

In Search of Lost Time: Fiction, Archaeology, and the Elusive Subject of Prehistory

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THE ENTHUSIASTIC PUBLIC RECEPTION OF PREHISTORIC FICTION (NOVELS AND STORIES set before the advent of writing) from J.-H. Rosny's *La Guerre du feu* to Jean M. Auel's *The Clan of the Cave Bear* demonstrates widespread fascination with prehistory, despite or perhaps because of how little we know about it. One of the central reasons for wishing to learn about the past is to understand the present. Many of the most significant shifts in human history occurred prior to *history* in the strict sense (studies of the past based on primary sources): the development of agriculture, metallurgy, urbanisation, the genesis of class society, labour specialisation.

Yet we can only grasp the meaning of those shifts by thinking about them the way the people at the time would have understood them. This is not easy. In contrast with the work of historians, who are able to use primary sources to enrich their accounts of the past with a high degree of specificity, the academic study of prehistory consists largely of provisional, frequently contested and revised hypotheses describing processes of change over long time scales. Such discourses have tended to offer 'an alienated, impersonal history' that often does not resonate much beyond the academy (Bernbeck 98). Archaeological research is necessarily constrained by what can be excavated and studied, which leaves large gaps in our understanding of aspects of prehistoric life that must have been central to prehistoric people: social relations, gender roles, the rhythms of daily life

(Tringham, 'Endangered Places' 170). The 'field of tension within historiography in general' (Van Dyke and Bernbeck 6) between rigorous adherence to verifiable fact and the 'yearning within historical research for subjective access to the past' (Pihlainen 56) is particularly acute for prehistory due to its sparse evidential base.

By contrast, in prehistoric fiction subjective accounts of prehistory are readily available to the reader. But such works have been criticised for infidelity to the archaeological record (De Paolo 1-7; Ruddick 11; Van Dyke and Bernbeck 3), subordination to an ideological agenda (Angenot and Khouri 39; Ruddick 127) and insufficient sensitivity to the ethics of representing past peoples (J. Thomas 177). Some archaeologists have attempted to bridge the gap between material evidence and subjectivity by incorporating elements of fictional narrative into their research (Gibb 160; Tringham, 'Creating Narratives' 28) or even by writing novels based on their discoveries (Nelson 219). Such efforts, however, have suffered from a different and opposing set of problems: constrained by their discipline, and lacking the skills, experience and commitments specific to fiction writing, archaeologists have struggled to produce compelling, immersive fictional narrative (J. Thomas 183).

My own interest in this problem is a practical one. I am currently writing a work of prehistoric fiction. Not all fictional narrative about prehistory has the same purpose; different means are suited to different ends. Jim Crace's novel *The Gift of Stones* uses its prehistoric setting for philosophical and allegorical purposes, and Eric Chevillard's *Prehistoric Times* reflects on the nature of time, mortality and the absurdity of human existence. For me, however, the aim is to acquire an understanding of a moment in prehistory that is as fully realised as possible, and to represent the perspective of my characters in such a way as to immerse the reader in their world. My formal training and experience is in literary studies and creative writing rather than archaeology; the questions of how to reconstruct prehistoric subjectivity, what knowledge and skills are required to do so, and who is best equipped to make the attempt are therefore pressing ones for me.

In this article, I consider the relationship between narrative, archaeological research and fiction writing. For these purposes, I consider the relationship (famously explored by C. P. Snow) between science and literature, both within the discipline of archaeology itself, and in terms of the encounter between archaeology and fiction writing required to produce prehistoric fiction.

Prehistory and Fiction

The term *prehistoric* emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, slightly in advance of a fully realised conception of prehistory as we would recognise it today. Its exact provenance is not entirely clear, but two of the earliest scholars to use it (or the

cognate words in their respective languages) were the Danish historian Christian Molbech and the Swedish archaeologist Sven Nilsson. A dispute between the two, carried out in the pages of academic journals in the mid-1840s, demonstrates the contested intellectual terrain on which prehistory emerged as an object of enquiry. Molbech criticises other historians' endeavours to parse history from myth and legend. He argues that their complex theories, correlating Biblical chronology with a euhemeristic interpretation of the Norse sagas, are unreliable and tendentious. Nevertheless, he maintains that *some* kernel of historical truth can be extracted from ancient narrative poetry. For Nilsson, however, Molbech does not go far enough: any attempt to treat myth as a basis for history is misguided and illegitimate. The absence of contemporaneous written sources excludes prehistory from historical study and places it firmly in the realm of his own discipline, archaeology (Rowley-Conwy 107-12).

Nilsson's arguments prevailed in this academic turf war: episteme over mythos. Our understanding of prehistory has ever since been grounded (literally as well as metaphorically) by evidence gained at shovel-point. Archaeologists' commitment to the cautious and provisional advancement of hypotheses, tested using painstaking empirical means, have afforded us a vast, complex and sophisticated body of knowledge (Renfrew and Bahn 9).

Absent from this type of knowledge, however, are answers to some of the questions that a curious non-specialist would be most likely to ask. Who *were* the people of the Paleolithic? What did they talk about? What drove their actions, what were their hopes, their fears, their codes of conduct? What was it *like* to be a man living on the bank of the Neolithic Dnieper, or a woman in the Mesolithic Alps?

Even in history, for which we have the benefit of accounts written by historical subjects themselves, such questions are problematised by the gap between the cultural contexts of modern readers and historical writers. Texts are not self-contained semiotic parcels, but interventions on a much larger field of shared meaning, in which language is only the most basic stratum. Primary sources leave out much that would be taken for granted by their contemporaries; a naïve reading that assumes the world of the writer is similar to the reader's own is likely to misinterpret the words on the page (Carr 24). And if history requires a complex apparatus of cautious inference and informed interpretation, the study of prehistory, which by definition lacks primary sources (Clark xvii), requires a considerable tolerance for leaving unanswerable questions unanswered. Indeed (at least up until the rise of post-processual or interpretative archaeology) questions of subjective experience and individual agency were generally bracketed in archaeology in favour of broader analyses of material, social and cultural change over long time-scales (Hodder, 'Theoretical Archaeology' 2; Tringham, 'Engendered Places' 170-1).

But public demand for access to prehistoric subjectivity is not predicated on whether such reconstructions are empirically legitimate. Almost as soon as the concept of prehistory was formed, novels and short stories set in prehistoric times began to appear, first in Paris, in the 1860s, and shortly after in London and New York. In addition to popular science books and the exhibition of prehistoric artefacts in natural history museums, one of the ways in which prehistory disseminated from academic discourse into public consciousness was via these works of prehistoric fiction. Indeed, the very first prehistoric novel, the rather lurid and fantastical *Paris avant les hommes* written in 1861 by the botanist and geologist Pierre Boitard, was published in an educational context, as a prize for diligent school pupils (Ruddick 17).

Prehistoric fiction has been published in many languages, most prolifically in French and English, and has been written by various kinds of authors, from science fiction pioneers such as J.-H. Rosny (the collaborative pseudonym of a pair of brothers) and H. G. Wells to authors better known for literary fiction such as William Golding and Jim Crace, and popular writers such as Bernard Cornwell and Jean M. Auel, whose *Earth's Children* series brought stories of the Upper Paleolithic to millions of readers. Aside from novels, fictional depictions of life in prehistory have taken other forms: visual art, such as the illustrator Emile Bayard's impressionistic depictions of scenes from prehistory, or the lifelike sculptures by Élisabeth Daynès, based on forensic reconstructions of prehistoric remains; films such as *La Guerre du feu* (an adaptation of a novel of the same name by Rosny) and the more recent *10,000 BC*; 'L'Age Antéhistorique', an 1867 narrative poem in five parts; and video games, such as *Far Cry Primal*, which pits the player against woolly mammoths and sabre-toothed tigers. And of course, cartoons: *The Flintstones* transposes a suburban nuclear family into a comedically anachronistic version of a Stone Age world in which characters dressed in animal-skin clothing coexist with dinosaurs and drive in cars with stone wheels.

While most works of prehistoric fiction make more serious attempts at depicting prehistory than *The Flintstones* does, the genre's position in literature has been decidedly marginal. Despite the presence of both Rosny brothers in the original membership of the académie Goncourt (Ransom 293), only a very few works, such as William Golding's *The Inheritors* and the elder Rosny's *La Guerre du feu*, have received critical acclaim. The academic literature on prehistoric fiction as a genre is scant compared to the much richer tradition of criticism of the historical novel, from Herbert Butterfield to Georg Lukács and Fredric Jameson. This relative dearth of scholarship is likely related to the sensationalist and romanticised portrayal of prehistory contained in much of the genre—the relentless violence of the earliest works was mocked by Gustave Flaubert (Cohen 18)—as well as its later association with pulp fiction and, since Auel, the mass-market paperback.

For Nicholas Ruddick, whose book *Fire in the Stone* is the most comprehensive English-language critical account of prehistoric fiction, the genre is a form of speculative fiction, closely aligned to science fiction. He argues that our understanding of prehistory is based solely on the ‘material evidence’ of the archaeological record, which, in the absence of writing, leaves ‘very few traces’ of ‘languages, customs and beliefs’ (2). Ruddick argues that prehistoric fiction is therefore a highly speculative endeavour. He posits a hard break between history, which ‘may be undecidable but... not unknowable’ and prehistory, which he claims is, like the future, ‘ultimately unknowable’ (3). In Ruddick’s account, prehistory is something of a blank slate; in order to use it as the setting for a novel, an author must undertake a cultural world-building of a similar kind to that required when writing a story set in a fantasy world or an imagined far future.

The implication of Ruddick’s claim is that prehistoric fiction, inasmuch as it evokes the subjectivity of prehistoric characters, is essentially an exercise in fantasy, albeit bounded by the evidence of the archaeological record. Although at the most literal level, this claim is unarguable (a novelist is not a spirit medium), it fails to recognise the contribution that narrative can make in knowledge construction. Later in this article I will argue that a more dynamic, bidirectional relationship between prehistoric fiction and archaeology is possible.

However, it is certainly the case that writers of prehistoric fiction have all too often treated their prehistoric storyworlds as mere vehicles for contemporary ideological content. In a survey of the genre, the critics Marc Angenot and Nadia Khouri describe it as an ‘intellectual apparatus’ that incorporates and reinforces certain ideological currents, projecting back onto prehistory nineteenth-century ideas about race, teleological notions of progress, vulgarisations of Darwin, and ‘a hodge-podge of pseudo-socialist or reactionary speculations, where the influences of Malthus, Spencer, Nietzsche, and Marx often form some disturbing combinations’ (39). Looking back at the thematic and narrative content of prehistoric fiction over a century and a half, we can see cultural reflexes of contemporaneous social change. For instance, there is an initial preponderance of regressive sexual politics—dominant cave-man, submissive cave-woman—which, in its attempt to naturalise gender roles and essentialise gender identities, reveals anxiety about contemporary changes to gender norms (Ruddick 133-7). More recent works do precisely the opposite, emphasising the contingency of such norms. Mary Mackey’s *Earthsong* trilogy draws on the work of the archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, according to whom a longstanding peaceful and egalitarian society in Neolithic Europe was invaded during the Bronze Age by warlike, horse-riding nomads from the eastern steppe (Gimbutas 23, 34). The reception of Mackey’s work, whether appreciative or deprecatory, interprets and evaluates it more as an intervention in the so-called culture wars of American society than as

an exploration of prehistoric Europe *per se*; and in interviews about her own work, Mackey states that she intends the reading of her novels to be a transformative experience (Wilcox 331-2; Guillen 23-5; Margolis).

Both of these tendencies—escapism with reactionary overtones, and thinly disguised agitprop—tell us more about writers' contemporary preoccupations than they do about prehistoric life. Might it be that archaeologists themselves, with their wealth of knowledge and disciplinary commitment to the pursuit of truth, are better equipped than novelists to reconstruct prehistoric subjectivity?

This complex question requires unpacking. Underlying it are three further questions that require at least provisional answers. What *are* the disciplinary commitments of archaeologists, and what kind of knowledge do they seek? In pursuit of that knowledge, does narrative play a role as a function of archaeological inquiry? And what challenges and opportunities does the practice of writing prehistoric fiction present to archaeologists?

Archaeological Knowledge

As a discipline, archaeology occupies a complex position; it can be viewed as an aspect both of anthropology and of history, or even 'a science as well as a humanity' (Renfrew and Bahn 12; Trigger 172). Its raw data are artefacts from the past that happen to have been preserved sufficiently to be inspected in the present, assisted by a wide range of tools and techniques: radiocarbon dating, stratigraphy, geographic information systems, molecular genetics, evolutionary biology and comparative linguistics (Renfrew and Bahn 118, 124, 137, 222). But in order to make sense of these data, interpretive work is required to construct a coherent narrative of what happened in the past (Trigger 19). Especially in the case of prehistoric archaeology, debates about the kinds of knowledge that can be obtained, the utility of various interpretive strategies, and the ends to which such knowledge should be put have been long-running and contentious (Renfrew 6-9; Childe 54-5; Hodder, 'Theoretical Archaeology' 1-3; Boado 134-5).

In his book *A History of Archaeological Thought*, Bruce G. Trigger traces the development of a number of regional and intellectual currents into several broad groupings (10-11). Many of the theoretical shifts responded to perceived inadequacies in existing schools of thought, and also to broader ideological trends. For instance, in the late nineteenth century, excavations across Europe revealed a diversity of artefacts in complex geographical clustering that could not be explained by the explanatory framework that had been generally accepted until that point, an evolutionary sequencing based on types of prehistoric tools and metallurgy. When this schema proved too simplistic to account for the discoveries, a new typological theory known as *culture-historical* archaeology emerged to

explain them, grouping sites into archaeological ‘cultures’ representing discrete social or ethnic groups (161, 168). The ideological utility of such a conception to nationalist programmes in lending ancient gravitas to social or political formations—even (or especially) to relatively modern ones—is similar to that of nationalist history (174; Suny 870; Kristiansen, ‘Old Boundaries’ 111).

One of the movements most significant to the present discussion is known as post-processual or interpretive archaeology. In the late 1970s, the dominant school was processual archaeology, which promoted a systemic approach, using deductive reasoning to marshal reliable explanations from quantitative data (Binford, ‘Archaeological Perspectives’ 16-18), in which changes in material culture are explained largely on the basis of technological adaptation to pressure from the natural environment or neighbouring groups (Binford, ‘Archaeology as Anthropology’ 218, 224; Willey and Phillips 200; Trigger 296). In 1980, however, a group of archaeologists expressed their dissatisfaction with the processual theory and its implications for practice, on a number of fronts. Processualist explanations for change as adaptive reactions to exogenous pressure depend on a conception of societies as naturally homeostatic (Hodder, ‘Theoretical Archaeology’ 3). Such explanations, post-processualists argue, produce passive and reductionist accounts of past societies (Tilley 369) in which individual agency and the particularity of intra-societal dynamics all but disappears (Hodder, ‘Postprocessual Archaeology’ 1-3). Moreover, processualist claims for the objectivity of knowledge derived from archaeological research are challenged for their neglect of archaeologists’ own subjective biases in the interpretation of data (11-13) and the social construction of even the data itself ‘within a field of symbolic interaction’ (Kus 48). These questions are particularly significant for feminist archaeologists, for whom bracketing questions of gender and intra-communal dynamics leaves unacceptable lacunae (Tringham, ‘Engendered Places’ 181). They are also salient to the present discussion of the prehistoric subject, which is too tiny and fleeting to be discerned in the *longue durée* of gradual evolutionary processes described by processualists.

The debate has not been settled (Flohr Sørensen, ‘New Crossroads’ 102). Whether post-processualism should even be understood in oppositional terms, rather than as a corrective to and extension of processualism, is a matter of dispute (Renfrew and Bahn 46). So is the question of whether post-processualism is a coherent movement or a collective term for a set of various critiques without a specific methodology (Earle and Preucel 512-3). It is beyond the scope of the present paper and the competencies of its author to explore these questions in depth. Some observations in general terms may, however, prove salient.

The post-processual movement in archaeology can be situated as part of a broader shift towards critical reflexivity in the humanities and social sciences: the ‘opening

of the discipline to the [then] current concerns of the human sciences as a whole' (Thomas and Tilley 107). Since the high water mark of post-processualist theory in the 1980s, however, advances in scientific methods such as genetic sequencing and the use of algorithmic techniques to marshal large sets of quantitative data (Kristiansen, 'New Paradigm' 13, 17-18) have led to a reorientation of archaeology towards a strongly empirical approach; perhaps even a 'silent collapse' of post-processualism (14) in favour of a 'Scientific Turn' (Flohr Sørensen, 'New Crossroads' 101). Or, conversely, contemporary approaches may be understood as eclectic and pragmatic, drawing on different theoretical paradigms depending on their applicability to the line of enquiry or at different 'levels of interpretation'; a 'bricolage' of theory (Pearce et al. 87).

There is a pattern to these turns and paradigm shifts. From Nilsson and Molbech's mid-nineteenth-century dispute over whether humanistic methods or those of the natural sciences were better suited to investigate prehistory, successive schools of thought have shifted the focus back and forth between these poles. Rather than a mere pendulum swing or succession of fads, this oscillation represents a dialectical progression of corrections made necessary by the ambivalent, impure and partial nature of archaeological evidence, requiring multiple lenses to be brought into focus. Since its emergence as a concept and an object of study, prehistory has been contested terrain to which both of C. P. Snow's famous 'Two Cultures' (if we define them as the sciences and the humanities—somewhat broader terms than Snow's, a point to which I will return shortly) can stake a credible claim, but neither can occupy alone. The vexed question of how to combine insights from across disciplines—and bridge Snow's 'gulf of mutual incomprehension' (4)—lies at the heart of archaeology's long-standing epistemological tensions. The archaeologist Tim Flohr Sørensen warns that since Snow's day, the tables have been turned: it is now the sciences that possess the 'political capital'—and the public funding that accompanies it—leading to a 'fetishisation of data' and a return to positivism ('New Crossroads' 101, 103, 107). Flohr Sørensen argues that what is really being accomplished in the name of interdisciplinarity is not merely the utilisation of scientific means, but the subordination of archaeology to scientific ends, in which only certain types of knowledge are legitimated, and everything else dismissed as mere conjecture (108, 111). He writes:

I find it difficult, however, to see any point in archaeology—whatsoever—if it does not address topics like 'belief systems, worldviews, and societal relations', which must eventually be reconstructed and understood through an interpretative methodology within which the researcher is necessarily grounded subjectively (108).

Flohr Sørensen suggests, instead, a ‘multi-disciplinary’ approach that welcomes the insights afforded by scientific advances such as gene sequencing and isotopic analysis, while also respecting the role of interpretation and ‘methodical speculation’ in the production of archaeological knowledge that maintains its ‘multivocality, sustaining the strengths and principles of each partner in the collaboration’ (110-11).

One might object that this formulation does not reflect the reality of synthesising knowledge from multiple disciplines, in which the findings of one may constrain the parameters of another’s line of inquiry (Kristiansen, ‘Nature’ 122). Further, it can be read as essentialising a dichotomy between the sciences and humanities that is better understood as historically contingent (Boutser and Karstens 352). The division between the humanities and sciences may better be understood as running *through* archaeology itself, rather than between archaeology and sources of knowledge exterior to it (Fossheim 116). Nevertheless, even if the above discussion has not answered the first of our three questions (what are the disciplinary commitments of archaeologists?) it has, at least, usefully qualified it by pluralising its terms. Archaeologists must contend with *multiple* disciplinary commitments that are sometimes in conflict, and the kinds of knowledge sought in archaeological research are also multiple, ranging in degree of certainty, and encompassing both material facts and propositions about their social, cultural and symbolic significance. The generation of such knowledge necessarily crosses disciplinary boundaries and involves collaboration between multiple researchers, because it involves ‘more highly advanced competences...than the gifted student will be able to develop in the course of a lifetime’ (Fossheim 118).

Narrative in Archaeology

To return briefly to C. P. Snow, the ‘Two Cultures’ to which his essay refers are often taken to be science on the one hand and, on the other, either the humanities in general or, more specifically, literary studies. In this framing, the equivalent term to ‘science’ is not ‘literature’ but, rather, ‘literary criticism’, whereas literature itself ‘corresponds to nature, the subject-matter of study’ (Collini lii). The ‘archetypal figure’ that Snow chooses to represent the culture of ‘literary intellectuals’, however, is T. S. Eliot, speaking not about his works as a critic but as a poet (4). Snow’s intentions aside, for the purpose of this discussion I would like to interpret the phrase ‘science and literature’ not as a contrast between academic disciplines but between two kinds of activity: scientific research and creative writing, specifically the writing of fictional narrative (Beer 88).

The act of narration is crucial to archaeology; not only in order to make meaning from the raw data of fieldwork or the output of laboratory analysis, but even in

determining what is worth excavating in the first place, or what kinds of analysis are worth undertaking. The archaeologist Ruth Tringham, for example, ascribes her colleagues' reluctance to investigate the burning of houses in the Neolithic Vinča culture to their acceptance of a certain narrative in which those societies are depicted as peaceful and egalitarian ('Engendered Places' 174-7). Storytelling is deeply embedded in the practice of archaeology 'from its inception in the field or lab' to 'the formalization of stories in lectures, books' and other media (Joyce 4, 17).

The kinds of stories that archaeologists tell and how they tell them, however, has changed over time. Ian Hodder describes a 'gradual shift from the contingent and contextualised in the 18th century to the modern, abstract, distanced and universal' ('Writing Archaeology' 272). First-person narrators who pepper their field reports with impressions and opinions gave way, over time, to an impersonal narration that makes heavy use of the passive tense, such that 'it appears as if self-evident data are simply described in neutral terms' (271). This 'neutral' style is a rhetoric of authority that, by its austerity, disavows its own essence *as* rhetoric (J. Thomas 169-71). One need not follow the theorist Hayden White to the relativistic extreme of dissolving the distinction between history and fiction (*Tropics* 82, 88) to recognise the *constructive* role that narrative and rhetoric play in advancing an account of past events and their significance (*Metahistory* 29; Hodder, 'Narrative and Rhetoric' 272-4; Plucinniek, 'Archaeological Narratives' 257-8). Some post-processual and feminist critics of the impersonal, abstract style argue that it obscures points of uncertainty, doubt and open-endedness that are inevitable in archaeology (Hodder, 'Writing Archaeology' 273) and presents a false sense of closure, a 'monologue' in Mikhail Bakhtin's sense, 'finalized and deaf to the other's response' (293). Such critics urge archaeologists to be upfront about the intentions, limitations and biases of their own standpoints (Leone 182) and to engage in 'listening, understanding, and accommodation among different voices' (Hodder, 'Interpretive Archaeology' 15), a 'dialogic' model that upholds 'some degree of autonomy of human subjects' (Joyce 9).

From my own perspective, as an outsider to the discipline, I often wish that archaeologists would more frequently speculate in their writing on possible interpretations of their findings. During my brief time at an excavation, whenever I asked what a certain artefact might indicate about the prehistoric people who made and used it, the archaeologists on site would readily provide a number of possible interpretations—usually concluding with the warning that there was not sufficient evidence to decide one way or another. By contrast, the impression I receive from the vast majority of academic archaeological texts I have read is that, in writing, archaeologists tend to propose hypotheses only when they have sufficient evidence to defend them from critique by their peers. From the perspective of an archaeologist protecting their reputation, this approach makes

good sense. But it remains the case that I have gleaned far more evocative detail that is proving useful in my creative practice from a few brief conversations on a dig than I would find spending the same amount of time reading field reports, journal articles, monographs or even books of popular archaeology. I appreciate the force of Joyce's critique of 'monologic' archaeological discourse.

Even in the case of a 'dialogic' discourse that reveals ambiguity and multiple interpretations, however, the voices and perspectives remain contemporary ones. In a study of narrative in archaeology, Mark Pluciennik notes that even where archaeologists depart from the 'third-person passive', archaeological narrative presents a 'bird's eye view' onto a 'story of, rather than in, the past...There is usually little sense of actions, events, or history considered from the actor's point of view' ('Archaeological Narratives' 667). The narratologist Gerard Genette's terminology may offer greater precision here; to put it in his terms, we could say that archaeological narrative typically uses a heterodiegetic narrator to tell a story with external focalisation (190, 245).

Writing Prehistoric Fiction

Typically—but not universally. The book *Subjects and Narratives in Archaeology* collects explorations of unconventional uses of narrative as archaeological practice, of various kinds—stories, dramatic dialogue, novels and digital media—and purposes: both to present their findings in a way that will engage the interest of the general public and also, through the exercise of imagination in order to generate a story, to prompt themselves to ask new questions and thus to generate new lines of enquiry for further research (Gibb 160). Concerns common to many of the discussions are the ethics of representing past peoples in fictional narrative (Van Dyke 83-4; Pluciennik, 'Authoritative and Ethical Voices' 67; J. Thomas 177; Tringham, 'Creating Narratives' 37), as well as a desire to make clear to the reader how such narratives connect to the empirical evidence, to distinguish between fact and fiction. Several of the writers express concern (J. Thomas 172; Van Dyke and Bernbeck 2) that non-archaeologist writers lack both these scruples and the depth of knowledge required to tackle fiction set in prehistory:

... far better for archaeologists to direct this work than to leave the field to filmmakers, novelists, or other avocationalists whose enthusiasm may be great but whose engagement with the empirical data is necessarily shallow. (Van Dyke 94)

The results of these experiments are interesting. Ruth Tringham's 'Dead Women Do Tell Tales' is an interactive multimedia experience, accessible online: the reader navigates through a network of hyperlinked nodes, spatially visualised via the browser. The nodes contain various kinds of content: video and still images

from the archaeological site, technical descriptions of artefacts, fieldwork reports describing the actions and emotional responses of archaeologists at the site, and short fragments of narrative from the perspective of prehistoric women. Some of the nodes even give voice to the artefacts themselves—the node ‘Biography of a Neolithic Basket’ opens with the statement: ‘I am going to speak as this basket or rather this basket will speak through me’. The effect is one of radical openness; it lays the process of fieldwork, analysis and interpretation bare, and by the use of the narrative fragments, it invites the reader to speculate on what life might have been like for the Neolithic people who once inhabited the site. It certainly does not invite the reader into a fully-realised prehistoric narrative: that is not its intention.

Other creative works by archaeologists are written in a more conventional format. The novels of Sarah Hilledge Nelson, such as *Spirit Bird Journey*, aim for a ‘binocular vision’ of past and present: some chapters are written from the perspective of Clara, an archaeologist character, others—which are narrated as Clara’s ‘dreams or visions’—from the perspective of one of the ancient people whom Clara is researching (‘Talking Potsherds’ 217, 220). Nelson wishes to immerse the reader in the past, while also describing the ways in which knowledge of that past is acquired, ‘the discoveries of the spade and the work of the laboratory...without too many grubby details but without ignoring them, either’ (217). The dual narratives are not, however, convincingly realised: Clara’s lucid dreaming is a clumsy, whimsical device, and the problem is exacerbated by a lack of stylistic differentiation between the two narratives. The chapters set in the past suffer from that combination of anachronistic sensibility and superficial periodisation which Georg Lukács criticises as ‘sterile exoticism’ in mediocre historical novels (177, 182).

It is unfair to single out Nelson’s works for criticism, as the problem is a common one. To invert Van Dyke’s point about avocationalists, an archaeologist attempting to write a novel for the first time can be characterised as an ‘avocationalist’ or enthusiastic dabbler with just as much force as an author who decides to set a novel in prehistory for the first time. As the archaeologist Isaac Gilead notes:

Creative writing, playing, and movie making are generated by inner drives and by abilities that people are born with and develop during their lifetimes. The drives and talents that ‘make’ archaeologists are of a different order, and very few can excel in both archaeology and the arts. We are indeed interested in *Things*, but do we have the talent of Georges Perec? Can archaeologists acquire such skills? I doubt it. If not, why should the public read books or watch movies created by unprofessional authors or directors? (245)

Writing fiction is not simply a matter of relaxing one's commitment to objective truth; the question of 'talent' aside, mastery of the skills and practices involved requires more discarded manuscripts, dead ends and bloody-mindedness than an archaeologist is likely to be able to spare on top of their academic duties. Institutional forces work against such efforts: not only in the fact that fictional narratives are unlikely to count towards academic output, but also the active disapproval of colleagues towards what may be considered an unserious activity, as the archaeologist Jonathan T. Thomas remarks (172). With generous frankness, he describes his own efforts to write stories set in prehistory, and the problems he encountered while doing so. His sensibility as a reader and his understanding of literary modes and stylistic issues are demonstrated by the difficulties he identifies: narratological contradictions ('would the omniscient narrator be omniscient of the past but not of the present?'), epistemic impoverishment ('stripped of all modern knowledge, I was left with a prehistoric protagonist that was vague and uninteresting') and the development of a convincing idiom in dialogue and first-person narrative ('I am still plagued by the spectre of "hokeyness", a literary quality that is poison to the suspension of disbelief'), all of which are significant problems writers of prehistoric fiction must negotiate (176, 183). Yet, despite his grasp of the problems, Thomas admits that is unable to find solutions as a writer that live up to his expectations as a reader:

As it turns out, the methods of postmodern metafiction are not particularly well suited to writing stories about the ancient past...the vignettes were too experimental and confusing (or perhaps just poorly written)... It turns out I could not be the servant of contemporary literature, the archaeological record, and critical theory all at once. (178)

Thomas's account of his foray into writing fiction demonstrates the gap between his insight into the stylistic approach most suited to the 'technical, rhetorical, and epistemological' problematics he wished his stories to explore, and his inability to actualise that insight (177). Not only was he torn between the contradictory commitments of archaeologist and author, but—as he admits with commendable honesty—he lacked the skill and experience to realise his vision of the story he wished write.

These practical failures do not invalidate Thomas's insights. It is not that 'the methods of postmodern metafiction' (177) are necessarily unsuitable for dealing with prehistory; the problem is rather that such methods' self-conscious narration and intradiegetic interrogation of the text's own artifice preclude the kind of immersive representation required to bring the reader into an encounter with a prehistoric subjectivity.

Given Thomas's own epistemic scepticism (183), would such representation even be a legitimate outcome in his own terms? Or, rather, would not an aesthetics of limitation and uncertainty better suit the ethics espoused by Thomas in relation to the prehistoric subject: 'it... seemed slightly insensitive to attempt some sort of emic Paleolithic voice coming from the back of the cave' (177). As the literary scholar Bruno Blanckeman points out, there is something paradoxical about writing prehistoric fiction, which 'calls into question its own narrative legitimacy: reflecting modes of life that were ignorant of writing, it can only situate itself awkwardly in relation to them' (160, translation mine). In his novel *Prehistoric Times*, the author Eric Chevillard makes no attempt to elide these contradictions, but revels in them. His protagonist, a present-day tour guide at a site of ancient cave paintings, is obsessed with mortality and the frailties of the body; the meandering, digressive narrative is reminiscent of Samuel Beckett. The novel is not prehistoric fiction in the strict sense, but its ruminations touch on more of the epistemological and ethical issues at stake in the study of prehistory than many works that attempt to represent prehistoric life directly. Yet Chevillard is not an archaeologist or a scholar of prehistory. It is his sensibility as an author, a novelist who delights in the absurdity of life and death, that enabled him to write such a book.

This is not to claim that all literature can say about prehistory is that it is impenetrable, or to satirise attempts to uncover its mysteries. Immersive representation *is* possible, as William Golding demonstrates with his evocation of Neanderthal interiority in *The Inheritors* (Ruddick 178)—although Golding's portrayal has been criticised for scientific inaccuracy (De Paolo 78). Critics have pointed out the proliferation of novels which are implausible in the light of prehistoric archaeology, given their anachronistic mixing of different periods' cultural practices and technologies (De Paolo 3; Ruddick 9-10).

The writing of prehistoric fiction, then, at least inasmuch as it aspires to some degree of verisimilitude, appears to be riven by a contradiction or caught in a double bind: novelists dabbling in prehistory tend to write sensationalist or misinformed narratives, whereas for professional archaeologists acting as amateur authors, the pedagogical intent tends to override literary concerns, producing novels marked more by worthiness than evocative representation. The exceptions are so few as to prove the rule: one such is the anthropologist Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, whose novels of Paleolithic hunter-gatherers, *Reindeer Moon* and *The Animal Wife* are unusually strong instances of prehistoric fiction: they evoke a world that is coherent in its own terms but utterly alien to the reader's own. Perhaps Thomas is one of Gilead's 'very few' who have mastered both the academic and literary skills involved.

For a more replicable model, we might recall Flossheim's observation that archaeology itself requires collaboration between disciplines because it requires more skills than an individual is likely to be able to acquire 'in the course of a lifetime'. *The Gathering Night*, a novel by the Scottish writer Margaret Elphinstone, was written after weeks of dialogue with an archaeologist, Caroline Wickham-Jones, with whom she participated in an excavation (533-4). Elphinstone portrays a Mesolithic community via a series of homodiegetic narratives; the lifeworld and story play out in their own terms, rather than (as is so often the case in prehistoric fiction) as a morality play or an escapist fantasy with a prehistoric backdrop. One notable fact about Elphinstone is that—unlike many other writers of prehistoric fiction—she had previously written several historical novels. It is perhaps this experience that gave her the ability to 'wear her research so lightly' (Kirchhoff), prompting critics to praise the novel's 'beguiling prose' (Sethi) that 'persuades us to accept its entirely different value-system without a qualm' (Thorpe) rather than the faint praise of 'accuracy' with which prehistoric fiction is usually damned.

I draw two crucial lessons from Elphinstone's achievement. One is that she did not treat prehistory as Ruddick's 'ultimately unknowable' cultural blank slate. She drew on ethnographic parallels from her own experiences with the Saami people of Lapland to construct an understanding of the hunter-gatherer societies Mesolithic Scotland. The other is that the relationship between Elphinstone's creative practice and the scholarship of Wickham-Jones was not purely a one-way flow of information. Wickham-Jones notes the unexpected mutual benefit of the collaboration:

My initial agenda had been simply to get reliable information about the Mesolithic out to a wider audience. I saw her as my interpreter, someone who could translate my academic interests into popular discourse... But another aspect of our collaboration gradually became apparent...the process was beginning to stimulate my own academic investigations. I started to consider aspects of prehistoric life that had not occurred to me before: 'So, what did they have for breakfast?' It occurred to me that I had never tried to make my idea of Mesolithic life actually work. (536)

Not only, then, does the division of labour between archaeologist and novelist help to navigate both sets of concerns (ethics and depth of understanding, and the literary quality of the finished work), but the results of this collaboration are productive for the author, the reader, and even for the archaeologist. Much like archaeology itself, the production of prehistoric fiction requires multiple skill-sets. A collaboration such as the one between Elphinstone and Wickham-Jones can deepen knowledge in both directions.

Conclusion: Fruitful Tensions

This discussion has only sketched the outlines of the epistemological questions underlying the writing of prehistoric fiction, and has barely touched the narratological and ethical ones. To simplify my approach for the purposes of this essay, I focussed on European prehistory rather than that of other areas of the world, in which the relationship of Indigenous and settler populations lend more complexity to ethical questions. Space constraints also prevent me from here comparing prehistoric fiction with historical fiction, and archaeologists' narrative experiments with parallel developments in historiography, such as speculative biography and microhistory. Some of the epistemic issues involved in writing prehistoric fiction are significantly different depending on the specific period of prehistory. Non-archaeological sources such as oral histories, comparative mythology and historical linguistics considerably enrich what we know about later periods; future research into prehistoric fiction might examine the effect of variation in the epistemic bases of different prehistoric settings (in both time and place) on the kinds of stories written about them.

I hope, however, that this article has demonstrated that the 'epistemological friction' that Flohr Sørensen identifies as a necessary aspect of the production of archaeological knowledge ('Archaeological Paradigms' 131) is also present in the writing of prehistoric fiction, both as a challenge and as a productive tension. Our knowledge of prehistoric life is inevitably riven by gaps, uncertainties and ambiguity, but it is by no means a void of ignorance. Many kinds of work can make inroads into the grey areas of the deep past, following the echoes of prehistoric subjectivity. Much of that work is done with shovel and trowel, and the painstaking testing of hypotheses large and small; my contention is that there is a place in those efforts, too, for storytelling.

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