

The Gumdigger's Wife
and
**Speaking the Truth through Love: Historical
Life, Fiction, and Faith**

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Abstract

The Gumdigger's Wife is a work of historical fiction, set in the early twentieth century at the peak of the kauri gum industry in New Zealand.

Emmalina, a letter bride from Dalmatia, and Johan, a gumdigging migrant from the same country, enter an arranged marriage under personal circumstances which cast doubt over their relationship's chance of success. Their story and struggle could be summarized in the following question: can a marriage built on obligation, secrecy and distrust be pieced together?

The Gumdigger's Wife is about the journey of the characters to find that answer. As well as considering the discrimination against the Dalmatian race, this creative writing thesis focuses on issues of duplicity, forgiveness and the desire to atone for past wrongs. It is also about Emmalina's journey of discovering the flawed, yet authentic and profound, love of another human being.

The exegesis then comments on the process of writing such a work, particularly in terms of the genre in which I have chosen to write and how my personal beliefs have factored into the work. First I observe the genre of the historical novel and its concern of reflecting truth within fiction; then I consider the extent to which moral/religious influences can appear in a novel without becoming didacticism.

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed _____ Christel Jeffs

Date _____

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Exegesis

**Speaking the Truth through Love: Historical Life
and Faith in *The Gumdigger's Wife***

Synopsis

Today, Emmalina will marry a photograph.

The year is 1905. Dalmatia, Emmalina's birthplace, is shrinking in the shadow of *Amerika*: the name of any place that offers 'a better life'. Men are leaving the country in droves. Women are betrothed to strangers and shipped away from their struggling village homes. After saying her vows in Dalmatia, Emmalina will sail to New Zealand and join Johan Turk on the northern gumfields, where men and women slave over miry ground to dig up remnants of the valuable kauri gum resin.

Emmalina has never met the grizzled and weather-beaten man that comes to her on the wharf – nor the younger, cleaner version of him in the photograph she held at her wedding. Worst of all the man she intended to marry, Hans Bakovic, jilted her for another woman. Her unwelcome marriage to Johan is a battle between her will and his ambition; yet his gentle words, respect and habit of counteracting her malice with gifts affects her more than she will admit.

On the other hand, Johan is affected by the derogatory labels and laws persecuting the Dalmatian race. He determines to rebel against the British instigators and force change for his people. However his attempts are useless, leaving him defeated and desperate to hide his mistakes – including an incriminating one from his past.

Then Hans suddenly comes back into Emmalina's life. His charming apologies and buttery words lead Emmalina to make a foolish choice, which results in everything being exposed that she and Johan were trying to hide. They push one another to the limits of forgiveness and Emmalina and Johan will then decide if they can piece together a marriage built on obligation, deception and distrust.

The Gumdigger's Wife – the beginning

The novel writer in me speaks all the time, but she is easily silenced. When people or experiences deliver a heady rush of inspiration, she becomes desperate to create a work larger than a short story or poem. But the excitement of turning ideas into novels is often short-lived for one reason or another: I don't have the time, or the money to go overseas for

research, or I simply fall asleep again (you'll remember that dream in the morning, I lie to myself).

I remember the writer being silenced one geography lesson. The topic of migration led to learning about immigrants who came from the European region of Dalmatia (now Croatia) to New Zealand at the turn of last century (Walrond, 2012). They worked in the kauri gum industry and while many sent money home and eventually returned, numerous others married and settled in their new land. It was thankless work, produced a pittance of income, yet it was better than the miserable prospects back home. Lives were uprooted in the hope that they would somehow improve; I felt the writer beginning to stir. A novel could come from this, I thought. But as usual, exams and assignments came first and the idea faded.

Several years later I read *The Gumdigger* (1948), a nonfiction title by A.H Reed (writer, publisher and philanthropist, also an acquaintance of my grandfather). His words spoke strongly to me:

It is a story not without romance, and in some danger of being forgotten. Someday the already obliterated gumfields, and the diversified throngs who sojourned there...will provide some writer of genius with the material for a great novel (Reed, 1948, p. 59).

While I do not claim to be a genius, I decided then I wanted to be that writer. Of course I am not the only one who has covered this territory in fiction – other authors who have written about gumdigging and Dalmatian migrants include William Satchell (*Land of the Lost*, 1971), Florida Vela (*Croatia Mine*, 1997) and Amelia Batistich (*An Olive Tree in Dalmatia*, 1980). There are likely others, but my purpose in writing this exegesis is not to make an account of how extensively this subject has been covered. It is about how I chose to cover a point of history in northern New Zealand, the area in which I grew up and feel a connection to. It also considers how my identity, both as a person and as a writer, has influenced and shaped *The Gumdigger's Wife*, my first novel.

The Gumdigger's Wife is a love story set in 1905, and thus it could be classed as a historical romance. I will approach the discussion of my novel through the framework of genre, specifically the broader category of historical fiction. This genre raises questions in terms of the relationship between fact and fiction, for example the extent to which a writer can take liberty with historical fact and the effect of fiction on accurate historical accounts.

My subsequent aim was to write a novel that is as factually correct as possible, while still having the pleasures of imagination and conflict that fictional stories offer.

A further purpose in writing this book was to incorporate themes representative of my Christian faith. Christian novels are written to “preach to the converted” (Mort, 2002, p. 2); that is, written for a niche readership desiring fiction that upholds moral and spiritual values. I myself read this fiction for that very reason, but such works are often didactic in the way they deliver their messages. Thus my aim for *The Gumdigger’s Wife* was not to write for the specialised genre of Christian fiction, but to write a story which, while still incorporating Christian themes, is not didactic.

The research questions which emerged from my thesis are hence the following:

- To what extent can a fictional story reflect history in a way that is both truthful and engaging?
- To what extent can I write a work incorporating Christian themes in a non-didactic way?

I will approach the answers to these questions with a close examination of the historical and Christian fiction genres. In so doing I will consider how *The Gumdigger’s Wife* functions within (or without) these genres, which will lead to a discussion of how the work has tried addressing each of the above aims.

Historical fiction: *The Gumdigger’s Wife* and its genre

It is safe to assume that readers will recognise *The Gumdigger’s Wife* as belonging to the historical fiction genre. But they are unlikely to think beyond the term to consider how generally it describes such a multi-faceted category of fiction. I will attempt to discuss some of its aspects here.

In her book *The Reader’s Advisory Guide to Historical Fiction*, Saricks (2009) highlights features that could be considered standard elements of historical fiction, including the following:

- A historical setting which occurred outside the writer’s lifetime or experience
- A respect for details and accuracy
- Social or moral issues raised
- Characters shaped by the times

However, theorists seem to agree (Cobley, 2001; Frow, 2007; Moessner, 2001; White, 2003) that the act of defining a genre is not as simple as creating a list of features which classify a novel as belonging to one category or another. For example, White (2003) states that the notion of a “pure genre” (p. 600) – that is, genre is a concrete entity which has an essential, easily definable nature – is outdated. Alternatively, White (2003) continues, the concept of genre may be considered from a historical perspective, meaning that a genre is analysed according to the time and place that it occupies within the history of literature. I will thus not attempt to consider what essentially classifies a genre through explanations of theory. Instead I will consider the ‘history’ of the genre: the origins of historical fiction, its development and reception, and the subsequent context into which my novel will enter.

The first novel considered to be historical fiction was Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814/1985). Succeeding this work was a combination of well-regarded novels and popular Westerns and romances produced in the twentieth century, the latter two contributing to the genre’s lowered perception of quality (S. Johnson, 2009). Writers such as Catherine Cookson, Georgette Heyer and Jean Plaidy were condemned for their popularity, and historical novels were regarded as simply “bodice-rippers with a bibliography” (de Groot, 2010, para. 6), written to titillate the reader with romance and intrigue. Well-regarded ‘literary’ authors started “looking back to the past” in the 1990s (S. Johnson, 2009, p. 3) and some esteemed historical works emerged – for example, Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* (1992) and Arthur Golden’s *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997) – but as de Groot (2010) further explains, such novels were shunted off and classed as literary fiction. Sarah Johnson (2009) observed that it was the beginning of the new millennium that heralded a renewed perception of the historical fiction genre, and its demand has amplified ever since. She suggests that this is perhaps due to the increasingly depressing world events and affairs that make readers want to “escap[e] the realities” (2009, p. 3).

A further development in historical fiction – and fiction in general – is the proliferation of hybridisation, further illustrating the concept of genre’s fluidity. In her book *Historical Fiction: A Guide to the Genre*, Johnson (2009) identifies that novels which straddle more than one genre in terms of their content are an unquestionable trend in historical fiction. She uses the term historical fiction as an umbrella term for a broad variety of fiction, including traditional historical novels (such as Walter Scott’s *Waverley*, 1814/1985), literary historical novels (Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, 2007; Markus Zusak’s

The Book Thief, 2007), historical romance (Philippa Gregory's *Fallen Skies*, 1993; Deborah Challinor's *Kitty*, 2006), and alternate history (Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, 1975). With such a scope of titles under the classification of historical fiction, the genre's definition is opened up considerably.

I mentioned earlier that I would not discuss the problem of theorising or defining genre. However, it is perhaps necessary to place novels into some form of categorisation – to aid the reader in identifying the kind of novel they desire to read, if nothing else. Saricks (2009) states that she classifies books according to their “primary emphasis” (p. 291); under this model, one could define *Kitty* (Challinor, 2006) as a historical romance because of its focus on the characters' romantic situations, or *Atonement* (McEwan, 2007) as literary historical fiction due to its “highly literary” quality and the fact it was shortlisted for the Man Booker prize (Lee, 2001, para. 1).

In regards to *The Gumdigger's Wife*, it is a hybrid work of historical romance. The basic definition of this subgenre is that the personal stories of the characters and their relationships – their love interests, liaisons, etc. – are of prominent emphasis within a historical setting. For example, Eloisa James' *Fool for Love* (2003) focuses on the main protagonist Henrietta Maclellan and her personal journey of falling in love with an unyielding gentleman and the consequences of that choice – which, of course, ends happily. Typical happy endings involving marriage or at the very least an established relationship are almost expected in such stories. Repeated romantic plots are “reassuring”, as Hughes states, and they free a reader from “inhibitions and preoccupations by drawing him or her into its own world” (1993, p. 2).

However, Sarah Johnson (2009) delineates the historical romance genre further and says there are different types of historical romantic fiction: from “romantic epics” (p. 109) that foreground historical detail (Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, 1936), to historical romances which foreground the love story (authors include Eloisa James and Deborah Challinor), to still others that are somewhere between these opposites, which could be termed “romantic historicals” (p. 109), for instance Siri Mitchell's *She Walks in Beauty* (2010). My novel centres on the relationship of Emmalina and Johan (my main protagonists) and the question of whether a relationship built on compulsion, secrecy and distrust can be successful. Because of this predominant romantic arc, I consider *The Gumdigger's Wife* a historical romance in the sense that the love story is foregrounded.

However, the novel is also set in a period of social significance for the Dalmatian migrants in New Zealand. They were mistakenly identified as Austrians and their unwanted presence was coined the “Austrian question” as steps were taken to alienate and restrict them within the colony (Walrond, 2012, para. 4). In the process of learning and writing about the Dalmatian people, I realised that there was more to my narrative than romance. My male protagonist Johan became a far stronger character than anticipated during the first stages of writing, and his patriotic ambitions colour the narrative. Therefore *The Gumdigger’s Wife*, although a love story and historical romance, has elements from Johnson’s category of “romantic historical” (2009, p. 109) novels.

Writing in a historical genre demands a commitment to thorough research and awareness of fact in order to create as accurate an account of history as possible. As Thom (2010) intimates, the historical fiction writer should retain a certain degree of verisimilitude in writing about the past – that is, there should be a faithfulness to reality even as invention of character and plot takes place. Nevertheless, the very relationship between history and fiction has been a moot subject for theorists over a number of years (i.e. Ranke, 1824; Croce, 1921; Bury, 1916; Benjamin, 1928, as cited in Curthoys and Docker, 2010). Historical fiction is in every sense a contradictory genre for there is a tension between the term ‘historical’ – indicating its basis in history and thus the requirement to be authentic with nonfiction details – and the term ‘fiction’, indicating the presence of imagined elements and the fact that the past can only be “guessed at” through fictional reconstruction (de Groot, 2010, para. 3). For instance, there is certain information that one can accept as being factual evidence about what happened during the September 2001 terrorist attack on America. But there is only so much that these details can tell; the process of writing a complete narrative based on 9/11 will inevitably involve imagination and creative license (as shown in Karen Kingsbury’s *One Tuesday Morning* (2003), where a survivor suffering from amnesia is mistaken to be the husband of a dead firefighter’s wife). While it may be understood that the past cannot be accurately captured in a work of fiction, there is a concern that writing historical fiction brings a problematic liberty to the representation of history. The freedom of invention means that facts can be elided, changed, and thus used to mislead people about the veracity of historical events.

Lack of information can also be as misleading as the *omission* of information, as is true for my novel. For instance, I have set *The Gumdigger’s Wife* in 1905, a year chosen

due to its position after the 1898 Kauri Gum Industry Act – a government movement restricting Dalmatian gumdigging activity – and during the period when letter brides came to New Zealand (Božić-Vrbančić, 2008); moreover it was also the year when the kauri gum industry was at its peak and about to dwindle (Firth, 1922). The novel mentions different restrictions on the Dalmatian people at this time, such as the creation of exclusive gum reserves for British citizens (Smith, 1952) and the requirement for Dalmatians to work elsewhere than the gumfields for three months to prove their worth (Dalmatian Genealogical and Historical Society, 2008). The problem is that these sources do not provide information of when such limitations began or ended; hence they may be incorrect, as Mataga (2013) indicates that some of the sanctions were lifted during the early 1900s. Mataga does not say however *what* restrictions were removed, nor could any other information be uncovered from my sources. This means I could be unwittingly negating historical fact, albeit in a small manner, despite my resolve to be as accurate as possible.

A further difficulty that can present itself in historical fiction is the portrayal of race relations in a fictional world which demands conflict and antagonistic influence. As aforementioned, Dalmatia was the nation that spoke to the writer in me that geography class. I hence centred the story on the Dalmatian people and proceeded to research their role within New Zealand society. What I discovered was a hierarchical structure existing in the early twentieth century, in which British colonialists perceived themselves as the most desirable citizens and Dalmatians were labelled “locusts”, “squareheads” and “white Chinamen” (Božić-Vrbančić, 2008, p. 73). Božić-Vrbančić (2008) also cites that it was the British who took measures to discourage and inhibit Dalmatian immigrants, including a Commission of Inquiry, an act of Parliament, and even isolated boycotts against their gumdigging endeavours. Consequently, the facts I researched became the foundation upon which I created British antagonists to reflect the hostilities projected onto the Dalmatian people: namely Philip Simms, the gum buyer, Bradley Howe, the hotel owner, and Matthew Greyson, the journalist.

Historical accuracy in *The Gumdigger's Wife* is indisputably important. However there is the issue that a reader's emotional attachment might centre solely on the Dalmatian race, given the evident divide between the ‘hero’ and ‘villain’ characters (Dalmatian and British respectively). Analyst Inga Clendinnen indicates that readers' emotional attachment – whom they identify with the most – privileges some characters over others (as cited in

Pinto, 2010). The main characters are most likely to be in this position, meaning that characters representing other values and cultures could be made subordinate. Clendinnen explains that this attribution of emotion to characters in stories can create a wrong impression of a country's past (as cited in Pinto, 2010), because the act of foregrounding characters may privilege one viewpoint/culture above another.

In the context of my novel, I am aware that the attribution of emotion to the main Dalmatian characters means that the readers' attachment is all but guaranteed to be focused on that race. The British characters are thus marginalised due their antagonistic qualities, perhaps creating the perception that *all* British representatives in colonial New Zealand were adverse to the Dalmatians' presence. Such a claim is too general to make and has prejudiced overtones; moreover it does not take into consideration the British perspective of the Dalmatian influx to New Zealand. In fact, Mataga (2013) notes that the British colonialists felt threatened by the Dalmatian people. They expressed concern at the immigrants working in groups and hence depleting the gumfields wholesale and at swift pace. This money would then be saved for the workers' return to Dalmatia, rather than being used to nurture and support New Zealand's weak economy. Mataga (2013) also suggests that the title of scholar Andrew Triln's study on Dalmatian immigration, *Now respected, once despised* (1979), perhaps overstates the issue. Rather, he suggests, the Dalmatians were "resented, even feared, rather than despised" (p. 11-12).

There is no denying that *The Gumdigger's Wife* provides a consensus of opinion that the Dalmatian people were in fact despised:

"You understand me, Slav?" The man leaned close to Emmalina and spoke at a snail's pace. "I highly doubt it, Eliza – they never bother."

....

"Her dress is quite shocking, isn't it?" put in the girl Eliza. She looked quite triumphant as she patted her own gown. "You'd think she'd wear better clothes with all the gum they've been stealing."

"They just send it all back to their poor little families. Or spend it on plonk," someone spoke up, and the entire room laughed. (*The Gumdigger's Wife*, p. 117)

Characters such as the man Leonard above, his partner Eliza, along with the characters Howe, Simms and Greyson, are stereotypical 'villains' in the way they endeavour to take advantage of the Dalmatian characters, be it through methods of cheating, lying, or seduction. Such explicit hatred and intent to degrade a people is necessary for the story's

conflict, even as it perhaps exaggerates the issue by assigning negative characteristics predominantly to the British race. I am aware that the attachment of emotion to the Dalmatian characters and negative characteristics to the British characters may result in the perception that I am concealing a part of history, hence creating a fiction of how the British colonisers in general behaved.

In response to this concern and to answer my first research question – the extent to which a fictional story can reflect history in a truthful and engaging way – I attempted to make some changes to *The Gumdigger's Wife* in order to not only retain a sense of faithfulness to factual information, but also to create a more balanced portrayal of the two races represented. The first strategy, for instance, was to give the British characters an opportunity to advocate their position within the 1905 economic and social climate of New Zealand. Philip Simms is that primary voice, and the scenes in which we are privy to his point-of-view provide reasons why the British might perhaps be justified in their sentiment:

He'd seen the colony grow. He'd witnessed his forefathers' toil, a crippling depression, and he'd seen New Zealand rise again. But then, *they* came, working like slaves and stripping the fields bare. They moved in packs and glutted the market with their spoils, then sent all the money back home. So much for being settlers. (*The Gumdigger's Wife*, p. 84)

In the second draft, I also introduced a minor English character to represent those who may have been sympathetic to the Dalmatians' situation. Johan meets a woman working at the jewellery shop that used to belong to his friend Roman Vilasich. The jeweller recently committed suicide and the woman expresses her condolences to Johan upon the news, even going so far as to call him 'sir'. This is a term that has never been bestowed upon him by an English person and he is "stung from her gentle kindness" (*The Gumdigger's Wife*, p. 205). A final change I made was giving Emmalina a voice to plea the idea to Johan that not *all* English are bigoted in their views: "You're just against all Englishmen, and you don't *know* all of them...you're just as narrow-minded" (*The Gumdigger's Wife*, p. 154). These changes are small to avoid diminishing the reality of research which evidences the prejudice against Dalmatian citizens (Božić-Vrbancić, 2008; Hayward, 1989; Smith, 1952; The Genealogical Dalmatian Society, 2008). However it is my hope that the changes help create a more balanced view of both the races in question, so that the emotion attached to the main characters does not overshadow the fact that the British colonialists also have valid points of view. I am not suggesting they are justified in the limitations and labels they

placed on the Dalmatian immigrants; however their response is perhaps understandable and it is important that this be included in the novel.

As well as aiming to be truthful, I recognise that a historical novel's power lies not only in the information it gives readers, but also in the way it is written to captivate a reader's attention. To address the second part of my first research aim, then, I attempted to create a balance between historical fact and engaging narrative in *The Gumdigger's Wife*. Achieving such a balance can be difficult. I personally find it challenging to incorporate background information in any story without it sounding forced. As such the research undertaken for the novel – visiting museums, studying photographs, reading books – was perhaps not so daunting a task as the requirement to incorporate historical detail seamlessly. This was particularly demanding in the first chapter, where there was seemingly much information that the reader needed to know. The resolution came from my writing mentor Mike Johnson's advice. He highlighted the importance of "drip-feeding" details, suggesting that any information I provide about kauri gum or its industry should only be disclosed when it is essential for the reader's understanding (M. Johnson, personal communication, 22nd July 2014). For example, at the start of the novel Emmalina doesn't know what the kauri gum industry involves, so the reader does not need to know that either:

I was nine when I first heard about Novi Zeland. It was the new *Amerika* where my father and brother were going to earn money and bring it back to make our lives better... They'd dig kauri gum, a 'treasure from the trees', they said. I didn't know what that was back then. All I knew was that my family was about to shrink... (*The Gumdigger's Wife*, p. 7)

Dialogue is used to reveal the information about gumdigging more naturally, via pressure applied to Emmalina's own lack of knowledge:

"Where does kauri gum come from anyway?"

"The kauri trees." Johan just managed to say it without sarcasm. "The ones that died years ago, they decayed and left gum in the earth. It's what the kauri tree bleeds when it gets struck by lightning or a branch breaks off. It's how it heals." (*The Gumdigger's Wife*, p. 72)

A further strategy to connect the reader fictionally to a historical account is the use of description, evocative detail, and characterisation which can connect a reader more closely to the history being described. This is to raise the point that elements of fiction are not necessarily detrimental to history; contrarily they have the ability to connect readers with a

historical situation in a more personal and memorable way than straight fact could achieve. White (2005) illustrates this point through Primo Levi's book *Survival in Auschwitz*. He argues that the book's power is not in terms of whether or not there is any new factual information revealed, but rather in the author's narrative tools – such as plot, character, and personification – that create a deeper sense of the horror which “transcends the truth – reality distinction” (White, 2005, p. 149). Murray furthers this idea by drawing attention to the power of character in stories, saying that “what we learn through fiction, we don't learn through fact, we learn it through people” (2013, p. 41). She suggests that what we learn through historical fiction comes not from the facts that are included, but from the human traits attached to characters in order to make their historical situations relatable.

I have attempted thus to give my characters a depth of humanity and describe their circumstances in the most tangible, vivid way possible, so that the reader connects with them rather than with impersonal information. For instance, I placed Emmalina into the historical situation of being a letter bride. Young Dalmatian women arriving in New Zealand in the early 1900s would have had no knowledge of English, no understanding of the hard work and primitive conditions awaiting them, and most would have never met their new husbands (Božić-Vrbančić, 2008). I aim to connect readers to this historical reality through concrete details and a subjective point of view, intended to evoke a sense of alienation and change for Emmalina:

There he was. The man who had married her. Johan was tall, bigger and wider than in his photograph. Dressed in a white shirt and worn Sunday suit, he was trying very hard to be a bridegroom. But he looked much older than his supposed twenty-nine years – his face was like a ploughed olive grove. His supposedly blue eyes were black in the dusk and his chin was covered with revolting stubble. But that was the least of Emmalina's worries...[w]orst of all, there was not a female in sight. Men surrounded her, shouting things that were garbled and meaningless. All the women she'd been shipped over with had no doubt found their husbands and bled into the crowd. To God knew where. (*The Gumdigger's Wife*, p. 24)

Such description provides the reader with images suggesting what it would have been like stepping off a ship, standing amongst the babble of a foreign language in a foreign country, and meeting a stranger who is now your spouse. Its purpose is to bring readers closer to an understanding of a young letter bride's historical situation, which is perceptible and relatable even as it is fictional. In this way, narrative techniques in *The Gumdigger's Wife* are employed to engage readers and bring them into closer empathy and proximity with the

historical situation, allowing them to perhaps grasp a deeper understanding of history than a simple factual account might offer.

To conclude this section, I return to my first research aim: to what extent can a fictional story reflect history in a way that is both truthful and engaging? Readers of *The Gumdigger's Wife* will hopefully gain an honest understanding of the time period through the way I consider both the British and Dalmatian races in as truthful a manner as possible. Moreover, they will perhaps enter a more engaging relationship with the time period through the specific details and impressions I give through the eyes of the characters. Perhaps fiction, then, is a valid way to consider history despite the concerns surrounding the relationship between the two entities. If successful, the novel will present the Dalmatian and British colonialists in a truthful and intriguing manner that draws a reader closer to the reality of their history, rather than marginalising and distorting it.

Christianity and *The Gumdigger's Wife*

I will now turn to my second research aim for *The Gumdigger's Wife*: the consideration of whether or not I have been able to write a novel from my Christian worldview in a non-didactic way. For the purposes of this discussion, I will look at my novel in terms of how it does *not* belong to the Christian fiction genre, to illustrate my intention to write for a wider readership than the Christian audience.

Arguably, the most distinguishing feature of the Christian fiction genre is that the characters are used as mouthpieces for an evangelical message, as evidenced in the following conversation from Siri Mitchell's novel *Love's Pursuit* (2009):

My secret came out like the rush of a wind. "I am not good, Daniel."

....

[Daniel speaking] "Only God is good."

"But I could be better."

"So could we all. Hear me now. 'Tis important: Only God is good. But more than that, God is only good...[w]e can only cast ourselves upon God's goodness, trusting that in the end, He is only good." (Mitchell, 2009, p. 268)

Much Christian fiction involves characters explicitly stating their beliefs through their experiences, such as the above. One scene in particular from *The Gumdigger's Wife* could perhaps also be considered an example, where the preacher Daniel Bauer gives a sermon:

“But the Lord says we gotta forgive. Seventy times seven...[y]ou think it’s too far. Well, what about God? We’ve gone pretty far. Have you gone too far for Him to forgive you?” (*The Gumdigger’s Wife*, p. 87). Characters may also be initially opposed to belief until they undergo what Sanders (2006) negatively terms as “microwave redemption” (p. 65), where salvation or some type of faith revelation unfolds in an invariable and unquestioned manner (examples include Lori Wick’s *Whatever Tomorrow Brings*, 1992, Julie Klassen’s *The Tutor’s Daughter*, 2012).

Novels belonging in this genre retain a sense of being the “sanitized” fiction that William Schaap (1997, para.14) bemoaned as resulting from the Christian Booksellers’ Association’s (CBA) tight moral guidelines. While writers are dealing with topics and issues considered ‘non-Christian’ or distasteful, such as homosexuality (Gayle Roper’s *Spring Rain*, 2001), rape (*A Day to Pick Your Own Cotton* by Michael Phillips, 2003), abortion (Karen Kingsbury’s *Shades of Blue*, 2009) and murder (Dee Henderson’s *Before I Wake*, 2006), the literature consists predominantly of that which is clean and inoffensive: no coarse language, sex scenes or vulgarity. The Christian fiction genre perhaps delivers a similar form of escapism that historical fiction does: a kind of positive hope in contrast to world problems.

Christian fiction’s development over the years can be defined by its connection with (and subsequent separation from) the mainstream fiction market. Beginning in the 1950s, books incorporating Christianity were categorised alongside other ‘secular’ fiction. A decade later, however, the trend shifted and faith-based literature appeared to fade from the mainstream scene (Mort, 2002). Nevertheless, the change meant a niche market opened for a new type of Christian fiction that provided a form of escapism in regards to showcasing the “glories of America’s past, romantic love, and the hope for redemption” (Mort, 2002, p. 2). Organisations such as the CBA and Evangelical Christian Publishing Association opened up the market for Christian fiction, and a number of successful titles and series helped set the precedent and demand for it (Mort, 2002); for example, Frank Peretti’s *This Present Darkness* (1986), Jan Karon’s *At home in Mitford* (1994), Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins’ *Left Behind: a novel of the earth’s last days* (1995), and Brock and Bodie Thoene’s *The Zion Diaries* series (i.e. *The Gathering Storm*, 2010).

Turning to the Christian historical fiction genre, historical novels with a faith perspective are personified by Mort (2002) as coming from a manufacturing “assembly

line” (p. 53). Additionally the Christian romantic genre is described as featuring Christ as the true “love interest” while the actual “Mr. Right” presented will nearly always be or become a Christian (Mort, 2002, p. 133). All such simplified and perhaps dismissive definitions add to the perception that works of literary quality are all but obsolete from Christian fiction. Trends suggest that people are after “easy reads” and view literary fiction as dark and depressing (Riess, 2010, p. 10). However there are still the exceptions; in particular Vinita Hampton Wright (*Dwelling Places*, 2006) has been touted as writing “bona fide literary fiction with a Christian theme” (Riess, as cited in Fisher, 2003, p. 23). Mort also considers Brock and Bodie Thoene as having mastered the blend between “readability and plausible history” (2002, p. 53), meaning well-written prose and sound historical content. I could also label other Christian historical fiction titles as worthy of mention in terms of those qualities, such as *A Day to Pick Your Own Cotton* (Phillips, 2003) and Francine Rivers’ *Her Mother’s Hope* (2010).

The increase of Christian fiction within the literature market contributed to the widening gap between the mainstream and evangelical publishers and the two have yet to be reconciled, despite suggestions that this avoidance trend may be shifting (Fisher, 2003). The genre is restricted to a small niche market in New Zealand, with most Christian fiction (historical and contemporary) being bought from America. Regardless of origin, however, there is a clear distinction between mainstream and Christian fiction: both cater to their own distinct audiences and deliver what those readers wish to receive.

Rather than writing for this specific market, I have considered ways to write *The Gumdigger’s Wife* with a more indirect approach to faith. Based on my own reading and observation, I will look at two ways of writing non-didactically that I have tried to incorporate in my novel. The first is that of allegory, where characters and situations come to represent something other and greater than themselves; then there is subtext, where the message is apparently omitted yet hidden in plain view for any reader to gain understanding from. I will now look at these two elements in depth.

The use of allegory – when something stands in for something else – is perhaps best described using the most popular paradigms of Christian allegory: C.S. Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950/1974) and J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1968/1983). Both these authors are considered to have used character and plot to allegorically represent

Christian narrative and ideas. For example, Brennan (n.d.) compares the moments just before the lion Aslan is killed with that of Scripture's account of Jesus Christ's crucifixion:

Once he is in the hands of the Witch, Aslan is subjected to humiliation and ridicule....“he [was] surrounded by the whole crowd of creatures kicking him, hitting him, spitting on him, jeering at him.” (Lewis, 1986, p. 139-140) This imagery is, once again, remarkably similar to that of the Gospels: “The men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him...” (Brennan, n.d., para. 18)

Tolkien's Christian influence is more subtle than this characterisation of Biblical figures, instead using situations that represent spiritual conditions. For instance, in *The Lord of the Rings* (1983) Frodo is faced with the challenge of choosing not to preserve the object of his desire (the Ring), but instead to destroy and thereby lose it. This represents what Wood (1993) calls the “deepest of all Christian truths: how to surrender one's life, how to lose one's treasure, how to die, and thus how truly to live” (p. 209).

Stone points out that the strength of allegory in works such as the above is that the Christian themes are visible only to those who have understanding of that Christian context (as cited in Brady, 2005). Mark Johnson also states in the same discussion that the story's Christian themes will only be found if you look for them, or are told to look for them, from a Christian reference point (as cited in Brady, 2005). Allegorical stories thus can be successful through covert representation of Christian themes, and any reader can enjoy them without receiving a possibly unwanted evangelical message.

Allegory is not exclusive to fantasy stories like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Narnia*. In Francine Rivers' *Redeeming Love* (1997), the main characters of Michael and Angel represent the prophet Hosea and his unfaithful wife Gomer from the Bible. In turn they are meant to represent the forgiveness of God for His people despite their constant rebellion. Similarly, I see that the actions of my characters could be seen as allegorical of this pursuit. For example, Johan has to choose twice to pursue Emmalina when she makes decisions to run from their marriage and chase after other desires. This involves an act of forgiveness that could be seen to mirror the forgiveness of God. In a similar way, Emmalina also symbolises the value of forgiveness when she pardons Johan for the mistakes he makes and, while she doesn't explicitly come to the point of forgiving her malevolent father, it is implied that a shift of heart has occurred through her decision to first move in forgiveness towards her husband:

[Emmalina speaking to friend Magdalene]: “If you’re suggesting I forgive Otac [Emmalina’s father], you’re wasting breath. You don’t understand what it was like living with such a man.”

[Magdalene’s reply]: “Forgive Johan, then. Good place to start, isn’t it? If you can’t fix your feelings about your father, for heaven’s sake fix what you can do something about!” (*The Gumdigger’s Wife*, p. 199)

The theme of forgiveness is present in the novel, but it is only symbolised through the characters’ actions and may or may not be accepted as conveying Biblical truth, depending on the reader’s own frame of reference. In this way, allegory is used in *The Gumdigger’s Wife* to marry themes of faith with a universally accessible and relatable story.

Now I turn to the element of subtext. The author which I will use to illustrate is Graham Greene, a literary writer well known for the Christian content he incorporated subtly into his works. Subtext is the “true meaning simmering underneath the words and actions” (Seeger, 2011, para. 6) of a story; this means that the words of a story imply a meaning that is beyond, and often contrary to, that which is overtly expressed. In regards to Greene and Christian literature, what *isn’t* said in his novels, what is only implied through his stories, is what contains the true Christian message. His novel *A Burnt-Out Case* (1974) is a paradigm of subtext at work. The main character of the novel, Querry, has made some detrimental mistakes in his life despite his reputation of being a great man of faith. He continually degrades himself while everyone else praises him for his Christian deeds; yet the actions he takes in comparison with other characters, particularly the preacher Rycker, are more Christ-like in nature. What occurs here, then, is a contradiction between what he believes about himself and what we see in him, and because we recognise that contradiction his deeds thus show Christian faith in an understated manner. Such a strategy means that the faith lesson is not forced upon a reader in the telling of the story. It is instead there to be called up at will, and it is up to readers to decide what such moral complexity will mean to them.

I have also attempted to use subtext in *The Gumdigger’s Wife*. For instance, Johan is quite a morally complex character in that he faces the choice of doing wrong for the betterment of his people, and by extension his wife and future family. While he has good reasons for making the choices he does, and we can empathise with him in that manner, the subtext at work here is that readers – whether they are believers or not – can perceive his twisted morality. He may think he can atone for what he has done in the past through the

decisions he makes in the present and future, but the reality is that he cannot escape from what he has already done. It is only the grace of another – Emmalina in this case, but also God in an allegorical sense – that convinces him that his mistakes have been forgiven. Of course, these meanings are not explicitly stated; they are hidden in the language of the story and merely imply this hidden Christian meaning. In this way, I have attempted to use subtext in the execution of a faith-inspired fictional work, *The Gumdigger's Wife*.

In summary, I use the techniques of allegory and subtext with the intention of making my work accessible for a wider audience than those who share my personal convictions. *The Gumdigger's Wife* is still true to my vision of the world, and representations of my faith are nonetheless present, but the spiritual meaning behind the work is only implicitly expressed for those who wish to find and consider them.

Potential audience, personal ambition

In all honesty, the consideration of how my novel fits within or without the historical and Christian genres of fiction has been challenging and, in some ways, unenjoyable. A dialogue on genre generates a plethora of value judgements and issues surrounding the concept, from how factually correct a historical novel should be to reservations about Christian fiction's quality. This has raised concerns for me in my own work. I hope that *The Gumdigger's Wife* is not presumed to be a bodice-ripper, a light entertainment with a ready-made moral message, or a story whose facts have been pushed "behind the curtain of invention" (McKenna, as cited in Pinto, 2010, p. 191). The research aims I have discussed above thus reflect the outcomes I wanted to achieve through *The Gumdigger's Wife*: a commitment to historical accuracy and subtle representation of personal beliefs.

Research aims aside, however, it is important that I now draw back from genre and consider my novel's potential audience. I am not writing for a genre, after all; I am writing for people. The questions left for me to discuss then are the following:

- What audience will I reach with the novel?
- What will they gain from the novel that is meaningful to them?

In terms of the potential audience, I envisage that a female readership is most likely and that women in the younger age bracket (20-30 years) will be most interested in it. This of course is just a supposition and based solely on the fact that I am within that age group –

and that it is a romantic story. However, in the interest of widening its potential audience, I have given it more substance with the different issues being explored within the narrative (however briefly or subtly). For example, take the prejudice against the Dalmatian people. The overall message that the novel gives about prejudice reflects accurately the times; the Dalmatians could not do anything about the situation they were in, as Johan finds out. The story also opens up the consideration of an alternative reaction to prejudice – that retaliation is not necessarily the answer – through the ramifications of Johan’s choices and Emmalina speaking to him about his own bigotry. The novel thus demonstrates, albeit indirectly, an awareness of questions surrounding the response to prejudice and the issue of revenge. In this sense, I hope it will have a broader appeal for readers who appreciate stories that have more than a romantic plot.

In regards to the second question – what will a reader gain from my novel that is meaningful to them – I also consider that my historical fiction novel could become not just a vehicle for recounting the past, but could also have consequences on how people perceive their *own* history, the history being currently created in society. De Groot (2010) suggests that an author can write about the past in order to reflect and consider their own contemporary society. He cites *Waverley* (Scott, 1814/1985) to illustrate that readers can perhaps recognise their own society’s situation in the protagonist Edward Waverley’s naivety and lack of understanding: “we are as innocent as him of what is actually happening around us, of how we are being manipulated, and the consequences of our actions” (de Groot, 2010, para. 4). Perhaps *The Gumdigger’s Wife* is similar in the way it illustrates racial discrimination; using the plight of the Dalmatian immigrants as its vehicle, the story might allow readers to identify with more contemporary issues of ethnic bigotry. It is perhaps true, then, that the historical novel can challenge us about how we understand our own society now; indeed, how the lessons of the past can be applied to our lives.

Moreover, my decision to write a non-didactic Christian work came from the desire to cause readers to think about aspects of humanity and its significance, irrespective of whether or not they identify with my faith. Mike Johnson advised me to make the reading experience “as real as [I] can make it” (personal communication, 11th June 2014), suggesting that I write a story that touches on the most cognizant and deepest human emotions and understanding. Emmalina, for example, is a character who is hungry to be loved, so much so that she even welcomes the most undesirable kind of attention: lust.

Johan's love for Emmalina goes deeper than that, a care that extends beyond physical attraction and reaches to her very character. Johan's love could be seen as an allegory of God's love for mankind. This is something that a reader may or may not identify with, depending on their own perception of the world, but most readers will identify with the universal human longing to be loved. Regardless of their background readers may still connect and identify with the novel because of the human experiences they portray. And that, I believe, is what fiction is all about: creating experiences that move and challenge the reader.

Conclusion

I sometimes wonder why the writer in me became so fascinated with kauri gum and the Dalmatian people who came to the north of New Zealand to dig it up. Maybe it is because I am a Northlander myself, or because of my Eastern European heritage that Dalmatian immigrants interest me. Nevertheless, the events are indeed rich and “not without romance” (Reed, 1948, p. 59); they have provided me with fertile ground to write this historical romance. I set myself goals in creating this work, and I suppose the work's reception in the reading and publishing world will determine whether or not I have achieved them. But perhaps my overriding goal in writing *The Gumdigger's Wife* was not so much about writing truthfully for a historical genre, or avoiding the stereotypical connotations of an evangelical genre. Rather it was to connect with people, sharing historical truth through a love story that touches on human issues from my own faith perspective: in other words, speaking the truth through love.

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