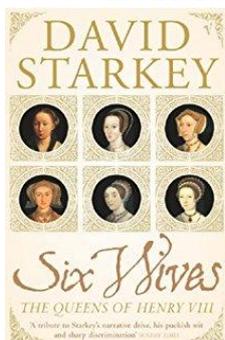


## REFORMATION TALK 3 – THE REFORMATION IN FICTION



Welcome to our third and final talk. The Reformation in Fiction. This is a difficult subject to tackle on several levels. First, there is much debate about what the Reformation was. As Peter has remarked in his previous two lectures, we are talking about a unique experience in England as opposed to Europe. Here the Reformation was probably top down, coming from the ruling classes rather than as the result of popular demand. In many other countries and states large numbers of people had demanded religious change; we'll hear later that reactionary people of the North of England and elsewhere formed a monarchy – threatening revolution over religion. So I will largely stick to books written about the Reformation in England.



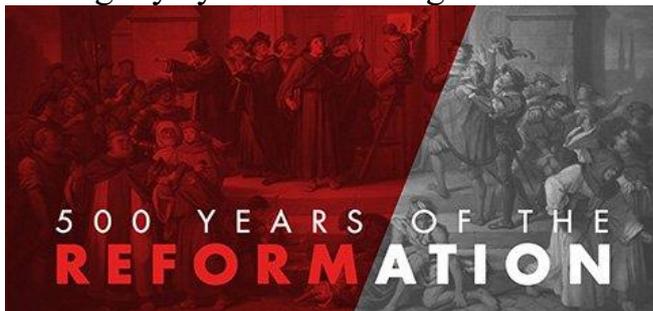
Secondly, why use fiction to look at something when facts are available? After all, historical non fiction books are massive sellers in Waterstones and elsewhere, and why dabble in speculation when biographies of all the major players are available?



Thirdly, the period of the Reformation is a really controversial in terms of historical fiction, as while writers like Hilary Mantel's novels are so popular, historians like John Guy are cross by the assumption that for many people, they represent the facts rather than a good read.



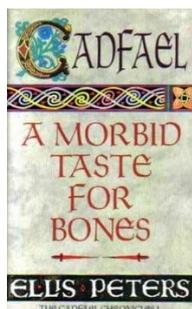
Those who listened to Hilary Mantel's first Reith lecture last week, or read the transcripts online – I've put the references to iplayer and printed transcripts on the handout - will have heard an impassioned argument in favour of historical fiction enabling understanding of the generations that have gone before. Her general argument is that all historians, in their choice of subject and method of presenting their findings, are selective. While she accepts that she has enlarged on the truth, she argues "Against romanticising the past, or seeing it as a gory, primitive horror show, suggesting that well written fiction doesn't betray history but enhances it." (Radio Times article) She says "when you are trying to recreate someone's world in the sixteenth century, you pretend you're there and sit and listen. I do a lot of that, putting myself into someone's milieu and closing my eyes and thinking 'Now what can I hear in this room?'"



So while Guy and other historian's rend their academic hoods and bewail the slight mistakes (the wrong mayor is mentioned in *Wolf Hall!*), I think it is a valid approach to look at the fiction which surrounds the Reformation, and try to discover what it actually felt like, as much as possible, to the people who were actually there at the time.



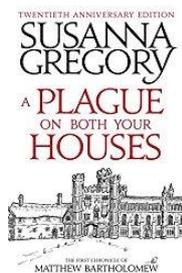
Two health warnings about the books I will be mentioning. This is not an exhaustive list of books, they are just ones that I have, read and largely enjoyed. Further, I take no responsibility for the vast amounts of money you may want to spend on books after this talk. Erm, try the library?!?



The first element of the fiction of the reformation I would like to look at is a book, the first in a series of twenty in fact, that covers the Abbey at Shrewsbury. Set in May 1137, *A Morbid Taste for Bones* by Ellis Peters introduces the story of Brother Cadfael who is the monk who grows the herbs and solves the mysteries associated with the religious life of the town and Abbey. In this first novel of the series, the ambitious Prior with some of the monks decides that they need some relics, any relics, to encourage pilgrims with their offerings to visit the Abbey. From this book we learn how those monks who live at the Abbey are from a variety of backgrounds, younger sons of the aristocracy, young men with a little learning and no real religious devotion, even ex Crusaders like Cadfael. We see how there is ambition and power plays within the Abbey, and how the need for relics, body parts of saints, is so important if the financial situation of the foundation is to improve.

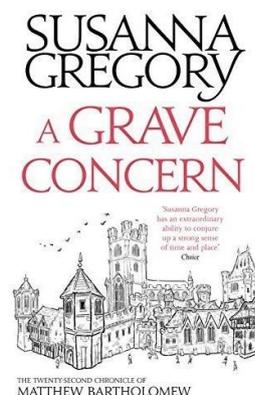


What happens in this first murder mystery can be found out by reading or watching the TV series made in 1996. If you do find the dvd of the series, be prepared for a lack of religious services and practice on show. This series of books gives a wealth of detail about the position of monasteries in a town like Shrewsbury, how they offered help and Sanctuary to people in a time of political unrest (the civil war between Stephen and Matilda), how Cadfael offered basic medical help to all, supported the secular authorities, and demanded gifts and legacies from believers to ensure their spiritual well being. Cadfael's monastery is a place of petty jealousies, but also a mainstay of the community in so many ways. Although these novels are set four hundred years before the Reformation, apparently not a lot changed in the intervening period in terms of the monasteries status in the communities.



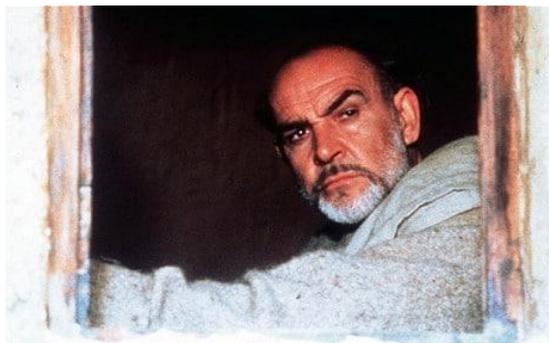
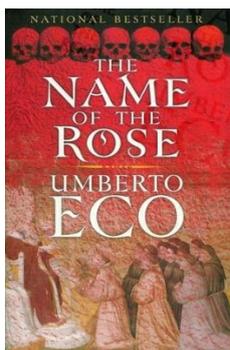
Another series of novels is the Matthew Bartholomew books by Susanna Gregory. These are set later, in 1348, in Cambridge. Matthew is not a monk or priest, but many of the fellows of the fledgling colleges that make up the University are monks, friars, priests of various orders. As Janina Ramirez's TV programmes about "Saints and Sinners" showed in Oxford, varieties of foundations all types were to be found in medieval Cambridge, where many of the fellows were in orders. The first in the series of currently 22 novels, *A Plague on Both Your Houses*, opens as the Black Death approaches Cambridge, to kill many of the townspeople and college inhabitants alike. Before it arrives there is a suspicious death of the Master of Michaelhouse, where Matthew is in charge of teaching medicine and is a physician to all. The installation of a new Master, Wilson, is attended by students and townspeople alike, in the context of a service.

READ page 15, "Father William ..." to page 16 "whisper to each other."

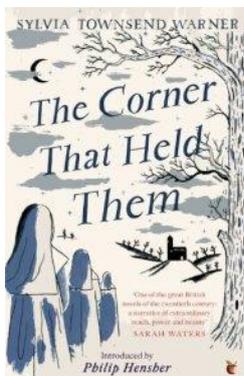


Like Peters, Susanna Gregory is able to show how the ambitions and jealousies of the different religious men can break out into violence, and how while they give help and sanctuary to the townspeople, tensions exist. In the latest novel to be published, *A Grave Concern*, the Chancellor of the University seems to be fighting with Satan on the top of St. Marys' Church Tower.

READ page 11 "Whatever possessed him ..." to page 12 "not to be required for Tynkell (the Chancellor)."



One of the best known books set in a Medieval Monastery is *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, set in 1327. Another murder mystery, it has been filmed starring Sean Connery, but I have not really got to grips with that, especially as it is an Italian Monastery.



There were also convents in Britain for nuns. The best known novel about a British convent is probably *The Corner that Held Them* by Sylvia Townsend Warner. The blurb on the back describes it like this “To become a nun ... in Sylvia Townsend Warner’s masterpiece.”

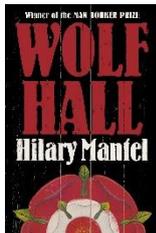


From these books and others like them we can get a comprehensive picture of the religious life of the country in the pre reformation period. Services in Latin, the influence of religious communities in towns and cities, an idea what places like Darley Abbey were actually like to live in, all come from these novels.

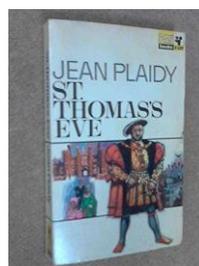
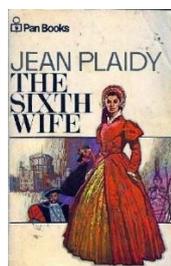


The actual Reformation is a slippery beast to find in fiction. I suppose the ins and outs of policy, religion and the power shift from Rome is difficult to make

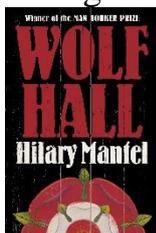
entertaining in a novel. Instead, the writers of historical novels and plays have written about individuals, their appreciation and reactions to what happened, and in one famous case, about someone who made it happen.



*Wolf Hall*, it's fair to say, upset the world of historical fiction. Up until then, novels about the Tudors had gone in and out of fashion, often seen as the novels read by history obsessed women and girls.



Having spent far too much of my misspent youth reading Jean Plaidy's novels, I can agree with that idea.



Hilary's Mantel's book immediately attracted a lot of interest for many people because it was a detailed novel about someone not on the outside, but Thomas Cromwell, seen by many as the architect of the Reformation in England. Henry's chief fixer after the downfall of Wolsey, Cromwell's life experience in Europe as a soldier, merchant, lawyer, meant that he could and did take the bigger view.



If Henry wanted a divorce, Cromwell would find ways of pressurising Rome, and when that failed, finding the person to mobilise the Universities and write the theological reasoning for splitting with Rome in the person of Cranmer. Cromwell emerges from *Wolf Hall* as a real man behind all the determination to dissolve the monasteries, and he was the man who justified pensioning off monks and collecting huge revenues for the King.



In this passage, King Henry and Katherine have to be handled carefully:  
 READ page 480 “The King has two bodies ...” to page 481 “October will bring the mists.”



This is a novel of real weight in many ways, revelling in its research, but not a list of dates. These are people of real emotions and reactions, doing what needs to be done in their eyes.



The sequel to *Wolf Hall*, *Bring up the Bodies*, continues the story of Cromwell into Anne’s time as Queen Consort. It opens with King Henry is hunting, and Cromwell is with him, working through the night on the paper work surrounding the King taking control of all the churches and religious foundations in the country.



There is a wonderful passage at the start of the book (page 3) where Cromwell’s hawks are flying.



Away from hunting, the monks in their monasteries are being surveyed.  
 READ page 52 “As for the monks ...” to page 53 “treated as beasts.”



*Bring up the Bodies* is a novel about the downfall of Anne, and the attraction of Jane Seymour. This is a book of royalty changing his mind, and Cromwell making it possible.



The play which dominated the perception of Thomas More for many years, until the coming of *Wolf Hall*, was one I studied at school, *A Man for All Seasons*. Yes, I can quote it, as its twentieth century language is full of great lines and set pieces which show More as a valiant man, his great learning, understanding and most of all faith, expose him to the ultimate fate of beheading “because” as he says, “I would not agree to the divorce”. He upholds the law because he says that it gives protection:

"What would you do? Cut a great road through the law to get after the Devil? ... And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned round on you – where would you hide, Roper, the laws all being flat? This country is planted thick with laws from coast to coast, Man's laws, not God's, and if you cut them down – and you're just the man to do it – do you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then? Yes, I give the Devil benefit of law, for my own safety's sake!"

If you think that quote seems familiar, some people quoted it when there was the suggestion made very recently of taking away some human rights laws.



More, as portrayed by Bolt, is certain that his own conscience should be his ultimate guide, more so than other forces, including laws and oaths set up by the King through Cromwell. When More's friend Norfolk challenges him to sign the Oath of succession, we hear this conversation ...

Norfolk:

Oh, confound all this. ... I'm not a scholar, as Master Cromwell never tires of pointing out, and frankly I don't know whether the marriage was lawful or not. But damn it, Thomas, look at those names. ... You know those men! Can't you do what I did, and come with us, for fellowship?

More:

And when we stand before God, and you are sent to Paradise for doing according to your conscience, and I am damned for not doing according to mine, will you come with me, for fellowship?



Much has been made of the correct portrayal of Sir Thomas More, scholar, lawyer and briefly Chancellor under Henry. His influence as one of the chief objectors to Henry's marriage to Queen Anne is undoubted, his motives more difficult to analyse.



The whole problem of the King's wish to dispense with his first wife, Katherine of Aragon, has been seen as the spark which led to the Reformation, and the dilemma faced by many has led to much interest in those six significant women.



Many writers have written about the wives of Henry VIII, ranging from Jean Plaidy through to Philippa Gregory. Some novels, TV series and films have been more accurate than others; some have completely omitted to mention the Reformation as a relevant force in the lives and fortunes of these women, others have looked at the personalities involved and drawn conclusions about the level of their involvement.



Alison Weir has produced seventeen history books about the Tudors and other figures from history. More recently she has also written six novels, mainly featuring women of the Tudor period, such as Lady Jane Grey in her reformed religious views. Her most recent novel is the second book in a set concerning Henry's Queens. I was fortunate to attend her lecture on her most recent novel *Anne Boleyn, A King's Obsession* as part of the Derby Book Festival. She has spent years researching this period and said how much her novel is the result of her latest research, including into the love letters sent by Henry to Anne, now intriguingly held in Rome. Rather hot stuff for the Vatican library!



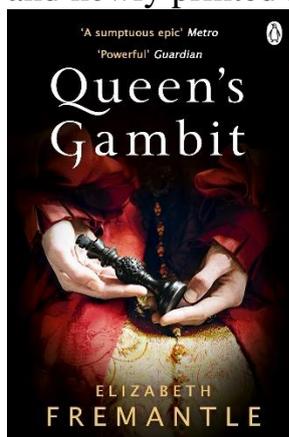
The book presents Anne as interested in the role of women in ruling countries, let alone households, and therefore takes an interest in the books and reading of Duchesse Marguerite in 1522 while part of her household.  
 READ page 94 "She had leisure ..." to page 95 "change the world."



Later, while waiting for Henry to achieve a break from Katherine, she becomes interested in Reform writings.

READ page 230 “Reform was a favourite ...” to page 231 “any book that was banned.”

At her Derby Book Festival lecture I asked Alison Weir if she thought Anne was an intellectual, given to study and thought on Reform writings. Weir thought not, at least there was no direct evidence that she wrote or consistently followed alternative thought. Maybe she was an instinctive reformer; maybe she just sought out any arguments that would speed up her marriage to Henry. Either way, she undoubtedly had access to various writings from the continent and newly printed in this country.



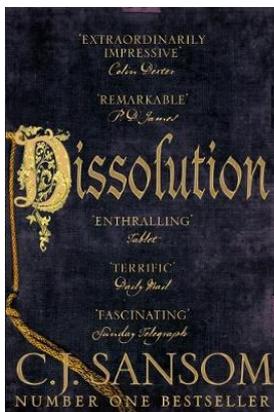
Elizabeth Fremantle, has also written about women in the Tudor period. Her first novel, *Queen's Gambit* features Katherine Parr, Henry's sixth and final wife. Widowed twice before Henry married her, she was undoubtedly a clever woman, keen to support the availability of worship in English. Despite Henry's mood swings and lasting loyalty to certain Catholic practices, she supports Anne Askew, condemned as a Protestant heretic by Henry's advisor, Bishop Gardiner.



Anne's brutal treatment in the Tower and subsequent execution terrifies Katherine, who speaks to her brother, Will Parr.

READ page 256 "Katherine stands and takes ..." to page 258 "They racked her."

Katherine lives in terror of Henry discovering her secret writings; she has a clearer view than Anne Boleyn of how Henry is still essentially a good Catholic; how his infirmity and fear of death makes him violently unwilling to embrace real reform of worship. Fremantle is basically correct in assuming that Katherine was more realistic in knowing that he would only accept so much change, and as she survived him we can only agree with Fremantle's assessment.



Away from the royal court there was work to be done in actually assessing each monastery, a process set up by Cromwell who sent investigators to every religious house. We have heard how certain, less rich houses were the first to go, such as Darley Abbey. In *Dissolution*, by C.J. Sansom, the first book in his Shardlake series, the lawyer Matthew Shardlake is sent to the monastery of Scarnsea, on the Sussex coast. He is not a Commissioner sent to compile the official report, but to investigate the murder of one of Cromwell's men. Cromwell in this novel is a shadowy but powerful character, determined in his task of closing down religious houses. When Matthew first arrives at the monastery with his bodyguard and assistant it reminds him of the religious house he was educated in, and what it was like.

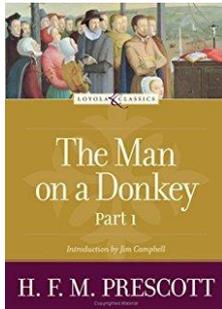
READ page 40 "I passed under the pillars ..." to page 41 "They were."



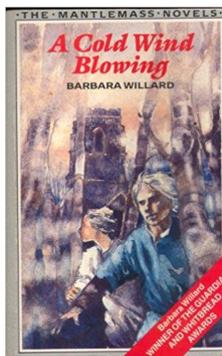
Without giving too much away, there is a later piece about the swift and decisive destruction of the monastery, when Matthew is sent back by Cromwell.

READ page 378 “Justice Copynger now ...” to page 380 “two days’ time.”

We have heard from Peter how the Abbey at Darley was sold up in every item; there are stories of even the doors from the monks’ cells being for sale.



If you thought that *Wolf Hall* is a big read, there is a far more comprehensive novel, possibly set of novels, to be found. *The Man on a Donkey* by Hilda Prescott is an immense work first produced in 1952 which takes the form of a chronicle, an intensely detailed story of the Reformation as it affected various individuals including a nun, a member of the aristocracy, and Robert Aske who led the Pilgrimage of Grace, a protest from Northern England against the Dissolution of the Monasteries which threatened the kingdom. Diane pointed this book out to me, which was fortunate as I had picked it up as a book from a new publisher and had forgotten it... I won't read anything from it, if only because the print is tiny, but if you like big books this will keep you occupied for months... and it is very readable...



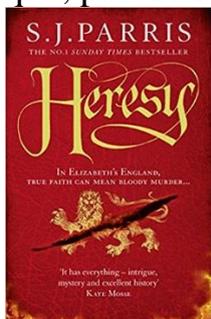
One of the great things about writing this talk is the ideas that people have given me for books, and the books lent to me. Chris came up with two, one of which is actually aimed at older children *A Cold Wind Blowing* by Barbara Willard. One scene involves the destruction of a monastery building. Piers, the hero of the novel, witnesses at first hand a crowd watching the tearing down of a building.

READ page 86 “They pushed on ...” to page 87 “left to destroy but himself.”

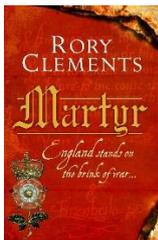
The destruction of the buildings which had stood for so long must have changed the landscape that everyone had grown up with, and it perhaps takes novelists to point out what a seismic change that would have been for everyone.



It is perhaps obvious that fiction set after the Reformation can no longer be set in monasteries as they had ceased to exist, or become Cathedrals in some cases. I did not have time or energy to track down books, if they exist, set in these Cathedrals, and perhaps it is fitting that in an age when individual faith had become vital, we can find books about men whose role was to protect the status quo, post Reformation and indeed post Cromwell.



Queen Elizabeth's reign was characterised by threats to her safety from agents of Spain and other Catholic countries. S.J. Parris' series of books begins with *Heresy*. It actually opens with the hero Giordano Bruno running away from his monastery in Naples, pursued as a heretic by the mighty Inquisition. He ends up in Oxford in 1583, where he is seeking a book about astronomy that will threaten all accepted knowledge.



Similarly, Rory Clements' John Shakespeare series is about a spy working for Walsingham, Elizabeth's intelligence chief. Murders need solving, but *Martyr*, the first in the series, is also concerned with the threatened invasion by Spain, seen as a Catholic crusade by much of Europe. Elizabeth's post – Reformation settlement was fragile, with the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots in the line of inheritance. Novels about the Scottish queen abound, but are beyond me at the moment.



So, I hope that I have shown that fiction is a valid way of looking at the Reformation in England in the early 1500s. The religious foundations which were in existence pre reformation were very influential, even dominating of the local area. They were employers, provided markets, acted as another source of law enforcement for communities, as well as being the focus of religious worship for thousands of people. The reformation for these institutions changed everything with those who gained land, bought furnishing, had to pick up the pieces of a way of life, a way of worship which had lasted for generations. The motive for all this, arguably centred on a royal marriage which was ending, was far more complex than a romantic breakaway by a powerful monarch. It could be argued that Cromwell, hero, or anti hero, was pushing on an open door to dissolve institutions already beset by corruption and unsatisfactory practices.



The whole question of the use of English in worship, printing of texts, a change in emphasis from the corporate to the individual were issues beyond any one individual; possibly the efficiency of Cromwell just made the destruction of religious institutions faster than it would have otherwise been.

Novels and plays give us some inside into the people and places that typified the Reformation in this country. Going beyond fact, they use the clues of the records to spark the imaginations of writers, which in turn spark our imaginations so that we can have some insight into what the Reformation meant for the entire country.



Peter and I have tried to tell the stories of the Reformations in our own ways. We are really grateful for all the support that we have had, and it is very much appreciated. All three talks are on the St Matthew's church website, but if you know someone who needs a hard copy, we'll try and sort that out for you. If you've got any contacts with groups or churches that would like these talks, do have a word. We've done the work now – and a tour of American universities would be fun. If you are full of ideas for a new topic for groups or talks, do let us know, and we will try to make that happen.

Julie Barham, 28 June 2017