies of history. In Istanbul, while Paul and Helen are in pursuit of the missing Professor Rossi, Helen says, “The conquest of Constantinople in 1453 by Mehmed II was one of the greatest tragedies in history. He broke down these walls with his cannonballs and then he sent his armies in to pillage and murder for three days. The soldiers raped young girls and boys on the altars of the churches, even in Saint Sophia ... Before that, this was the most beautiful city in history” (Kostova 193). This is a horrific scene to recall, but the details of the violence and destruction must be told. After learning of this tragedy, Paul remarks, “The city was still beautiful, with its delicate, rich colors and its exquisite domes and minarets, whatever atrocities had occurred here long ago. I was beginning to understand why an evil moment five hundred years ago was so real to Helen, but what did this really have to do with our lives in the present?” (193). This question is central to the novel. It is easy to think of historical tragedies as belonging to the distant past, but Kostova hints that the past invades our present.

Our narrator too must confront historical realities. Paul’s daughter, our narrator, has already realized, “human history is full of evil deeds” (Kostova, 39). After her father first tells her about Rossi’s declaration about Vlad Tepes remaining alive, she ventures to a university library. Our narrator discovers that Vlad Tepes “*did many terrible and curious things,*” such as having “*all the young boys burned who came to his land to learn the language, four hundred of*

them. He had a large family impaled and many of his people buried naked up to the navel and shot at. Some he had roasted and then flayed" (39). She reads a footnote defining "impaled" as "the penetration of the body with a sharpened wooden stake, usually through the anus or genitals upward, so that the stake sometimes emerged through the mouth and sometimes through the head" (39). This description is incredibly graphic and disturbing. The narrator reacts to this historical discovery by noting, "The thing that most haunted me ... was ... the fact that these things had – apparently – actually occurred" (39). This statement is significant in that this terrible historical discovery has occurred in our version of historical reality, too. *The Historian* distinguishes itself from other vampire novels in that it is deeply concerned with the historical past. Furthermore, our narrator thinks, "If I listened too closely ... I would hear the screams of the boys, of the 'large family' dying together" (39). She worries that she could be on the verge of some form of madness. The horrors of medieval history are nearly alive before her.

The character for whom the horrors of history, as well as the supernatural, most urgently invade his present is Professor Rossi. Rossi's experience with the supernatural is detailed in his letters to Paul, dating to 1930. Rossi, on his trip to Istanbul, finds mysterious maps that he thinks could reveal where Dracula's tomb is located, "someplace not even legend had recorded reliably" (Kostova 89). Rossi's letters detail how he is confronted in a library by a "broad shouldered, dark-headed figure, a crisp black silhouette" who threatens him not to continue his research (92). Kostova hints at the darkness of history, of the threat a library contains in terms of the written account of tragedies. Later, Rossi, upon finding his belongings disheveled in his hotel room, abandons his research. Rossi knows he is in danger. Paul, upon reading of this, remembers thinking, "In my historian's experience, the dead stayed respectfully dead, the Middle Ages held real horrors, not supernatural ones, Dracula was a colorful East European

legend resurrected by the movies of my childhood, and 1930 was three years before Hitler assumed dictator powers in Germany, a terror that surely precluded all other possibilities” (94). Paul has lived through a horror that he believes must be worse than any other event in history. What could be worse than the horrors occurring within his own lifetime, than the reign of Hitler? Paul is fearful, believing to have “stumbled into a world of sickness, a nether-world of the familiar academic one I’d known for many years, a subtext of the ordinary narrative or history I’d always taken for granted” (94). Paul realizes he may have to change his concept of history and “suspend disbelief” to “set out ... on the scent of Vlad Dracula, the historical or the supernatural, whichever he might prove to be” (95). Paul remains skeptical about an immortal Dracula, but he does recognize that history or the supernatural, or a combination of both, threaten his present.

Kostova further suggests the lingering presence of history by writing: “history, it seemed, could be ... a splash of blood whose agony didn’t fade overnight, or over centuries” (53). The agonies of history persist in generations to come. Paul senses this pervasiveness; he feels that the knowledge Rossi has shared with him means his “studies were to be of a new sort – novel to me, but not to Rossi and not to many others who had picked their way through the same dark underbrush” (53). After all, historical writing suggests a shared experience. Historians study paths that have been researched before, reading the material that constructs the past and permits interpretation. Chakrabarty further posits that historical pasts act “as supplement to the historian’s past ... in a Derridean sense – they enable history, the discipline, to be what it is and yet at the same time help to show what its limits are” (112). Kostova’s immortal Dracula may be problematic because it suggests history has no limits – a medieval figure is infringing on the present. What, then, are we to do with the presence of Dracula?

We are first introduced to Dracula in terms of an historical account of the real Vlad Tepes. Rossi's research has revealed that Vlad Tepes was "hated by the Ottoman Empire and his own people – both" (Kostova 19). Vlad was "among the nastiest of all medieval European tyrants" (19). It is estimated that he "slaughtered at least twenty thousand of his fellow Wallachians and Transylvanians over the years," and "there is evidence that Dracula's father gave Dracula over to the Turks when he was a boy as a hostage in a political bargain, and that Dracula acquired some of his taste for cruelty from observing Ottoman torture methods" (19). Dracula's dark story ends in his death "in a battle against the Turks, or perhaps just by accident by his own soldiers, and buried in a monastery on an island in Lake Snagov" (19). Yet his memory lives on, and Rossi notes that Dracula's story is "passed through generations of superstitious peasants" and at the end of the nineteenth century a "melodramatic author – Abraham Stoker – gets hold of the name *Dracula*" and popularizes it in his novel (20). Dracula is not only a historical figure, but a literary one as well. Literary history is at stake here as well.

Bram Stoker's novel is a work of fiction, though not a realist novel. Written in epistolary form, *Dracula* is a Gothic novel that dramatically details a group of friends' confrontations with the vampire. One of Paul's first reactions to Rossi's claim that Dracula is un-dead is recalling "Bram Stoker's novel ... and of those childhood nights at the movie theater ... Bela Lugosi hovering over some starlet's white neck" (Kostova 12). Kostova references Stoker's *Dracula* and the actor who played Count Dracula on Broadway and in film adaptations of the novel. Stoker's *Dracula* establishes the myths and the modern conception of vampires as blood-sucking corpses who hide from sunlight. This is not the first reference to Stoker's novel in *The Historian* that reminds the reader of the historical figure's fictional counterpart. Furthermore, each of the three parts of Kostova's novel is prefaced with a quote from *Dracula* reflecting the course of the

text. We are consistently reminded of Stoker's work of fiction. Professor Rossi "had thought it mainly useless as a source of information about the real Dracula" (58) but does acknowledge "Stoker assembled some useful lore about vampire legends – about Transylvania, too, without ever going there" (20). Rossi acknowledges Stoker's *Dracula* as a supernatural extrapolation from actual history that does not fall into the genre of historical fiction. In fact, there is no mention of the historical Vlad Tepes in Stoker's novel. Paul even reads Stoker's *Dracula* within the novel, finding that the "courtly, repulsive Count Dracula of the novel was a compelling figure ... even if he didn't have much in common with Vlad Tepes. But Rossi himself had been convinced that Dracula had become one of the undead, in life – in the course of history. I wondered if a novel could have the power to make something so strange happen in actuality" (58). Here, Kostova emphasizes the wobbling line between literature and history, fact and fiction. Literature may not actually have the power to defy the laws of nature and make a historical figure undead, but Kostova hints that written works indeed hold power.

Libraries, after all, are where the characters go to seek information about how to fight evil. In Istanbul, Paul and Helen meet Professor Turgot Bora who has proof that "the sultans [of the Ottoman Empire] feared him [Dracula] as a vampire" (Kostova 205). Sultan Mehmed II had "collected some of his documents and possessions here after Dracula died in Wallachia. Dracula killed many Turkish soldiers in his own country, and our sultan hated him for this, but that was not why he founded this archive. No!" (205). Instead, the sultan was creating a library to "fight the evil that Dracula had spread in his city after death" (206). Professor Bora suggests that Vlad Tepes has been feared as a vampire throughout history. He treasures the documents of this library because "There is still evil to fight in our city, as there is everywhere" (206). Professor

Bora's statement bears more interpretation, but it is first important to turn to another scene involving a library, perhaps one of the most supernatural scenes of all within the novel.

Rossi is the first character to have an interaction with the immortal Dracula in one of his tombs.¹³ His tomb, though, is a library within the reliquary of the Sveti Georgi church in Bulgaria. The library is "*one of the finest of its kind in the world. It is the result of centuries of careful selection*" (Kostova 605). Dracula admits he has taken Rossi there since he has "*been waiting a long time for someone to catalogue*" his library. Rossi is fascinated that he is with someone "*who had lived through more history than any historian can presume to study in even a rudimentary way in a single career*" (607). Dracula reveals, "*I became an historian in order to preserve my own history forever*" (607). Furthermore, Dracula wants Rossi's help in preserving his history. If Rossi becomes a vampire, his second task "*will last forever,*" to "*go out into the world ... and search for new acquisitions, and old ones, too, for [Dracula] shall never stop collecting works of the past*" (608). The association of the historian as vampire is startling in that Dracula suggests, "*Good is not perfectible, but evil is*" (617). Kostova hints that we must be wary of how we use chronicles of the past; history can easily become reality again. This scene also represents the juxtaposition of the two major themes of this subgenre; a supernatural figure wants to surround himself with history.

More startling than the juxtaposition itself is the body of work Dracula has collected. The library contains a wide range of works, including "*an early edition of Machiavelli: The Prince*" (Kostova 609), "*Mediaeval books ... mixed with fine Renaissance folios*" (613), "*a*

¹³ We learn about this encounter through letters that Rossi has hidden in Dracula's tomb. This letter sequence is directly following the chapter in which Helen and Paul must put a silver dagger through Rossi's heart to prevent him from fully turning into a vampire since Dracula has bitten him. Rossi details where he hid the letters within the tomb, which enables Paul and Helen, as well as the reader, to learn of this encounter.

biography of Hannibal by an eighteenth-century Englishman and a curling Greek manuscript" (614). More shocking though is a "*dog-eared first edition of Mein Kampf and a diary in French ... that appeared from its opening dates and accounts to chronicle the Reign of Terror from the point of view of a government official*" (614). Dracula has a "*large cabinet full of manuals of torture, some of them dating to the ancient world. They ranged through the prisons of mediaeval England, to the torture chambers of the Inquisition, to the experiments of the Third Reich*" (616). These books detail the atrocities of history, and they are Dracula's most prized possessions, forming his "*treasure-house*" (617). The literary works are full of evil, "*full of the lesson of history*" (617). According to Dracula, this lesson is that "*History has taught us that the nature of man is evil, sublimely so. ... There is no purity like the purity of the sufferings of history*" (618). Arguably, this is the most chilling moment in *The Historian*. Not Dracula's face "unmasked, a sight so terrible" that Rossi "cannot remember it" (618), nor the fact that he looks "*more dead than asleep, his skin waxen yellow, his long dark lashes unmoving, his strong, almost handsome features translucent*" (610). The historically accurate descriptions, not those of an "undead" Dracula, are the truly terrifying moments in this novel.

III. History vs. The Supernatural

The scene in Dracula's library is truly the most horrifying in the novel. Dracula embodies evil in terms not only of the horrible crimes he has committed as Prince of Wallachia, but also in the records of historical evils that surround him. An undead Dracula is impossible but these historical evils are *real*. Dracula's "terrible face" (Kostova 605) and cloaked form are not nearly as horrifying as his "*unparalleled archive on torture,*" as history itself (620). Dracula's presence is strange. He is undead and the figure of all-consuming evil. Indeed, his presence

instigates the journeys of this novel, from Rossi's kidnapping by Dracula, to Paul and Helen's search for the captured Rossi, and finally to our narrator's search for her father, who is in pursuit of her mother (who is also in pursuit of Dracula!). Dracula has tombs hidden in monasteries throughout Europe, from Bulgaria to Southern France. The characters convene at one of these tombs in the monastery Saint-Matthieu-des-Pyrénées-Orientales. Here, Helen shoots a silver bullet through Dracula's heart, seemingly killing him. The opening note to the reader holds true: "it is not only reaching back that endangers us; sometimes history itself reaches inexorably forward for us with its shadowy claw" (xv). It is history, not the supernatural that threatens us. This distinction brings us back to the question, why did Kostova invoke a supernatural horror?

The novel, after all, is full of horrors that actually occurred. Kostova mentions "Hitler's crimes" (250) and in Istanbul, Paul realizes the "Cold War was real to me now" (214). This novel is populated with references to historical atrocities. When Paul thinks about Vlad Tepes, he notes that he was "a renegade, loyal to no one but himself, as quick to execute his own followers as he was to kill his Turkish enemies. Like Stalin" (296). Paul recalls that "Stalin had died the year before, and new tales of his atrocities had leaked into the Western press" (296). One report detailed how "an apparently loyal general whom Stalin had accused just before the war of wanting to overthrow him ... had been removed from his apartment in the middle of the night and hung upside down from the beams of a busy railway station outside Moscow for several days until he died. The passengers getting on and off the trains had all seen him, but no one had dared to glance twice in his direction" (296). The horrors of history are suddenly very present, occurring in the capital of Russia. Torture is not confined to the medieval world, but

rather is still a device of modern historical figures.¹⁴ Indeed, realism comes back into play.

“Impalement” is a truly disturbing torture device, but a method of the medieval world. Kostova is careful to emphasize that torture is not a practice of the remote past.

There are characters in the novel that embody evil in their own right. Helen learns that one of her former colleagues, Géza Jozsef, is a member of the Hungarian secret police and “can be quite dangerous” (Kostova 424). Furthermore, Géza has told Helen about “people he had sent to jail, or had sent to be tortured, and implied that there was worse” (427). Helen admits, “It is impossible not to hate such a person, ultimately” (427). Terrible things occur in the present of this novel. Dracula is not the only force of evil. In Bulgaria, Paul and Helen are required to be accompanied by a guide named Ranov. We learn that Ranov is another member of the secret police working with Géza. Paul realizes, “I knew whom Ranov reminded me of. With his heavyset face and thick dark mustache, he looked like the photographs I’d seen of the young Stalin. People like Ranov and Géza did minimal damage only because they had minimal power” (627). There are people in this novel who are capable of performing the evils detailed in Dracula’s library. And the evil of the written works does not remain on the shelves of the library, though we may wish that the horrible deeds belonged solely to the world of fiction. These works detail terrible things that have already happened and could become reality again due to people like Géza and Jozsef. It is reality rather than the supernatural that is horrifying in this novel, recalling a generic aspect of magical realism. In magical realism, the “magical” may lead to recognition of the familiar and aspects of magic may bear an eerie affinity to reality. Kostova borrows this concept for her own novel. Although an immortal Dracula is an unrealistic

¹⁴ As discussed in Darius Rejali’s *Torture and Democracy*, a text which studies historical and modern torture.

character, his embodiment sheds light on reality. Indeed, he declares, “*History has taught us that the nature of man is evil*” (618).

So why do we need a supernatural horror in this novel? As historical fiction, this novel recalls some of history’s darkest moments. We should also recall Professor Bora’s statement that “there is still evil to fight in our city, as there is everywhere” (Kostova 206). Evil is manifested in the present. Reality has its own horrors. Thus, which is more horrifying in this novel, the supernatural or the historical? I conclude that it is history that truly fills us with horror. Dracula’s appearance in this novel isn’t terrifying so much as it is problematic. In a New York Times Book Review, Janet Maslin writes, “Every now and then a mysterious pale, sinister figure will materialize, only to vanish bewilderingly” (n.p.). The supernatural jolts in and out of this novel, but Kostova’s tone remains the same. *The Historian* seemingly begins as a travel narrative about the horrors of Eastern European history. The literary and serious tone of the novel is successful in describing the historical realm but not that of the supernatural.

A scene that illustrates the tonal pitfall of the novel is the final interaction with Dracula at the monastery Saint-Matthieu-des-Pyrénées-Orientales. The characters convene in Dracula’s tomb, and the narrator sees a figure with the “form of a man, but he did not move like a human being” (Kostova 655). This figure is the “undead” Dracula, wearing a “heavy cloak” with hands “white as bone against his dark clothing, with a jeweled ring on one finger” (655). Dracula speaks in a “guttural rush of words that might have been many languages together or one strange language” (656). Our narrator insists that these are words she knew “with [her] blood, not [her] ears” (656). Before Dracula can attack, Helen fires a gun and “Dracula ... was falling, first backward, so that his chiseled, pale face surfaced again for a moment, and then forward ... until there was a thud on the stone ... Then his body seemed to be turning to dust, to nothing, even his

ancient clothes decaying around him, sere in the confusing light” (658). Kostova maintains a serious tone to describe a fairly crazy event, and this ending reads as unintentionally comic. Even Dracula’s strange description has comedic undertones. Indeed, the Hudson Review found that Kostova’s Dracula was not a “particularly horrifying character,” and the novel “isn’t scary as much as atmospheric” (Balée 694). Even though the book’s characters are terrified by the presence of Dracula, readers may not be (Maslin, n.p.).

Dracula’s presence does not make this novel a failure. Rather, his presence raises an important question: Why do we read a Dracula tale for horrors when we could pick up a work detailing the biography of Vlad Tepes? The Dracula story is a fantasy. But Vlad Tepes and the atrocities he committed were real. The presence of the supernatural in this novel thus raises questions about the believability of history. Indeed, the myth in this novel, the supernatural, is primarily what everyone is afraid of. The historical is ultimately not only more horrifying than the supernatural, but also truly what we should be weary and wary of. Supernatural historical fiction thus teaches us that the horrors of history belong to our world and not that of the imaginary.

Chapter Three

Time travel, Truth, and Tralfamadorians in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

I. The Supernatural in Vonnegut's World

As stated in the Introduction, the historical crux of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the firebombing of Dresden in February of 1945. Whereas *The Historian* spans centuries of history, *Slaughterhouse-Five* remains focused on the Second World War. Indeed, Vonnegut's narrator is an unnamed man who has survived the Dresden firebombing as an American Infantry Scout and Prisoner of War. We are reading the narrator's experience and reaction to the atrocities of war. *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The Historian* are similar in detailing horrifying moments in history as well as in grounding themselves in realism. Vonnegut's characters travel to recognizable places at particular times, heightening a reader's investment in the reality of the story. While *The Historian* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* fall under the same subgenre, the supernatural operates quite differently within each of them.

Kostova invokes a historical figure with a factual basis in rendering the supernatural. In contrast, Vonnegut invents his own planet and alien race. The Tralfamadorians of the planet Tralfamadore exist solely within the fictional works of Kurt Vonnegut. These aliens are "two feet high, and green, and shaped like plumber's friends. Their suction cups were on the ground, and their shafts, which were extremely flexible, usually pointed to the sky. At the top of each shaft was a little hand with a green eye in its palm" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 33). The Tralfamadorians are imaginary beings; they "could see in four dimensions" (33). Readers, however, are not expected to overcome their skepticism regarding these strange creatures and the supernatural, further distinguishing this novel from *The Historian*.

Within the world of *The Historian*, an immortal Dracula is *real*. Multiple characters in Kostova's text come face to face with the vampire and seek to destroy the supernatural figure. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, however, the protagonist Billy Pilgrim is the *only* character convinced of the existence of the Tralfamadorians. Other characters in the text, particularly Billy's daughter, believe Billy to be mad. Furthermore, Billy incurs trauma during the war and survives a plane crash in which he hits his head. The supernatural occurrences are never explicitly attributed to Pilgrim's war experience and injuries; readers are allowed to decide for themselves what to believe. Readers also begin *Slaughterhouse-Five* with an expectation for the supernatural. As discussed in Chapter One, expectations are crucial regarding the readers' experience of a text. The title page of *Slaughterhouse-Five* prepares the reader for the subject matter and the mindset with which we should approach the text. The title page of *Slaughterhouse-Five* reads:

Slaughterhouse-Five
Or
The Children's Crusade
A Duty-Dance with Death

Kurt Vonnegut

Who, as an American Infantry Scout
Hors de Combat, as a Prisoner of War,
 Witnessed the Fire-Bombing of Dresden, Germany,
 "The Florence of the Elbe," a Long Time Ago,
 And Survived to Tell the Tale.
 This is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic
 Schizophrenic Manner of Tales of the Planet
 Tralfamadore, Where the Flying Saucers
 Come From.
 Peace. (4)

This title page is strikingly different from the note to the reader that prefaces Kostova's novel. While Kostova's note to the reader is foreboding and suggests evil, Dracula's presence is sprung upon the reader in a strange fashion. *The Historian* seemingly begins as a travel narrative

with a literary and historical tone. The novel suddenly incorporates bloodsucking and the threat of vampires at the turn of each corner; the emergence of the supernatural is startling. A reader is then expected to overcome his/her skepticism and accept the “undead” presence of Dracula within the text. In contrast, the reader from the outset knows that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is written in the “telegraphic Schizophrenic Manner of Tales of the Planet Tralfamadore.” This statement is confusing and seemingly nonsensical, but Vonnegut directly deals with the notion of credibility and verisimilitude. Vonnegut is upfront about the liberties he has taken. The supernatural is introduced as a central element to this text; Tralfamadore is “Where the Flying Saucers Come From.” Readers may not expect realism after reading the first few pages of the novel. The title page clarifies that this work is not entirely a representation that is recognizable from the outlook of everyday life. Vonnegut immediately hints at the out-of-this-world phenomena incorporated in his text, distinguishing his work from that of Kostova.

Paradoxically, *Slaughterhouse-Five* also immediately establishes itself as a historical novel whose author “witnessed the Fire-Bombing of Dresden, Germany, ‘The Florence of the Elbe,’ a Long Time Ago, And Survived to Tell the Tale.” Vonnegut experienced the firebombing firsthand as an American Infantry Scout and Prisoner of War. If realism “purports to be an authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals,” then Vonnegut could plausibly share his experience with readers, heightening a reader’s sense of realism (Watt 27). It is important to clarify that although Vonnegut witnessed the firebombing of Dresden, we cannot say that he is the narrator of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Rather, Vonnegut shares a history with his narrator.

Vonnegut has spoken about his experience of the firebombing and how it influenced his writing of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In an autobiographical collection of his speeches, essays, and

other writings entitled *Fates Worse Than Death*, Vonnegut recalls speaking for the American Psychiatric Association in Philadelphia with fellow writer Elie Wiesel. Wiesel is the author of *Night*, a book detailing his personal experience in the Nazi concentration camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Vonnegut is careful to distinguish his work from that of Wiesel. He writes: “Elie Wiesel made his reputation with a book called *Night*, which is about the horrors of the Holocaust as witnessed by the boy he used to be. I made my reputation with a book called *Slaughterhouse-Five* ... which was (about) the firebombing of Dresden – as witnessed by the young American Infantry Private First Class I used to be” (Vonnegut, *Fates Worse than Death* 30). Both authors share first-hand experience of the subjects they write about. But Vonnegut distinguishes his work from Wiesel’s through the differing nature of their experiences. Elie Wiesel “was the event itself,” both victim and witness to the atrocities of the Holocaust (31). Vonnegut says of himself, “I was outside the event. ... Before I was a soldier I was a journalist, and that’s what I was in Dresden – a voyeur of strangers’ miseries” (31). Rather than embodying the experience as Wiesel does, Vonnegut is a bystander.

In a 2011 biography about Vonnegut entitled *And So It Goes*, Charles Shields details how Vonnegut’s experience in Dresden influenced the writing of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. While a Prisoner of War, Vonnegut spent time with Private Edward “Joe” Crone from Rochester, New York, “because he would always swap his portions for smoke” (Shields 79). Joe “told everyone he was going to be ordained an Episcopalian minister when he got home” and “had a reputation for being physically awkward and shy” (80). Furthermore, Joe made a “terrible infantryman” (80). Vonnegut once said, “Joe didn’t understand the war and of course there was nothing to understand. The world had gone completely mad” (qtd. in Shields 80). Furthermore, Shields writes, “In this bewildered young man [Joe] who kept expecting a rationale that would explain to

his satisfaction the ultimate bedlam that is war, Vonnegut later found the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, for his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*” (80). This statement is testament to the fact that the novel is based on some of Vonnegut’s own experiences and that of a fellow infantryman. The text is not to be read as a memoir or autobiography. But it is also not pure fantasy or science fiction. Vonnegut blends genres to create a text that utilizes both realism and the fantastic as means of fictional truth-telling, exemplifying the tenets of supernatural historical fiction.

II. Billy Pilgrim’s Journey Through Time

Billy Pilgrim, a character based on one of Vonnegut’s war comrades, does not enter the novel until Chapter Two. Like *The Historian*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* unfolds as several stories threaded together within the broader framework of the novel. Chapter One begins, “All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really *did* threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war. And so on. I’ve changed all the names” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 1). The “I” of these statements refers to our unnamed narrator, who remains a distinct entity from Vonnegut. Our narrator is meditating on writing a book about Dresden. He writes: “As a trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations, I had outlined the Dresden story many times” (6). We quickly learn more about our narrator’s past, how he “went to the University of Chicago for awhile after the Second World War” and now lives a familiar suburban life (9). Chapter One reads as a jumble of the narrator’s anecdotes, from how he took his daughter and her friend across the “Delaware River where George Washington had crossed it” to more serious statements such as “And I asked myself about the present: how wide it was,

how deep it was, how much was mine to keep” (24). Chapter One also introduces the central theme of time to this novel.

The narrator details how on a flight from Philadelphia to Frankfurt, “The time would not pass. Somebody was playing with the clocks ... The second hand on my watch would twitch once, and a year would pass, and then it would twitch again. There was nothing I could do about it. As an Earthling, I had to believe whatever clocks said— and calendars” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 26). *Slaughterhouse-Five* quickly introduces a suspicion with the conception of time and causal connection that Ian Watt describes as being a shaping force of the novel. Rather than being guided by the objective force of time like a conventional realist novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is guided by a jumbled sense of time. The past and the present are not neatly defined. Indeed, *Slaughterhouse-Five* proposes an entirely new conception of reality. Chapter One ends: “People aren’t supposed to look back. I’m certainly not going to do it anymore. I’ve finished my war book now. The next one I write is going to be fun” (28). Upon beginning Chapter Two, we are beginning the narrator’s war book that he ruminated about in Chapter One. The war book, or Chapter Two, begins:

Listen:

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.

Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941. He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all events in between.

He says. (29)

We are introduced to a character that travels through time. Of course, as the passage above reveals, our narrator expresses skepticism with the blunt phrase, “He says” (29). Billy Pilgrim may believe in the reality of his time-travel, but the reader is left to establish for him/herself how “real” are the time-travel and other accounts within this novel. More importantly, the temporal dimension operates completely differently from that of a conventional realist novel. The past and present are jumbled, and we travel through time with Billy for experiences ranging from the Battle of the Bulge, his wedding night, and even to his death. Time is not a stabilizing force in this novel. Billy, for instance, learns from the Tralfamadorians that “when a person dies he only *appears* to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist” (34). This passage asks us to rethink what the temporal dimension *is*. If all moments always *have* existed and always *will* exist, “reality” is quite other than what we may believe it to be.¹⁵

Furthermore, “Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 34). Our narrator suggests that what we conceive of as realistic, objective time is a mistake or a myth. Indeed, the structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five* challenges realism’s emphasis on the conventional view of time.

¹⁵ It is important to note that this view of time is remarkably similar to any physicist’s view of time as it exists in a relativistic space-and-time continuum. Time-travel itself is not prohibited by science, nor is life on other planets. Vonnegut’s portrayal of a man who closes his eyes to awaken at random moments of his life and the imaginary Tralfamadorians establishes these ideas as supernatural.

Although Billy Pilgrim is introduced to us as a character who has “come unstuck in time,” much of his life is quite familiar and believable (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 29). Many aspects of his life are not strikingly different from those of our narrator. Billy is described as “riding in his Cadillac in 1967” (74). His father is a barber in Ilium, New York, and Billy was a “funny-looking child who became a funny-looking youth” (30). He “graduated from Ilium High School in the upper third of his class, and attended night sessions at the Ilium School of Optometry for one semester before being drafted for military service in the Second World War” (30). These are plausible scenarios, the details that Ian Watt cites as convincing readers of the authenticity of the text. There is nothing extraordinary about a barber’s son living in New York or graduating high school to then move onto optometry school. Only the truly curious or skeptical reader might research “Ilium, New York” to find that it is a fictional town. Billy has a wife, two children, a dog, and a successful optometry practice. Details of his life easily conform to a normative suburban lifestyle, creating verisimilitude. His experience of reality remains unique, though, in that he lives “in a constant state of stage fright” (29). Billy “has no control over where he is going” and “never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next” (29).

Billy also does not keep his time-traveling abilities a secret. He goes on a radio show in New York and broadcasts that he “had been kidnapped by the Tralfamadorians on the night of his daughter’s wedding. He hadn’t been missed, he said, because the Tralfamadorians had taken him through a time warp, so that he could be on Tralfamadore for years, and still be away from Earth for only a microsecond” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 33). In response to this broadcast, Billy’s daughter replies, “It’s all just crazy. None of it’s true” (37). Billy remains convinced of his journey through time, thrilled that “he was going to comfort so many people

with the truth of time” (35). He writes in a letter, “When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments” (34). Billy even knows the day on which he will die which he “experiences ... for a while. It is simply violet light and a hum. There isn’t anybody else there. Not even Billy Pilgrim is there” (182). What are we to make of Billy’s time-traveling conception of reality?

One explanation for Billy’s journey through time is directly related to his experience in the war. Billy “had seen the greatest massacre in European history” on the night of February 13, 1945 (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 128). After the firebombing, Dresden was “nothing but minerals. The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighborhood was dead” (228). Billy recognizes that “Absolutely everybody in the city was supposed to be dead, regardless of what they were, and that anybody that moved in it represented a flaw in the design” (230). The narrator writes of the firebombing the night it historically occurred, emphasizing that this firebombing was *real* and had *real* consequences. Furthermore, the firebombing was an instance of absolute destruction. Billy is paired with a Maori prisoner to work in “the first corpse mine in Dresden” (273). They are forced to clear bodies from the devastation, the “bodies rotted and liquefied, and the stink was like roses and mustard gas” (274). This is a character who has witnessed atrocities, and perhaps time-travel is his way of facing a reality he can no longer accept.

Our narrator further suggests that the war experience has lasting consequences for Billy. Three years after the end of the war, Billy has committed himself to a veterans’ hospital in a ward for nonviolent mental patients. The doctors are convinced that Billy “*was* going crazy” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 127). Billy’s roommate is “a former infantry captain named

Eliot Rosewater. Rosewater was sick and tired of being drunk all the time” (128). Rosewater has also experienced trauma, having “shot a fourteen-year-old fireman, mistaking him for a German soldier” (128). The narrator reveals that Rosewater and Billy “were dealing with similar crises in similar ways. They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in the war” (128). These men have been deeply affected by the war; it has prevented them from returning to normative everyday life. Time-travel, thus, could be a metaphor for how to get out of here, or rather, how to escape reality. Billy survives the firebombing, but how does one carry on a civilian life after experiencing war?

Our narrator seems to answer that one simply cannot. Furthermore, while in the hospital, “Rosewater ... introduced Billy to science fiction” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 128). Soon, science fiction works are “the only sort of tales” Billy will read (128). Billy and Rosewater “were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help” (128). Billy can no longer accept reality, using the supernatural to re-invent his own conception of it. He partakes in supernatural escapism.

III. So it goes

The reality of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, after all, is full of despair. The narrator writes, “Over the years, people I’ve met have often asked me what I’m working on, and I’ve usually replied that the main thing was a book about Dresden” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 4). We read of one such encounter in which a film producer says: “You know what I say to people when I hear they’re writing anti-war books ... Why don’t you write an anti-*glacier* book instead?” (4). Our narrator extrapolates this seemingly absurd quote, writing, “What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that, too. And

even if wars didn't keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death" (4). Atrocities are threaded throughout the entirety of the novel. During the war, "The British had no way of knowing it," but the candles and soap they are supplied with are "made from the fat of rendered Jews and Gypsies and fairies and communists, and other enemies of the State. So it goes" (122). "So it goes" is hardly the exclamation expected after revealing the twisted nature of using the fat of the deceased to wash the flesh of the living. This is not the only instance of the seemingly casual and emotionless use of the phrase "So it goes."

Tragedies occur from the level of microcosm to macrocosm, and our narrator acknowledges them with the same "So it goes" before moving along in the text. After surviving the war, Billy charts an airplane with a group of optometrists to attend a conference. The plane, however, "crashed on top of Sugarbush Mountain, in Vermont. Everybody was killed but Billy. So it goes. While Billy was recuperating in a hospital in Vermont, his wife died accidentally of carbon-monoxide poisoning. So it goes" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 31). The repetition of the phrase is startling – and it suggests a hint of cynicism. Although "So it goes" is a strange reaction to some of the detailed tragedies, it is a fitting phrase amidst the ironic and dark comedic narrative voice. Furthermore, Vonnegut was a known satirist. Len Grossman, in his article "Kurt Vonnegut, 1922-2007," writes that Vonnegut's "opinion of human nature was low, and that low opinion applied to his heroes and villains alike – he was endlessly disappointed in humanity and in himself, and he expressed that disappointment in a mixture of tar-black humor and deep despair" (n.p.). This low opinion of human nature and what humans are capable of pervades the novel.

Both the narrator and Billy Pilgrim address war with contempt. Billy, while interacting with the Tralfamadorians, exclaims, "I am from a planet that has been engaged in senseless

slaughter since the beginning of time. I myself have seen the bodies of schoolgirls who were boiled alive in a water tower by my own countrymen, who were proud of fighting pure evil at the time” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 148). Billy not only describes war as meaningless, but also seems appalled that his countrymen were capable of committing such atrocities. The narrator echoes Billy’s statement in writing of his book about Dresden, “It is so short and jumbled and jangled ... because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds” (24). He continues, “And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like ‘*Poo-tee-weet?*’” (24). Does the supernatural echo the inexplicable nature of war and massacre?

I believe that yes, the supernatural conveys the unintelligible and incomprehensible nature of the atrocities in this text. Billy lives through a massacre in which he witnesses death and destruction as well as humans taking pleasure in the pain and suffering of others. Our narrator is explicit about the horrors of war. The question remains, though, why not stick to historical realism? In other words, what does the supernatural accomplish in this novel? A specific passage exemplifies the purpose of the supernatural. Billy, after having been taken as a Prisoner of War by German soldiers, finds himself in a cottage with “about twenty other Americans ... sitting on the floor with their backs to the wall, staring into the flames—thinking whatever there was to think, which was zero” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 70). Billy is next to “an unprotesting captain” who is also a rabbi who “had been shot through the hand” (71). Suddenly, “Billy traveled in time, opened his eyes, found himself staring into the glass eyes of a jade green mechanical owl ... The owl was Billy’s optometer in his office in Ilium” (71). Even though this scene jumps to an entirely new time and place, it is surprisingly not jarring. Our

narrator's tone remains consistent – blunt, steady, and simple. This jump in time though seems nonsensical.

One explanation for the supernatural in this scene is that there simply is no logical way to convey the experience of war. There is no experience in reality that can fully capture being a Prisoner of War. Instead, we are left with the impression that our protagonist, Billy, is lost. The jump to his optometrist office, after all, is senseless. The reader *feels* the frustration of a jumbled narrative and dazed protagonist. The scene continues, and we learn that “Billy had fallen asleep while examining a female patient who was in a chair on the other side of the owl” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 71). Billy realizes he is forty-four years old and wonders, “Where have all the years gone?” (73). Before he can think much more about his jump in time, Billy “closed his eyes. When he opened them, he was back in World War Two again ... A German was kicking his feet, telling him to wake up, that it was time to move on” (73). The irony of the German's order to “move on” is that Billy simply cannot escape the war. Billy may try to create a new reality for himself, but his journey through time keeps the past simultaneous with his present. He is stuck in a cycle of illogical jumps through time.

The inexplicable nature of Billy's time-traveling captures the purpose of the supernatural in Vonnegut's novel. Vonnegut does not want to explain historical realities in length. He uses the supernatural to convey the incomprehensible nature of war and other such tragedies. In another passage, Billy feels dizzy during a golf match only to recover and find himself aboard a flying saucer to Tralfamadore. Upon asking how he got there, a Tralfamadorian responds, “It would take another Earthling to explain it to you. Earthlings are the great explainers, explaining why this event is structured as it is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 109). In contrast to Earthlings, Tralfamadorians believe, “All

time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is” (109). This Tralfamadorian quote suggests that there is no way to understand moments in history. Vonnegut avoids strict historical realism because he doesn’t want readers to think they comprehend the experience. Rather, Tralfamadorians and flying saucers are senseless, as are war and destruction. There is no rationale for aliens shaped like suction cups just as there is no fitting explanation for the massacres that have defined our past and even present.

This is not to suggest that *Slaughterhouse-Five* demeans or disregards atrocities of history. Our narrator seriously depicts the horrors of war, from “corpses with bare feet that were blue and ivory” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 83) to historical details like “one hundred and thirty thousand people in Dresden would die” (210). It is victory in war and destruction that our narrator suggests is meaningless. The narrator even states, “I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee” (24). There is nothing to celebrate about people hurting other people. There is no explanation that can justify a massacre. Vonnegut launches us to another planet because in reality, there is no way to express the horrors of war. To an extent, Vonnegut warns us that an attempt to accurately understand or explain moments in history is fruitless. These moments have happened, and within the context of the novel, they always will happen. *Slaughterhouse-Five* uses the supernatural to depict a world in which war will always exist. We are asked to reconsider what violence accomplishes within the text as well as within our own world. Our narrator concludes the novel with a scene in Dresden at the end of World War Two:

Billy and the rest wandered out onto the shady street. The trees were leafing out. There was nothing going on out there, no traffic

of any kind. There was only one vehicle, an abandoned wagon drawn by two horses. The wagon was green and coffin-shaped.

Birds were talking.

One bird said to Billy Pilgrim, “*Poo-tee-weet?*” (275)

The novel thus ends on a note of emptiness, and we return to the meaningless phrase, “*Poo-tee-weet.*” I believe we are meant to feel unsettled, even frustrated by this ending. Vonnegut wants us to recognize the senseless slaughter that fills his novel. Even though war ceaselessly exists within the world of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it does not have to within our own.

The supernatural thus works in tandem with the historical to convey the cycle of violence that defines the past, present, and possibly future. The incomprehensible nature of the supernatural also applies to the historical. This notion thus distinguishes *Slaughterhouse-Five* from *The Historian* in which the supernatural and the historical are competing forces. Critics have also received *Slaughterhouse-Five* more favorably. It is Vonnegut’s most famous novel as well as his personal favorite (Grossman n.p.). The novel has been praised as a “book we need to read, and to reread” (“Vonnegut” 25). The supernatural, after all, does not impinge on teaching us about our own universe. The New York Times warns that if you want to put Vonnegut in “the science-fiction category ... you’ll be wrong” (Lehmann-Haupt n.p.). The review continues, *Slaughterhouse-Five* “sounds like a fantastic last-ditch effort to make sense of a lunatic universe. But there is so much more to this book. It is very tough and very funny; it is sad and delightful; and it works” (Lehmann-Haupt n.p.). The novel cannot solely be defined by its emphasis on the supernatural nor the historical. It is the combination of both, and the emotions that arise that capture *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Vonnegut was further praised for his unconventional writing devices. He turned to “irony and black humor ... to illustrate the human condition,” and critics appreciated his “humorous and insightful comments” (“Vonnegut” 25). The narrator’s voice remains consistent through the entirety of the novel, and his tone successfully encompasses both the supernatural and historical worlds. Furthermore, time-travel enables “Mr. Vonnegut to tell his story fluidly, jumping forward and backward in time, free from the strictures of chronology” (Lehmann-Haupt n.p.). Vonnegut moves through time with such ease that it is not distracting from the narrative. Indeed, the novel as a whole is a success. *Slaughterhouse-Five* breaks free from the conventions of the realist novel and is still able to achieve literary truth. We are left, after all, to consider the human condition and violence that defines our world and not that of the planet Tralfamadore.

Conclusion

Supernatural Historical Fiction and its Future

As outlined in the previous two chapters, the supernatural works differently within each of my primary texts. An “undead” Dracula is not nearly as horrifying as the bloody events of Eastern European history detailed in *The Historian*. An immortal Dracula is a fantasy. It is not his presence that is terrifying, but the fact that Vlad Tepes and the crimes he committed were real. Not to mention all of the other atrocities detailed in this novel. The evils of history, not the supernatural, are truly horrifying in this text – evils that remain part of our present. Meanwhile, Vonnegut uses out of this world phenomena to illustrate that the senseless nature of the supernatural may not be so different from historical realities. Searching for meaning in Billy’s Pilgrim’s journey through time is a fruitless endeavor. We are meant to feel the frustration of a disjointed narrative. The Tralfamadarians are important not because they are aliens, but because they emphasize we must be wary of our conception of reality. Events that we may wish belonged solely to the past invade our present. Furthermore, Vonnegut emphasizes that there is no pleasure to be taken in any instance of violence and destruction. The supernatural in both novels helps emphasize that humans are capable of great evil.

These novels also ultimately blend realism and the supernatural to teach us about the world we live in. Indeed, these novels embody why this subgenre is so relevant in contemporary literary studies. Supernatural historical fiction, as previously discussed, is an exaggerated version of historical fiction. History is still the crux of both of these novels. Readers recognize a familiar world in these texts yet they also are confronted by the unbelievable. The supernatural can be both entertaining and bewildering, but it is ultimately a device of achieving literary truth. Both novels teach us about human nature and the evils of history. Furthermore, they remind us

not to view events of history as belonging to the distant past. Rather, history is always part of our present.

These novelists play with the objective view of time that defines realist novels. Kostova brings a figure of the past back to life to touch the present of the novel. It becomes clear that horrors that defined the fifteenth century, such as torture and ruthless war, are frighteningly part of our own reality. Vonnegut completely overturns the chain of events that defines the historical method. He makes the past simultaneous with the present, seemingly warning against viewing history as a closed continuum. Senseless slaughter has and will continue to define our world unless we make a serious change. These novels make us confront horrors that we may wish belonged to the world of the imaginary. Although this subgenre is notable for its unconventional devices and the presence of the unbelievable, it seeks to genuinely reflect on our world.

Supernatural historical fiction is a genre that demands study. Unlike strict historical fiction, this subgenre juxtaposes two seemingly contradictory topics. But maybe this is exactly what readers need in the twenty-first century. David Shields, in his manifesto *Reality Hunger*, calls for new literary forms to match the complexities of our ever-changing world. “Living as we perforce do in a manufactured and artificial world,” Shields writes, “we yearn for the ‘real,’ semblances of the real” (83). In the article “The Fiction of Memory,” Professor Luc Sante emphasizes, “We feel a need for reality, a need that is not being met by the old and crumbling models of literature” (n.p.). The novel, Shields suggests, is too formalized for readers in this day and age. Sante further writes, “reality is a landscape that includes unreal features; being true to reality involves a certain amount of wavering between real and unreal” (n.p.). The depiction of the real and the unreal, or the historical and the supernatural, in this subgenre may not be as problematic for readers as it initially seems. Readers may actually connect to the presence of

both worlds within one text. Indeed, this subgenre may fit a growing need for a new way of commentating on reality that breaks away from the conventional novel. This subgenre thus speaks to twenty-first century culture.

Supernatural historical fiction may also force us to think about history in a way we never have before. *Dracula* becomes a figure with historical resonance while a journey through time emphasizes the repetitive cycle of violence in our world. But the differing reception of my primary texts emphasizes the genre's pitfalls. The blending of the real and the unreal in this subgenre does not exist without problems. Tone, first of all, is crucial. Vonnegut's satirical and comedic voice reassures readers that we are not to take him too seriously. Vonnegut *wants* us to be skeptical. Still, the senseless jumps through time can be frustrating, and readers may wonder if they can believe anything in such a jumbled narrative. Kostova's novel, on the other hand, is grounded in a serious tone that sets the stage for a literary novel about Eastern European history. This tone is problematic in depicting the supernatural moments. The supernatural enters and exits the novel in a startling manner, and we are expected to accept its presence. Indeed, *Dracula*'s appearance can be distracting in the text. Regardless of its pitfalls, this subgenre makes us think about history. Both novelists raise awareness of the historical realities of Eastern European history and World War Two. This blending of fact and fiction, I believe, will become a more prevalent form.

These primary texts are not the only examples of this subgenre. *Going After Cacciato* by Tim O'Brien is a novel about the Vietnam war that "in a blend of reality and fantasy ... tells the story of a young soldier who one day lays down his rifle and sets off on a quixotic journey from the jungles of Indochina to the street of Paris" (Freedman n.p.). There are realistic descriptions of war as well as fantastic dreamlike scenes that belong to the realm of the supernatural. Another

text that delves into this subgenre is *Percival's Planet* by Michael Byers. This novel is based on the true story of the discovery of the planet Pluto. There are moments in the novel characterized by heightened prose, such as a description of Arizona in the summer of 1928 attracting “Tubercular patients in their last visionary days, half-mad desert seekers, white-gowned proponents of psychological truth, sunstruck mummy hunters prospecting in the Grand Canyon ... you hardly have to walk a mile to encounter someone from another world who has decided the Colorado Plateau is the New Atlantis” (Byers 43). The hint of the supernatural in this text is primarily attributed to mental illness. There is an unbalanced woman who believes “she has grown a single enormous tusk about six feet long not quite out of the top of her head but rather around to the back slightly” (63). Still, the presence of supernatural images and descriptions in a text grounded in history suggests that this novel shares features of this subgenre.

Supernatural historical fiction may become a more prevalent form as writers seek new ways to commentate on our world. We must remember that the presence of the supernatural does not demean the literary value of these texts. Vampires and aliens may sound like foolish topics, but they appear in these texts for a reason. Indeed, they seek to teach us about our own world. Analysis of these texts reveals that it is irrelevant whether or not we believe the unbelievable. Rather, it's how the intermingling of the historical and supernatural makes us *feel*. Are we horrified by the historically accurate descriptions of Vlad Tepes rather than an “undead” Dracula? Do we feel the frustration of returning to civilian life after war through Billy's mindless journey through time? In thinking about dark moments of history, we may recognize that we are learning about ourselves and the world we live in.

Works Consulted

Appleby, Joyce, Lynn Avery. Hunt, and Margaret C. Jacob. *Telling the Truth about History*.

New York: W. W. Norton &, 1995. Print.

Balée, Susan. "Textual Pleasures and Pet Peeves." *The Hudson Review*, 58.4 (2006): 689-699.

Web. 1 March 2012.

Byers, Michael. *Percival's Planet: A Novel*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2010.

Print.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Chapter 4: Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts." *Provincializing*

Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP,

2000. 97-113. Print.

Charles, Ron. "Michael Byers's *Percival's Planet*." *The Washington Post*, 11 August 2010.

Web. 8 March 2012.

Collins, Robert A. "Swann on Swann: The Conscious Uses of Fantasy." *Aspects of Fantasy:*

Selected Essays from the Second International Conference on the Fantastic in Literature

and Film. Ed. William Coyle. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986. 23-29. Print.

Faris, Wendy B. "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction."

Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995.

163-90. Print.

Faris, Wendy B. *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of*

Narrative. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2004. Print.

Freedman, Richard. "A Separate Peace." *The New York Times*, 12 February 1978. Web. 8

March 2012.

Frow, John. *Genre*. London: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Grossman, Lev. "Kurt Vonnegut, 1922-2007." *Time*, 12 April 2007. Web. 12 December

2011.

Iser, Wolfgang. "The Rudiments of a Theory of Aesthetic Response." *The Act of Reading: a Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978. 20-38. Print.

Jameson, Fredric. "Preface." *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981. 9-14. Print.

Jones, Edward. *The Known World: A Novel*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2003. Print.

Jones, Edward P. "Edward P. Jones on *The Known World*." *HarperCollins Publishers — World Leading Book Publisher*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2010. Web. 29 Sept. 2011.

Kostova, Elizabeth. *The Historian: a Novel*. New York: Little, Brown, 2005. Print

Kostova, Elizabeth and Hayley Whitlock. "A Conversation with the Author of *The Historian*: Elizabeth Kostova Talks with Hayley Whitlock of *BookEnds*." *The Historian: a Novel*. New York: Little, Brown, 2005. 1-7. Print.

Lehmann-Haupt, Christopher. "Slaughterhouse-Five, Or the Children's Crusade." *The New York Times*, 21 November 2010. Web. 5 February 2012.

Mallon, Thomas. "Never Happened: Fictions of alternative history." *The New Yorker*, 21 November 2011. Web. 6 December 2011.

Maslin, Janet. "Scholarship Trumps the Stake in Pursuit of Dracula." *The New York Times*, 13 June 2005. Web. 5 February 2012.

McKeon, Michael. "Toward Realism, the Aesthetic, and Human Creativity." *The Origins of the English Novel: 1600-1740*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ., 1987. 118-28. Print.

O'Brien, Tim. *Going After Cacciato*. New York: Broadway Books, 1999. Print.

Rejali, Darius. *Torture and Democracy*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007. Print.

- Rogers, Mary F. "The Fictive." *Novels, Novelists, and Readers: toward a Phenomenological Sociology of Literature*. Albany: State University of New York, 1991. 203-12. Print.
- Sante, Luc. "The Fiction of Memory." *The New York Times*, 12 March 2010. Web. 1 March 2012.
- Shields, Charles J. *And So It Goes: Kurt Vonnegut, a Life*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2011. Print.
- Shields, David. *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. Print.
- Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2000. Print.
- Valdez Moses, Michael. "Magical Realism at World's End." *Literary Imagination: The Review of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics* 3.1 (2001): 105-33. *Oxfordjournals.org*. Web. 9 Nov. 2011
- Vonnegut, Kurt. *Fates Worse than Death: an Autobiographical Collage of the 1980s*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1991. Print.
- . *Slaughterhouse-Five*. New York: Dial Trade Paperbacks, 2009. Print.
- "Vonnegut." *Literary Calvacade*. January 2001. 25. Web. 8 March 2012.
- Watt, Ian P. "Chapter I: Realism and the novel form." *The Rise of the Novel; Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding*. Berkeley: University of California, 1957. 9-35. Print.
- Watt, Ian P. "Chapter II: The Reading Public and the Rise of the Novel." *The Rise of the Novel; Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding*. Berkeley: University of California, 1957. 35-59. Print.