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THE BBC REITH LECTURES – CAN THESE BONES LIVE?

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LECTURE 4 - EXETER

SUE LAWLEY: Hello. Hello and welcome to the fourth of this year's BBC Reith Lectures with the author Hilary Mantel. This week we've come home with Hilary to Devon. It's on the coast just south of here that she transports herself back through time to write her historical fiction.

We're at Exeter University. Exeter was once a port and from the Middle Ages through to the 18th century it grew affluent on the wool trade and it was also an important centre for importing wine. But many of its old buildings were targeted in World War Two for their cultural and historic value and they were destroyed by successive bombing raids.

It's the past and our relationship with it that fascinates our lecturer. She seeks to bring it to life through her writing. It's the novelist's job, she says, to put the reader in the moment, even if the moment is 500 years ago. In this lecture, she'll discuss the process that gets historical fiction on the page. 'Can these bones live?' is its title.

Ladies and gentlemen, would you please welcome the BBC Reith Lecturer for 2017, Dame Hilary Mantel.

[APPLAUSE]

HILARY MANTEL: A few years back, before I began writing novels about the Tudors, my partner and I bought a new-built house in Surrey. We bought it off-plan, and we watched it grow out of an open field. The site looked like a battlefield from the Great War. It was a churned-up wasteland filled with shattering noise, and if you visited it after working hours, you felt you'd arrived in the middle of a temporary truce, and the ground beneath your feet was still shaking. There was a sea of mud in which stood pipes and half-built walls and shrouded piles of bricks, and abandoned diggers stood in ditches, their jaws encrusted with clay. The evenings were silent. There was no birdsong, because no trees: nature had been eradicated.

The outside of our house was to be plain: a modest tile-hung style. But one evening we came to check progress and realised that the plans had changed. The people around the corner were getting our façade. We were being Tudorized. Stacked on a truck were beams. They were not wood or plastic. They were in effect pictures of beams, on large sheets, ready to be stuck to the raw breezeblock. And beside them, on similar sheets, pictures of pink herringbone brickwork, to be papered on the wall between the beams.

It went beyond bad taste. I felt shame. But we were too far along with the deal to pull out of it. Over the next few weeks I talked myself around. The façade was not my problem. I would be inside the house. Someone else would have to look at it.

We only lived there for four years. It was like living inside a giant metaphor about the faking of the past. In those days, my thoughts were moving to the sixteenth century. I wondered how quickly I could learn to inhabit a new era. I thought, I don't want my walls to be paper-thin, my knowledge to be stuck on. I need a solid house for characters to live in. In fact, I should not call them 'characters,' I should call them 'people' – they are real, even if they happen to be dead.

In the Old Testament, God asked the prophet Ezekiel, 'Can these bones live?' He answered yes: and so do I. The task of historical fiction is to take the past out of the archive and relocate it in a body. In this lecture, I would like to talk about the practical job of resurrection, and the process that gets historical fiction on to the page.

I've never believed that fiction set in the past, or the future, is an inferior form of fiction. It demands the same attention to style and form as a story with a modern setting, and places a greater demand on the skills of placing information, and of managing complexity. Every page in a novel is a result of hundreds of tiny choices, both linguistic and imaginative, made word by word, syllable by syllable. The historical novel requires an extra set of choices – what sources to consult, what shape to cut from the big picture - what to do when the evidence is missing or ambiguous or plain contradictory. Most of these choices are invisible to the reader. You must be able to justify your decisions to the well-informed. But you won't satisfy everybody. The historian will always wonder why you left certain things out, while the literary critic will wonder why you put them in. 'Because I could,' is not a good reason. You need to know ten times as much as you tell.

Debate about historical fiction often centres on research. Is it sound? Is it necessary? Some writers – not me - say it's what you do after your story is finished. That

depends on the nature of your story. Are you using real characters and events? Or are you using the past as a backdrop? In either case, I think there is a misunderstanding about what research really is.

First, I hesitate to use the word. Writers shouldn't claim they are doing research when they mean they are skimming facts out of pre-existing texts. Unless they are also trained historians, novelists mostly don't have the skills for original research from primary sources. Typically, we first meet the material when it's been filtered – by historians, biographers. In the early stages, that's helpful. It helps you see shape, it stops you being distracted by irrelevant detail, and it keys you in to controversies. Your job at this stage is to stare hard at the pattern already picked out, and see if it shifts under your scrutiny.

Facts are strong, but they are not stable. Soon you find your sources are riddled with contradiction, and that even when the facts are agreed, their meaning often isn't. At this stage, you will want to seek out the earliest evidence you can get. If your story tracks real events, you will spend a lot of time sifting versions, checking discrepancies, assessing the status of evidence: always asking, who is telling me this, and why does he want me to believe it? The contradictions can be fertile. If you can locate the area of doubt, that's where you go to work. You may well consult original documents, and you will tramp over the ground, and visit the libraries, and allow your hand to hover over a document and imagine the hand that first wrote it.

At this stage, you are doing much the same job as an academic colleague. If you solve a puzzle, if make a discovery, that's satisfying. We all want to chip in with a little contribution to the historical record. But your real job as a novelist, is not to be an inferior sort of historian, but to recreate the texture of lived experience: to activate the senses, and to deepen the reader's engagement through feeling.

Research is not a separate phase from writing. There is no point where the writer can say, 'I know enough.' Writing a novel is not like building a wall. Your preparatory stage is about digging deep, understanding context, and evolving a total world picture. The activity is immersive. The novelist is after a type of knowledge that goes beyond the academic. She is entering into a dramatic process with her characters, and until she plunges into a particular scene, she hardly knows what she needs to know.

It takes time to locate yourself in a new age, a new geography. You have to expand your area of curiosity, away from political history and into every area of culture. Learn about art, trade, how things are made. Then lift your eyes from the page and learn to look.

At first you are a stranger in your chosen era. But a time comes when you can walk around in a room and touch the objects. When you not only know what your characters wore, but you can feel their clothes on your back: that rasp of homespun wool: that whisper of linen and weight of brocade: the way your riding coat settles when you mount your horse: the sway and chink of the items at your girdle or belt, the scissors and keys and rosary beads. You listen: what sound do your feet make, on this floor of beaten earth? Or on these terracotta tiles? How do your boots feel as you pull your feet out of the mud? How old are your boots? What colour is the mud? When you can answer these questions, you are ready to begin.

But then, the next question: is the reader ready for your story? How will you give them the background information they need to make sense of it? Exposition is the trickiest bit of the trade. We all know how not to do it: ‘Why masters, here comes the Lady Anne Boleyn, she who has supplanted the Spanish Queen Katherine in the fickle affections of our sovereign, King Henry VIII.’

You can’t have your people telling their contemporaries what they would already know. Authors are always advised, ‘Show, don’t tell,’ but sometimes dialogue just won’t stretch to cover your points, and you must lay down the facts in a passage of narrative – quick as you can, tailored and succinct – remembering to privilege what matters to your characters, not just what has proved in hindsight to be important.

There’s a lot of use in a stupid character, one who has to be told twice. There’s more use in a stranger – some newcomer who can ask the questions the reader wants to ask. In every scene, the writer’s opportunity comes at the point of change. A person doesn’t notice the street he walks down every day. But when they knock down the house on the corner, and a new vista is revealed – that’s when your character notices, and that’s when you can describe. Landscapes, streetscapes, objects, are dead in themselves. They only come alive through the senses of your character, through his perceptions, his opinions, his point of view.

There are no special tricks to make exposition work. There are only different levels of skill, in the author. You need to be sure of the point you want to make, and then communicate it clearly. But you may have to decide, at some point between competing evils – too much or too little information – the reader spoon-fed, or the reader needing more.

I’d prefer to leave the reader hungry. Your book can’t do it all. If the reader is puzzled, there are other sources he can consult. But if you underestimate your reader’s intelligence, he will put your novel down. You cannot give a complete account. A complete thing is an exhausted thing. You are looking for the one detail that lights up the page: one line, to perturb or challenge the reader, make him feel acknowledged, and yet estranged. The reader should be a welcome guest in your house of invention, but he shouldn’t put his feet up on the furniture. Just when he’s settling, you need to open the gap between them and us: just let in a flash of light, to show the gap is there.

I have one piece of advice: don’t lie. Don’t go against known facts. Mathematical truth may be pleasing, elegant, light. Historical truth is a rough beast – shapeless, blundering, hard to tame. It fights you every step. It cuts against storyteller’s instinct. Your characters are never how or where you’d like them to be.

I wrote a novel set in revolutionary Paris, with three main characters – all young and strong and raring to go. Not one of them was at the fall of the Bastille. One of them intended to be, but turned up late. That’s how reality plays out. George Orwell said that every life, seen from the inside, feels like a series of defeats. Glorious speeches often go unheard, except by posterity. The man who is fighting can’t see over the hill, or out of the trench. If you describe a battle, you must ask yourself, at what point did it become possible to say that this side had won, and this side lost? Posterity gives out the prizes – sees who won the battle and who won the war. When you are situated *in* history, as we all are, you don’t hear the great drumroll of fate, but penny whistles and the banging of dustbin lids. Every great shift in human history happens on just another day – a Tuesday

in July, as it may be - the sun coming out after Monday's rain, the Paris streets filling up again, but a dozen things to delay you as you try to get to across the river – and when you get there, the world-shaking event is over.

It's a relief sometimes, to have a character turn up late. The big set-piece is better left to the cinema. As an observer, I'd rather be in the tent the night before the battle with the generals than on the battlefield itself - or sweeping up the sodden bunting, after the big parade has passed. Not that you should evade the great moments, if you see a way of telling them. You should be ambitious: history helps you raise your game. If real events seem a pointless, shapeless muddle, you need to look for their inner nature, their private meaning for your character. His concerns will lead you through. Always, you should resist the temptation to tidy up the past.

You may remember from ten years back the spectacular TV series, *The Tudors* in which Henry VIII was played by a very small Irishman. I watched this series keenly, because I was in the process of my first Tudor novel, and I knew that this version would be the public offering preceding mine – and so would condition expectation. Most historical fiction is, I like to think, in dialogue with the past. *The Tudors* was not holding a conversation – just stamping, whistling and making faces. It offered a strange blend of the ploddingly literal and the violently implausible. In trying to spare the viewer the effort of thought, the writers declared war on the laws of time and space.

I will give an example. In real life, Henry had two sisters. Margaret married the king of Scotland. Mary married the king of France. The writers rolled the two sisters into one, and called her Margaret.

This composite – who will she marry? The writers had overshot the date for Margaret's Scottish marriage, which took place when she was a child. And they had killed off the old French king, in order to get the glamorous Francis I on camera. So they invented a bridegroom – a king of Portugal. They may have thought better of it, because very soon the bride murdered this fictional king. Margaret was free to marry again – a real person this time – with whom she had the wrong number of children.

One falsification trips another. Consequences cascade. The writers have eaten the future. James V of Scotland is mentioned in the series, but how was he born? With no Scottish marriage, he has no mother. Lady Jane Grey, though queen of England for a week, cannot be born – because her ancestor is cancelled. So is Mary, Queen of Scots: she can't be born either. So all those historical romances about her must be re-shelved, as fantasy. Suddenly Mary Stuart is no more real than a character in *Game of Thrones*.

Now you may say, what does it matter? No one ever thought *The Tudors* was accurate. When characters from the 1530s ride in 18th century carriages, why not roll two sisters into one?

The problem is, though, the brilliant stories they missed. Look at the real women, Mary and Margaret – their lives are spectacular. They read like unlikely fables, but are soberly inscribed in the records. The reason you must stick by the truth is that it is better, stranger, stronger, than anything you can make up. If its shape is awkward, then you must make your fictional technique so flexible that it can bend around the difficulty; because it is the shape of *your* narrative the reader will follow. You can select, elide, highlight, omit. Just don't cheat.

After all, you are the one who chooses where to focus. You have discretion in how you direct your reader's gaze, and your job is to select the scenes that deliver the most value – for information, for entertainment, for character definition, for the balance of the work as a whole.

An event you choose to tell may not be dramatic in itself. Your scene may be as simple as a woman writing a letter, when a man comes in and interrupts her. But when two people are talking in a room, they have a hinterland, and you must suggest it. To that one moment, you bring a sense of every moment that led us there, everything that has brought your woman to this hour, this room, this desk. The multitude of life choices. The motives, conscious or unconscious. The wishes, dreams and desires, all held invisibly within the body whose actions you describe. They hover over the text like guardian angels. The more you know, as a writer, the less you have to do on the page, because the reader trusts you and he's drawn into the effort of recreation – the reader becomes your ally in negotiating with reality.

You will not be error-free. Sometimes you have a straight choice of what to believe, with no evidence you can rely on. Here, the historian can state the problem to the reader, and back off. But sometimes a novelist must jump – guess if she needs to. If she grasps the context, her guess is valid. A historian aims to work from speculation to certainty, effect following cause. The novelist works in a world where choices are still open. Moving forward with her character, she hesitates with him at the fork in the road. His information is imperfect. His map is barely legible. In the novel, he is ignorant of the future, and free.

But you *know* the end, people say. So how do you maintain suspense? It's not a real problem. You succeed not *despite* the fact that your reader knows what will happen, but *because* of it. The Greek tragedies, as the years go by, never turn out any better. Oedipus stays blind. Fate operates, and we watch it, hypnotized, and watch its victims struggle. It was only once, *once*, that an audience went to see *Romeo and Juliet*, and hoped they might live happily ever after. You can bet that the word soon got around the playhouses: they don't get out of that tomb alive. But every time it has been played – every night, every show – we stand with Romeo at the Capulet's monument. We know when he breaks into the tomb he will see Juliet asleep and believe she is dead. We know he will be dead himself, before he knows better. But every time, we are on the edge of our seats, holding out our knowledge, like a present we can't give him.

It's the same with the people in history. Our attention is transfixed, as we watch someone stride towards the edge of a cliff, when we can see the edge and the character can't. The reader becomes a small, conflicted god, or a disbelieved prophet. He is in two places at once. He is at the foot of the cliff, wise after the event, and he is also on the path, he is before the event; he is the observer, and he is also the person who steps into air.

Only fiction can do this. It's the novelist's job: to put the reader in the moment, even if the moment is 500 years ago. There are techniques, but no tricks. You can only do it through honest negotiation with the facts and the power of the informed imagination.

Recently I went to Windsor Castle, and I learned, to my delight, that the cooking for state banquets is still done in the medieval kitchens. Into the alcoves where open fires once burned, they have fitted gleaming stainless-steel ranges. Look up to the roof, and it's like a cathedral. Great gothic arches span it, holding up the roof.

Except they don't. Early in the 18th century, restorers decided that the 15th century roof looked insufficiently medieval. It was structurally sound, but it wasn't picturesque. So they did a bit of faking. The gothic additions are hollow, made of pine planks - which were painted to look like old oak. They hold no weight, support nothing - except our underpowered imaginations. What I recommend to fellow writers is that, having found your story, you trust the men and trust the materials. The past will hold itself up.

[APPLAUSE]

SUE LAWLEY: Thank you. Thank you very much, Hilary. Wonderful stuff. Now we're here, have an audience. We're in Exeter University. They'll no doubt have many questions for you but I just wanted to ask you a quick one myself first because you've given us so many insights about how you write, but what about where you write because I know that you write in your seafront study about 18 miles south of here. But do you look at the sea? Is your desk against the wall? Do you see people or does nothing matter at all because it's all in your head?

HILARY MANTEL: In truth I write anywhere but there has to be a place where you pull it all together. And yes, that's my sea-facing rooms in Budleigh Salterton but I don't look at the sea. I think there's an uninterruptable voice which is speaking to you and a rhythm in your book that you can't be knocked off.

SUE LAWLEY: Let's take some questions from the floor now...

Q: Hello. **Debra Myhill, Director of the Centre for Research in Writing here at the University of Exeter.** I know that you write the scenes before you write the whole book. Can you tell me a little bit about your writing process, how you move from those disparate scenes into a coherent narrative?

HILARY MANTEL: I don't write chronologically. I tend to follow a theme through the book or if you're writing is seen that concentrates on a specific character then it will occur to me that this is happening to the character now but 18 months down the line this scene will have its counterpart or its mirror image or some resonance will travel from that scene to one much later in the character's life. So I would then try to get a sketch of that later scene down. And then when I do work my way through the book chronologically, it's ready for me. I may reject it. I will certainly revise it. You want to leave an element of unpredictability in there.

SUE LAWLEY: Yes, there...

Q: **James Clark, Professor of History at Exeter.** When the historian answers the archive they're eager to challenge the received narrative but much of the popular enthusiasm for history, it has to be said, is for the old stories to be retold, just better than they have been before. So what does the novelist do? Do you reassure the reader with

Henry VIII, the serial monogamist, or do you wrong-foot them with Henry VIII, the sensitive supportive husband who instinctively knows what the boys' and girls' jobs are?

HILARY MANTEL: A very good question. My tendency is to approach the received version with great scepticism and try to get the reader to challenge what they think they know. The problem is that people are very loyal to the first history they learned. They are very attached to what their teachers told them and they are very resistant to having this subverted, but I think it's our job to throw something new into the mixture.

SUE LAWLEY: Question here...

Q: My name is Mike Val Davis, and I studied the English Reformation as a special subject for A Level at Exeter School, and our teacher, George Aires, emphasized to us that Cromwell was a crucial historical figure because he effectively was Henry's enforcer. He was like a combination of – he didn't say this obviously, I'm putting this interpretation on it – Jonathan Powell and Alistair Campbell and he just did the King's dirty work. And one of the problems with our politicians today is they don't know much about history.

HILARY MANTEL: Well, let me tell you about Jonathan Powell and Alistair Campbell. Thomas Cromwell would have eaten them for breakfast. (laughter) But with all respect to your old history teacher, I think he was a rare creative spirit in government. I think he was much more than the King's enforcer, and this is what I seek to show through my novels. About history, I could not agree with you more. The fact that the range of reference of our leaders is so narrow it's something that makes us very vulnerable and exposes us to other ideologies which we do not understand.

Q: Emma Bessent, current undergraduate at the University of Exeter. You opened the lecture talking about how important it is to humanize our heritage and the people who came before us, but we hear a lot of calls today for our generation to apologize for their transgressions in terms of things like slavery and other colonial exploitations. Can you, in one single text, balance condemning the individuals who practiced these things with an accurate presentation of how celebrated they were in their day?

HILARY MANTEL: When I talk about humanizing the past, I'm not talking about making them better than they were or softening the truth. There are harsh, cruel realities that we have to face when we write about the past but I have to say that when I'm writing, I'm not there to pass judgement on my characters.

SUE LAWLEY: But you're not one to duck controversy, as we know, Hilary. I mean, what do you think of the fact that the Colston Hall in Bristol is no longer going to be called the Colston Hall because Edward Colston made his money out of slavery? Or the push to take down the statue of Cecil Rhodes because he expropriated..?

HILARY MANTEL: It's a question of one sectional interest pitched against another. And I actually don't think that there is a principle that you can apply here. I do think you have to look at these things on a case-by-case basis, but I think the fact that the debate arises is a very healthy one. People are understanding that the past really matters, that we

are not separate from history. It's not an exam we pass. It's something we are in, and we are not just rationally involved but emotionally involved in the past and its legacy.

SUE LAWLEY: But the principle of apologising for history, do you agree with that? Do you think that's right?

HILARY MANTEL: It often seems fatuous, I have to say. You hear the phrase 'truth and reconciliation'. I think the lump of the matter is that those are two very different things. Sometimes we can't stand too much truth.

SUE LAWLEY: Question here...

Q: Nick Groom, Professor in English, University of Exeter. What I'm wondering about is whether what you're really writing are ghost stories.

HILARY MANTEL: Yes.

Nick Groom: That your relationship with the past is one and whether consciously or unconsciously you are adopting the conventions and the style and the genre of the gothic novel. In fact, the gothic novel and historical novel emerge at exactly the same time as ways of dealing with the past and trying to explain what the relationship of the past is to the present.

HILARY MANTEL: Indeed. Indeed. When you're writing historical fiction, you are always looking for the untold story. You're looking for what has been repressed politically, or repressed psychologically. You are working in the crypt.

SUE LAWLEY: But the language is about resurrection, the laying out of the dead, the reverence of the dead. I mean, one does get the impression that you are, as Elliot said, Webster, you know, much possessed by death. You know, see the skull beneath the skin.

HILARY MANTEL: I don't think I'm possessed by death. I think I'm possessed by the notion of afterlife. And that in a sense, if it doesn't sound too grandiose, is what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to have a rerun. We know the end but they don't.

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

Q: Hi, my name is Joe Oliver. I work for a charity here in Exeter. Could you give us any idea of when we might see the third book because we're all greedy for it, and are you ever tempted even slightly to sort of bend the rules of history and time and give Thomas Cromwell a happy ending?

HILARY MANTEL: (Laughter) Well, I hope to finish next year, but whether early next year or late next year I can't say at the moment.

SUE LAWLEY: And what's holding it up? Is it people like us coming along and asking you to do the Reith Lectures? I mean, what is the hold up?

HILARY MANTEL: I gave two years to the stage productions. In effect, it was not wasted. It made me a better writer, but it was a considerable amount of time when the new book was going but it was going slowly. And there comes a stage where you have to

simply sit at home and consolidate it all. But to take your point about the happy ending, people ask me if I'm having trouble killing off Thomas Cromwell, if I'm unconsciously resisting it. No. Why would I, because I know that man. As soon as he's dead, he will get up, put on his head, again and charge on to the TV screen with, we hope, Mark Rylance and quite possibly there will be another stage play. So it's simply a weigh station on his road to triumph.

SUE LAWLEY: And the book is definitely 2018? She pressed, once more.

HILARY MANTEL: Oh, absolutely not. No, to be honest, it simply depends on what time of year it comes in. You know, publishing goes in seasons. If I can get it in early in the New Year, it might very well come out in late summer but I have to say that this is looking increasingly unlikely. But you know, I think it has to take the time it takes. It's ten years' worth of effort and it is lovely to have the encouragement of people who are waiting for it, but that's the reason why I want to deliver them something that is the very best I can do.

SUE LAWLEY: And there we must leave it. Our thanks to our hosts here at Exeter University and of course to you, our audience. More information about the series is available on the website, where you can find transcripts, audio and much more in the Reith Archives. Just go to the Reith pages on the BBC website. Next time, for the last of Hilary's lectures, we're in Stratford-upon-Avon to hear her ideas about "How fiction changes when it's adapted for stage or screen." For now, our thanks again to our Reith Lecturer, Dame Hilary Mantel.

[APPLAUSE]

END.