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**THE BBC REITH LECTURES – The Day Is for the Living**

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**PRESENTER: SUE LAWLEY**

**PRODUCER: JIM FRANK**

**Reith Lecture 1: THE DAY IS FOR THE LIVING**

**MANCHESTER**

**SUE LAWLEY:** Hello and welcome to the 2017 BBC Reith Lectures. We begin in Manchester, where our lecturer spent part of her childhood, and we're in Halle St Peter's. It was a church 150 years ago, when this was an area bustling with mill workers, but for want of churchgoers, it became a warehouse and then for years it stood derelict. But now it's been restored to its former light and airy beauty and has become the principal rehearsal and recording venue for the Halle Orchestra. So we're in a place that literally seeps history.

Our Lecturer has spent most of her life trying to feel her way into an experience of the past and come to grips with history and ways of interpreting it. She writes historical fiction hugely successfully. In the past eight years, she's won the Booker Prize not once but twice. In these five lectures, she'll delve into the world she's inhabited with such success and ask why historical fiction is so seductive to some and so reviled by others. She asks should we police our imaginations when, as she puts it, they go out by night and stray into the hazy border zone of mess and collective memory. The title of this series is "Resurrection: the Art and Craft". The first lecture is called "The Day Is For The Living".

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the BBC's Reith Lecturer for 2017, Hilary Mantel.

[APPLAUSE]

**HILARY MANTEL:** St Augustine says, the dead are invisible, they are not absent. You needn't believe in ghosts to see that's true. We carry the genes and the culture of our ancestors, and what we think about them shapes what we think of ourselves, and how we make sense of our time and place. Are these good times, bad times, interesting times? We rely on history to tell us. History, and science too, help us put our small lives in context. But if we want to meet the dead looking alive, we turn to art.

There is a poem by WH Auden, called *As I Walked Out One Evening*:

The glacier knocks in the cupboard  
The desert sighs in the bed  
And the crack in the teacup opens  
A lane to the land of the dead

The purpose of my first lecture is to ask if this lane is two-way street. In imagination, we chase the dead, shouting, 'Come back!' We may suspect that the voices we hear are an echo of our own, and the movement we see is our own shadow. But we sense the dead have a vital force still – they have something to tell us, something we need to understand. Using fiction and drama, we try to gain that understanding. In these talks, I hope to show there are techniques we can use. I don't claim we can hear the past or see it. But I say we can listen and look.

My concern as a writer is with memory, personal and collective: with the restless dead asserting their claims. My own family history is meagre. An audience member once said to me, "I come from a long line of nobodies." I agreed: me too. I have no names beyond my maternal great-grandmother - but let me introduce her, as an example, because she reached through time from the end of the nineteenth century to form my sense of who I am, at this point in the twenty-first: even nobodies can do this.

She was the daughter of a Patrick, the wife of a Patrick, the mother of a Patrick; her name was Catherine O'Shea, and she spent her early life in Portlaw, a mill village near Waterford in the south of Ireland. Portlaw was an artificial place, purpose-built by a Quaker family called Malcolmsen, whose business was shipping and corn, cotton and flax. The mill opened in 1826. At one time Portlaw was so busy that it imported labour from London. The Malcolmsens were moral capitalists and keen on social control. Their village was laid out on a plan ideal for surveillance, built so that one policeman stationed in the square could look down all five streets. The Malcolmsens founded a Thrift Society and a Temperance Society and paid their workers partly in cardboard tokens, exchangeable in the company shop. When a regional newspaper suggested this was a form of slavery, the Malcolmsens sued them, and won.

As the nineteenth century ended, textiles declined and the Malcolmsens lost their money. The mill closed in 1904 - by which time my family, like many others, had begun a shuffling stage-by-stage emigration.

Two of Catherine's brothers went to America, and in time-honoured fashion were never heard from again. Catherine was a young married woman when she came to England - to another mill village, Hadfield, on the edge of the Peak District. Like Portlaw, it was green and wet and shadowed by hills. As far as I know, she never left it. She must have wondered, does the whole world look like this?

Her first home was in a street called Waterside - for many years the scene of ritual gang fights on Friday nights between the locals and the incomers. I know hardly anything about Catherine's life. I suppose that when a woman has ten children, she ceases to have a biography. One photograph of her survives. She is standing on the doorstep of a stone-built terraced house. Her skirt covers her waist to ankle, her torn shawl covers the rest. I can't read her face, or relate it to mine.

But I imagine I know where the picture was taken. There was a row of houses which fronted Waterside, their backs within the mill enclosure. In time the houses were knocked down, but the facades had to stand, because they were part of the mill wall. The windows and the doorways were infilled by blocks of stone. By the time I was alive to see it, this new stone was the same colour as the mill: black. But you could see where the doors and windows had been. When I was a child these houses struck me as sinister: an image of deception and loss.

The door of a house should lead to a home. But behind this door was the public space of the mill yard. By studying history - let's say, the emigrant experience, or the textile trade - I could locate Catherine in the public sphere. But I have no access to her thoughts. My great-grandmother couldn't read or write. One saying of hers survives. 'The day is for the living, and the night is for the dead.'

I assume it was what she said to keep the ten children in order after lights-out. After her early years, as I understand it, Catherine no longer worked in the mill. But I am told she had a certain role in her community: she was the woman who laid out the dead.

Why do we do this - or employ someone to do it? Why do we wash their faces and dress them in familiar clothes? We do it for the sake of the living. Even if we have no religious belief, we still believe what has been human should be treated as human still; witness the indignation if a corpse is desecrated, and the agony of those who have no bodies to bury. It is almost the definition of being human: we are the animals who mourn. One of the horrors of genocide is the mass grave, the aggregation of the loving, living person into common, compound matter, stripped of a name.

Commemoration is an active process, and often a contentious one. When we memorialize the dead, we are sometimes desperate for the truth, and sometimes for a comforting illusion. We remember individually, out of grief and need. We remember as a society, with a political agenda - we reach into the past for foundation myths of our tribe, our nation, and found them on glory, or found them on grievance, but we seldom found them on cold facts.

Nations are built on wishful versions of their origins: stories in which our forefathers were giants, of one kind or another. This is how we live in the world: romancing. Once the romance was about aristocratic connections and secret status, the fantasy of being part of an elite. Now the romance is about deprivation, dislocation, about the distance covered between there and here: between, let's say, where my great-

grandmother was and where I am today. The facts have less traction, less influence on what we are and what we do, than the self-built fictions.

As soon as we die, we enter into fiction. Just ask two different family members to tell you about someone recently gone, and you will see what I mean. Once we can no longer speak for ourselves, we are interpreted. When we remember – as psychologists so often tell us – we don't reproduce the past, we create it. Surely, you may say – some truths are non-negotiable, the facts of history guide us. And the records do indeed throw up some facts and figures that admit no dispute. But the historian Patrick Collinson wrote:

'It is possible for competent historians to come to radically different conclusions on the basis of the same evidence. Because, of course, 99% of the evidence, above all, unrecorded speech, is not available to us.'

Evidence is always partial. Facts are not truth, though they are part of it – information is not knowledge. And history is not the past - it is the method we have evolved of organizing our ignorance of the past. It's the record of what's left on the record. It's the plan of the positions taken, when we to stop the dance to note them down. It's what's left in the sieve when the centuries have run through it – a few stones, scraps of writing, scraps of cloth. It is no more 'the past' than a birth certificate is a birth, or a script is a performance, or a map is a journey. It is the multiplication of the evidence of fallible and biased witnesses, combined with incomplete accounts of actions not fully understood by the people who performed them. It's no more than the best we can do, and often it falls short of that.

Historians are sometimes scrupulous and self-aware, sometimes careless or biased. Yet in either case, and hardly knowing which is which, we cede them moral authority. They do not consciously fictionalize, and we believe they are *trying* to tell the truth. But historical novelists face – as they should - questions about whether their work is legitimate. No other sort of writer has to explain their trade so often. The reader asks, is this story true?

That sounds like a simple question, but we have to unwrap it. Often the reader is asking, can I check this out in a history book? Does it agree with other accounts? Would my old history teacher recognize it?

It may be that a novelist's driving idea is to take apart the received version. But readers are touchingly loyal to the first history they learn – and if you challenge it, it's as if you are taking away their childhoods. For a person who seeks safety and authority, history is the wrong place to look. Any worthwhile history is a constant state of self-questioning, just as any worthwhile fiction is. If the reader asks the writer, 'Have you evidence to back your story?' the answer should be yes: but you hope your the reader will be wise to the many kinds of evidence there are, and how they can be used.

It's not possible to lay down a rule or a standard of good practice, because there are so many types of historical fiction. Some have the feel of documentary, others are close to fantasy. Not every author concerns herself with real people and real events. In my current cycle of Tudor novels, I track the historical record so I can report the outer world faithfully – though I also tell my reader the rumours, and suggest that sometimes the news is falsified.

But my chief concern is with the interior drama of my characters' lives. From history, I know what they do, but I can't with any certainty know what they think or feel. In any novel, once it's finished, you can't separate fact from fiction – it's like trying to return mayonnaise to oil and egg yolk. If you want to know how it was put together line by line, your only hope, I'm afraid, is to ask the author.

For this reason, some readers are deeply suspicious of historical fiction. They say that by its nature it's misleading. But I argue, a reader knows the nature of the contract. When you choose a novel to tell you about the past, you are putting in brackets the historical accounts – which may or may not agree with each other – and actively requesting a subjective interpretation. You are not buying a replica, or even a faithful photographic reproduction – you are buying a painting with the brush strokes left in. To the historian, the reader says, 'Take this document, object, person - tell me what it means.' To the novelist he says, 'Now tell me *what else* it means.'

The novelist knows her place. She works away at the point where what is enacted meets what is dreamed, where politics meets psychology, where private and public meet. I stand with my great-grandmother, on the doorstep. I break through the false wall. On the other side I connect my personal story with the collective story. I move through the domestic space and emerge into the buzzing economic space of the mill yard – the market place, the gossip shop, the street and the parliament house.

I began writing fiction in the 1970s, at the point - paradoxically – where I discovered I wanted to be a historian. I thought that because of my foolishness at the age of 16, not knowing what to put on my university applications, I had missed my chance, and so if I wanted to work with the past, I would have to become a novelist – which of course, any fool can do.

For the first year or two, I was subject to a cultural cringe. I felt I was morally inferior to historians and artistically inferior to real novelists, who could do plots – whereas I had only to find out what happened.

In those days historical fiction wasn't respectable or respected. It meant historical romance. If you read a brilliant novel like *I, Claudius*, you didn't taint it with the genre label, you just thought of it as literature. So I was shy about naming what I was doing. All the same I began. I wanted to find a novel I liked, about the French Revolution. I couldn't, so I started making one.

I wasn't after quick results. I was prepared to look at all the material I could find, even though I knew it would take years, but what I wasn't prepared for were the gaps, the erasures, the silences where there should have been evidence.

These erasures and silences made me into a novelist, but at first I found them simply disconcerting. I didn't like making things up, which put me at a disadvantage. In the end I scrambled through to an interim position that satisfied me. I would make up a man's inner torments, but not, for instance, the colour of his drawing room wallpaper.

Because his thoughts can only be conjectured. Even if he was a diarist or a confessional writer, he might be self-censoring. But the wallpaper – someone, somewhere, might know the pattern and colour, and if I kept on pursuing it I might find out. Then – when my character comes home weary from a 24 hour debate in the

National Convention and hurls his dispatch case into a corner, I would be able to look around at the room, through his eyes. When my book eventually came out, after many years, one snide critic - who was putting me in my place, as a woman writing about men doing serious politics - complained there was a lot in it about wallpaper. Believe me, I thought, hand on heart - there was not nearly enough.

In time I understood one thing: that you don't become a novelist to become a spinner of entertaining lies: you become a novelist so you can tell the truth. I start to practice my trade at the point where the satisfactions of the official story break down. Some stories bear retelling. They compel retelling. Take the last days of the life of Anne Boleyn. You can tell that story and tell it. Put it through hundreds of iterations. But still, there seems to be a piece of the puzzle missing. You say, I am sure I can do better next time. You start again. You look at the result - and realize, once again, that while you were tethering part of the truth, another part of it has fled into the wild.

However, it took time for me to get to the Tudors. For most of my career I wrote about odd and marginal people. They were psychic. Or religious. Or institutionalized. Or social workers. Or French. My readers were a small and select band, until I decided to march on to the middle ground of English history and plant a flag.

To researchers, the Tudor era is still a focus of hot dispute, but to the public it's light entertainment. And there were shelves full of novels about Henry VIII and his wives. But a novelist can't resist an unexplored angle. Change the viewpoint, and the story is new. Among authors of literary fiction, no one was fighting me for this territory. Everyone was busy cultivating their outsider status.

For many years we have been concerned with decentering the grand narrative. We have become romantic about the rootless, the broken, those without a voice - and sceptical about great men, dismissive of heroes. That's how our enquiry into the human drama has evolved - first the gods go, and then the heroes, and then we are left with our grubby, compromised selves.

As you gain knowledge and technique as a writer - as you gain a necessary self-consciousness about your trade - you lose some of the intensity of your childhood relationship with the past. When I was a child the past felt close and it felt personal. Beneath every history, there is another history - there is, at least, the life of the historian. That's why I invited my great grandmother to this lecture - because I know my life inflects my work. You can regard all novels as psychological compensation for lives un-lived. Historical fiction comes out of greed for experience. Violent curiosity drives us on, takes us far from our time, far from our shore, and often beyond our compass.

The pursuit of the past makes you aware, whether you are novelist or historian, of the dangers of your own fallibility and inbuilt bias. The writer of history is a walking anachronism, a displaced person, using today's techniques to try to know things about yesterday that yesterday didn't know itself. He must try to work authentically, hearing the words of the past, but communicating in a language the present understands. The historian, the biographer, the writer of fiction work within different constraints, but in a way that is complementary, not opposite. The novelist's trade is never just about making things up. The historian's trade is never simply about stockpiling facts. Even the driest, most data-driven research involves an element of interpretation. Deep research in the archives can be reported in tabular form and lists, by historians talking to each other. But

to talk to their public, they use the same devices as all storytellers - selection, elision, artful arrangement. The nineteenth century historian Lord Macaulay said that, 'History has to be burned into the imagination before it can be received by the reason.' So how do we teach history? Is it a set of stories, or a set of skills? Both, I think; we need to pass on the stories, but also impart the skills to hack the stories apart and make new ones.

To retrieve history we need rigour, integrity, unsparing devotion and an impulse to scepticism. To retrieve the past, we require all those virtues - and something more. If we want added value - to imagine not just how the past was, but what it felt like, from the inside - we pick up a novel. The historian and the biographer follow a trail of evidence, usually a paper trail. The novelist does that too, and then performs another act - puts the past back into process, into action - frees the people from the archive and lets them run about, ignorant of their fates, with all their mistakes unmade.

I am here because, as Grayson Perry said in an earlier Reith Lecture, I am one of the foot soldiers, one of the practitioners. We can't leave theory aside: it is impossible now to write an intelligent historical novel that is not also a historiographical novel, one which considers its own workings. But I have tried to find a way to talk about the past without, day by day, using terms like 'historiography'. I became a novelist to test the virtue in words that my great-grandmother would recognize, from that journey she made, Ireland to England, from one damp green place to another: words like thread and loom and warp and weft, words like dockside, and ship, and sea, and stone, and road, and home.

[APPLAUSE]

**SUE LAWLEY:** Thank you so much Hilary. I mean... it was truly fascinating. You could feel it in the hall as you spoke. I want to find out what our audience thinks about what you said, but I did want to put one point to you. You said - and I wrote it down - you don't claim we can hear the past or see it, and yet I've read that when you were 12 years' old you went to Hampton Court, the palace which of course belonged to Cardinal Woolsey and then subsequently to Henry VIII. And something hit you. You burst into tears. Something hit you. What was it, if you weren't seeing and feeling the past?

**HILARY MANTEL:** History was close and personal in those days, and like many 12 year old's, all my surfaces were raw. I was avid for experience without necessarily interpreting it. And that room, it's a little panelled room. Linen-fold panelling. They call it Woolsey's closet. I found out later that the linen-fold panelling may have been installed a few years later. Woolsey may never have seen it. I felt, in that little room, well, maybe I should just sit here. Maybe I should never leave this room. Maybe I should just sit on the floor that's me. That's my life. But it's strange to me that I have in fantasy fulfilled what I imagined that day. I have, as it were, seen Cardinal Woolsey sitting by the fireplace and I have leaned my elbow on the windowsill and I have conversed with him.

**SUE LAWLEY:** I'm going to take some questions from the floor.

**Q: Hello, Maria Highland, MJ Highland. I'm a novelist. Hilary, writing's hard. Why do you write and why do you keep writing?**

**HILARY MANTEL:** Well, I've signed this enormous contract you see... (Laughter-applause) And to be serious, why I began writing was out of a desire to read and I think you are always driven by curiosity. When something touches my writer's eye or ear, and there are certain questions where the historical record, the documentary evidence, will not provide you with the kind of answer you crave. When you want to know how did that feel from the inside, what was the turning point, why did it work out like it did, could it have worked out some other way. So then you want to go back and find those turning points. The points of switching, the crucial decision. And then you want to find them within every scene, within every little human interaction. And so I think what you enter into is a dramatic process, and that dramatic process is your writing life.

**SUE LAWLEY:** Question here...

**Q:** Hi. I'm Tim May, a Professor of Social Science Methodology at the University of Sheffield, and I wanted to ask you, there were times during your lecture where you wanted to sort of conflate truth and fiction, and at other times you wanted to say that it was all about interpretation and the most important thing was that if people were dead they could no longer give testimony and therefore validity has disappeared and all we had was description. And I was curious about that in terms of contemporary times where history itself is contested all the time, so what basis do we possible have to know what is and is not acceptable or credible?

**HILARY MANTEL:** Well that is an enormous question. My argument wasn't that once you're dead you lose validity or credibility. My argument was that any of us, the moment we are deceased, will become the subject of stories. And if you ask to members of the family, "What was that person like?" they might give you completely different accounts. The point I was making was that the process of fictionalization is instant, it's natural and it's inevitable.

**SUE LAWLEY:** Do you want to come back?

**Tim May:** Yes, but is it not the responsibility of the historian to adjudicate between credible narratives whereas it is not the responsibility of the fictionalized versions of history to do that? They are different things.

**HILARY MANTEL:** They are complimentary trades, I think, but I do not see to historian-ers the ground that might be occupied, let's say, by pure science. It's not a science. It's a humanity. We're working with fallible, flaky human beings.

**SUE LAWLEY:** Question here...

**Q:** Thank you. I'm Dinah Birch and I'm Pro-Vice Chancellor at the University of Liverpool. You've spoken Hilary, about the distinction between fact and truth and the necessary role of interpretation in historical fiction. How far can a historical novelist escape the pressure to impose our own moral values on fictional representations of the past?

**HILARY MANTEL:** She cannot possibly escape it. When you look back and you describe a series of events in your novel, you introduce a kind of wobbling to the fabric of reality, which informs the reader that things may not be quite as they seem. This is

subjective, this is my interpretation, but it's not a weakness in the form. It's a strength in the form.

**SUE LAWLEY:** The historian, Niall Ferguson, a former Reith Lecturer actually said quite recently when he was talking to someone who wrote historical fiction, he said that it was impossible for a 21<sup>st</sup> century person to escape modern sensibilities. I mean, he suggested that in the end you're just going to have 21<sup>st</sup> century people wandering around in Tudor costume.

**HILARY MANTEL:** Well, I think we can do a little bit better than that. [laughter]

**SUE LAWLEY:** Just a little...

**HILARY MANTEL:** The problem is that historians, when they speak along those lines, they're often speaking out of the defects and constraints of their own imagination. (laughter)

**SUE LAWLEY:** And a last question over there.

**Q:** I'm **David Walker. I'm the Bishop of Manchester**, so perhaps the only person here tonight who regularly goes to work in Tudor costume. (laughter) Hilary, you began by referring to our honouring the dead and I suggest a principle reason why we honour them is because we claim them as our dead. Like your great-grandmother, their story is our story. Well my work involves resurrecting the stories of the dead passed on through the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Their story too is my story. So my question is I think much of contemporary storytelling seems bereft of nuanced characters who have both personal and faith stories to tell. I wonder what lessons you might offer to novelists working even beyond the historical fiction genre?

**HILARY MANTEL:** One of the hardest things to put over to a modern audience is the faith mindset. But having said that, in our present-day world, faith is a driver of so many world events and people's concept of the next world, of eternal punishment, eternal reward, it is one of the most powerful drivers of human conduct. And I agree that novelists are impoverished if they chose to step back from this truth. So although I have been extremely critical at times of the Catholic Church, I am still grateful for having grown up within a faith, not least because for the simple reason that it does help me understand the characters in my novels.

**SUE LAWLEY:** You mentioned psychics in your lecture and I just wondered why that was so important to you. Do you sometimes feel like a medium?

**HILARY MANTEL:** All those unprofessional psychics are allowed to talk to the dead without being accused of being mad. So you can get given money for what would get other people locked up. (laughter) So I thought it would be fascinating to explore these traits. I saw a medium working. A psychic, I should say. I was fascinated by the mix of 95% skill in working a crowd and really canny psychology. And then there's the other 5%. How did she do that? (laughter) And that is what a historical novelist wants the reader to feel.

**SUE LAWLEY:** *Could you have done that? Could you have been a performing medium?* [laughter]

**HILARY MANTEL:** I am interested in how the inward condition, talking to the dead, being a writer, translates into public performance. So I...

**SUE LAWLEY:** I think that's a yes to my question. [laughter]

**HILARY MANTEL:** It's an option...and in my other incarnation, I should be seated at the back of the hall draped in lace and you may cross my palm with silver on the way out. [laughter]

**SUE LAWLEY:** We are going to leave it here now. Thank you to our hosts here at Halle St Peter's in Manchester. Do check out the Reith pages via the BBC Reith website where you will find transcripts, audio and much more in our archives. We're in London next week when Hilary will be discussing how we construct our images of the past. "Dead strangers, she says, did not live and die so we could draw lessons from them." Ponder that. For now, from Manchester, our thanks to our Reith Lecturer 2017, Dame Hilary Mantel.

[APPLAUSE]

END.