

Why Are the Sikhs Not English?: History in Peter Dickinson's *The Changes Trilogy*

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"I have made almost all of it up" (Dickinson, *Suth's Story* [1])

In Peter Dickinson's speculative fiction, conventional notions of history have little place. Reviewers are far more likely to speak glowingly of the books' "ingenuity," "imagination," and "suspense-filled narrative" than to consider seriously the status of history in such work. Addressing the reader of *Suth's Story*, Dickinson writes, "I have made almost all of it up" (1). What does "almost" mean? In *The Changes Trilogy* about a fantasy England, the three novels—*The Weathermonger*, *Heartsease*, and *The Devil's Children*—provide an answer to that question, an answer that reveals how history persists even when the novelist makes "almost all of it up." The desires explored by the *Changes* extend beyond the fantasy of sending all the bad English weather to France and imagining an England freed of smelly petrol fumes. Dickinson also explores the dangerous desire for an England in which everyone looks the same, a desire that cannot be separated from history and the narratives that "the English" tell about their history. For the joy with which Dickinson plays fast and loose with historical facts and times masks the impossibility of writing, let alone reading, any narrative, including speculative fiction, outside history.

We recognize a Dickinson novel by its persistent return to history. When teachers in *The Gift* make history "dead boring" (35), Davy is driven to use his imaginative powers as distraction from the tedium of his teachers' voices. That Davy gets a C- in history even as he uses his powers to understand the past is typical of Dickinson's fiction. One of the first signs of the enchantment that Dickinson examines in *The Changes Trilogy* is that characters no longer believe in history, i.e., that the past was different from the present. When Margaret, the heroine of *Heartsease*, recognizes that a landmark predates the Romans, she is shocked by the implications of this knowledge, for in the ahistorical world of the *Changes*, "[e]veryone talked and behaved as though England had always been the same as it was now" (36). Only a reader who recognizes the changes of history will understand that England has not always been the same, and only that reader will recognize the historical references that mark the world of the *Changes* as different from the contemporary world.

Signs of Dickinson's fascination with history are not only evident throughout his work but are also implicit in the intended readership of his books. For who will read his books other than children equally fascinated and ambivalent about history? A reader satisfied by conventional historical narrative will mistrust Dickinson's mixing of fantasy and historical fiction; a reader bored by conventional history will not likely care how it gets distorted in *The Changes Trilogy* when the well-intentioned Willoughby Furbelow accidentally wakes up Merlin. Surely the speculative history found in the trilogy appeals most to the reader who is familiar with the conventions of romantic English history, one who, like Dickinson, blurs legends and historical facts. The historical reference points that Dickinson uses in his trilogy—enduring Roman roads, the Dark Ages, Merlin, the Armada, innocent witches, wicked Lords, and plucky

children—are known because the implied reader is herself unquestionably “English,” an Englishness defined by her ancestry and familiarity with the historical narratives that celebrate it. Who else is addressed when the narrator of *The Weathermonger* refers to the “the huge, strong, patient Shires, which hauled for *our* [my underlining] ancestors for generations” (83)?

Other readers, including those born in England but whose ancestors were elsewhere when the huge patient Shires did their work, may conclude that it is not history that is set aside in Dickinson’s fiction, but the legitimacy of their relation to the text. Unfamiliar with the historical and literary references that the trilogy takes for granted, ignorant of who Merlin is and understanding even less Latin than the novel’s characters, such readers may well be bored, but the reason for their boredom sets them apart from Dickinson’s characters. His characters are not simply ignorant of history; they are pointedly described as people who repress what they once knew, and what they once knew was a history that postdates Merlin, a history paradoxically both terrifying and boring. Nicola, the heroine of *The Devil’s Children*, admits that such words as “India, and the war and things” (42) now put her to sleep: “it’s as if they’d become so . . . so boring” (42). The paradoxical consequence of waking up Merlin is the putting to sleep of historical memory, something that cannot occur to characters who never had those memories to begin with.

Dickinson’s narratives repeatedly assert that we invent fiction to satisfy our need for explanations; the Oldtales in *Suth’s Story* demonstrate that what defines us as human is our longing for explanatory narrative. Whether the tales tell the truth about the world is irrelevant; the truth Dickinson is concerned with is the narrative and psychological truth of our longing for explanation. Thus Dickinson deviates from the well-established tradition of distinguishing between history and fiction. When Aristotle insists that history deals with the particular and is therefore inferior to the generalizing discourse of poetry, he concludes that poetry is therefore more philosophical than history. Dickinson might well agree that poetry is superior, but like many other twentieth-century writers, he is just as likely to dismiss Aristotle’s definition of history as naïve. History is not what happened; it is a story about what happened.

Dickinson’s *Shadow of a Hero* is particularly attentive to the difference between fiction and history, the way that the storytelling of legends feeds human needs that the messy details of factual historical truth do not. As if Balkan history were not complicated enough—perhaps because Balkan history is so complicated—Dickinson’s response to contemporary history is to invent an imaginary nation’s quest for independence. He further emphasizes the freedom of storytelling by relying on a narrative structure that moves between legends and the real history of the Varinians, a history whose reality is itself an invention. Yet no novelist ever completely invents anything, for storytelling feeds on facts even as it transforms them into the satisfying, more coherent patterns of fiction. As Michael Chabon’s Pulitzer-prize winning novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, has reminded us, the desires of fantasy are always historically situated. Just as Chabon imagines a Jewish comic book artist who draws superheroes as a way of fighting the Nazis, Dickinson situates his fantasy world in relation to twentieth-century European history and geography. Varina, the contested land of the Varinians, occupies parts of Romania, Yugoslavia, and Hungary; Ceausescu, the long-time ruler of Romania, plays an important role; we are even told that the heroine’s grandfather fought in World War II against the Germans. But for the most part, precise historical reference in *Shadow of a Hero* is minimal.

Balkan history remains a blur; one time the heroine reports hearing on the radio “a lot of stuff about Eastern Europe” (62); another time she observes that there is “some kind of trouble” (88) between the Serbs and Croats.

As sympathetic as we might be to the exhaustion produced by history, and to the longing for historical amnesia expressed in the novel’s key phrase, “If only it had not been remembered” (7), to conclude only that historical details are simply “a lot of stuff” and a nation’s legends are always the same and always false is equally problematic. For even if “[t]he world is a simple place, in legends” (12), and people prefer simple story over complex truths, history demands a recognition of difference—Margaret’s dawning realization that England was not always the same. And whatever problems are posed by the narratives of history, it is equally misleading and dangerous to conclude that they are irrelevant because all histories are self-interested and therefore equally false. Are we really ready to say that history does not matter, that it is only another story? However postmodern we are, are we really posthistorical? The history that matters to us is always a matter of truth. When we live in a real world in which the truths of undeniable historical events are denied, to say that all storytellers lie and history is eventually only someone’s story (most likely the victor’s) is inadequate. In *Shadow of a Hero*, the grandfather tells the heroine that the function of legends is “to make the disgusting tolerable” (224), a comment that suggests that there is indeed a truth in history, one that we turn away from, not because the school lesson is boring, but because the historical truth is too painful.

Such painful historical truths are present in The Changes Trilogy. Unlike the invented countries of *Shadow of a Hero* and *AK*, a real place name identifies the world of the trilogy. The England affected by the Changes resembles what we might call Britain (the Changes do not extend to Ireland but their center is in Wales). Initially historical references are vague, through a deliberate collapsing of all past times into a singular pre-industrial era we recognize only by its difference from the present. The trilogy is set in a future somewhat later than the time of the novels’ publication; in *The Weathermonger*, Willoughby Furbelow reminisces about a trip to Costa Brava he and his wife made in 1969. Yet the time of the trilogy is hard to pin down. It resembles a past, but when? The Library of Congress information for *The Weathermonger* sets the fantasy in the Middle Ages; the dust jacket information for *Heartsease* says that *The Weathermonger* conceives “a way of life that existed in England 200 years ago.”

This vagueness reflects the text’s dependence on history as costume drama, costumes that the text assumes its readers will already know. In *The Weathermonger*, people are “oddly dressed, with a history-book look about them” (15). Which book? Which history? Later we read that the villagers are “in fancy dress, looking like dolls on a souvenir stall” (83). When Geoffrey asks his sister to explain what has happened, Sally can only say that everything has become “old-fashioned” (32). The costume-drama references demand a reader both familiar with pictures depicting the historical in other children’s books and willing to judge them as inadequate, e.g., when the haymaker’s smock is described as “the kind you used to see in particularly soppy nursery rhyme books” (79). What if *you* didn’t see them? Unless the reader already knows such books—perhaps the kind that Kate Greenaway illustrated?—the reference is as meaningless as the Latin that Sally and Merlin later speak.

The costume drama references function differently in *The Devil's Children*. Set in the beginning of a five-year period when “the English” (7) reject all modern machinery, the novel concerns a twelve-year-old child, Nicola Gore, separated from her parents during the panic initiated by the Changes. Like many others, Nicola’s parents have responded to the crisis in England by fleeing to France. The novel begins with Nicola repeating her name incessantly, not as a strategy for remembering her identity, but as a way of escaping the lonely pain of that identity. Yet when she sees a group of people moving towards her, questions of identity and difference are uppermost. The reader has no option but to see these people as focalized by Nicola, and what she sees are people who are racially different: “the colours were wrong” (13). The people are repeatedly described as “strange”; Nicola can only categorize them by comparing them to a “procession in fancy dress” (13).

Nicola approaches the people “with their strange clothes and beads and brown skins” (14), because she is desperate for some way out of London, and she believes that their difference will protect her from the danger of emotional commitment. Having been hurt by parents who have seemingly abandoned her, Nicola is determined not to be hurt again. And so she seeks the protection of strangers, “these foreign-looking folk” (16). At first the people want nothing to do with her; one of them speaking “proper English” but not “like an Englishman” (18) tells her to go away. Nicola sees the strange-looking people as other; they see her in the same way, but for that very reason, want nothing to do with her.

Only after Nicola demonstrates her utility as an English girl who can warn the strange people of the dangers that have taken over England, do they permit her to accompany them, identify themselves as Sikhs, and even explain that Sikhs must know how to fight because of the racial intolerance that they experience. But what the novel refuses to explain is why the Sikhs are immune to the machine hysteria that has taken over England. The novel simply presents this as fact, something that the reader must accept as part of the rules of the fantasy world, just as the Sikhs themselves do. One Sikh explains to Nicola that the “madness against machines . . . for some reason did not affect us Sikhs” (41). One possible explanation for the Sikhs’ immunity to the machine hysteria is that Merlin, whose accidental awakening triggers the Changes, never imagined their existence. That the Sikhs are unimaginable not only serves to protect them, it enables them in their otherness to become the heroes. Yet it also makes them vulnerable to the villagers who label them “the Devil’s Children” (74). For Merlin’s inability to imagine the Sikhs clearly does not prevent the villagers and Nicola from imagining them. Repeatedly we are told that the Sikhs are not English, that the old woman who leads them “screeche[s] like a wild animal” (22), that “real people” wear “English clothes” (52). Such statements compel us to distinguish between the Sikhs and the English. The Sikhs are not English; the implied reader is not Sikh.

Viewing the Sikhs as other is reinforced not simply through Nicola’s initial view of them as people dressed up for a pageant, but through the novel’s ending. After the Sikhs save the local village, they participate in a fancy dress parade at the spring festival. It is multicultural. Following a prayer in Punjabi and the singing of “God Save the Queen,” Kewal pointedly calls the celebration “Very English” (153). Yet despite this comment, the heroism of the Sikhs, and Nicola’s growing bond with the old Sikh woman, the Sikhs remain other, outside the category of “the English.” In the novel’s final line, they tell Nicola that it is time to seek her family in

France, but they refuse to accompany her because: “Outside these few fields we are still the Devil’s Children” (158). Even in a speculative novel where the writer has made almost all of it up, Dickinson reminds his non-Sikh reader that it is dangerous for people with brown skin to leave the village. But is this reminder an acknowledgment of past racial tensions or an inscribing of contemporary anxieties? What history accounts for the ending?

Clearly one way to read *The Devil’s Children* is as a lesson about racial intolerance and the politics of otherness. David Rees does this when he calls the novel “one of the most thoughtful discussions of racial intolerance in contemporary children’s literature” (164). Nicola learns that the Sikhs believe that they are cleaner than the Europeans, better at democratic processes, and certainly less likely to abandon their children. Kewal repeatedly instructs Nicola, and implicitly the reader, on the difference between the English and the Sikhs. One time he tells her that her pragmatism is typically English: “That is how the English ruled India. They would go and admire the Taj Mahal, but all the time they were thinking about drains” (66). But what conclusions can we draw from the ending? Even if their immunity to the machine hysteria is simply a plot device—someone has to be the hero—the linking of the immunity to their status as the Devil’s Children produces further questions. Does racial intolerance predate industrialization? Is an essential characteristic of “the English” their racism?

Or are “the English” resistant to acknowledging that national identities and histories evolve through time? For the novel challenges its own exclusionary premises by hinting at a radically different definition of “the English.” If the characters reject this definition, it is because they are themselves historical subjects threatened by a world in which Sikhs are English. I draw this conclusion when Gopal tells Nicola that the Sikhs are both different—“My people are Indians” (31)—and the same—English in that “many of us came to England, especially after the war” (31). Speaking in the first person, Gopal provides an alternate definition of “the English,” one which finds a place for the complex historical subjectivity of the immigrant and his child, and for the child reader whose family also comes from somewhere else, the child reader who is also “English.”

Gopal’s history books tell him that “[w]hen a man joins the Sikh religion he becomes taller and stronger and braver” (32). Must the reader mock Gopal’s faith in the truth of his history books, and conclude that history is only another story? Or might she learn that the truths of history are dependent on the stories we tell, that unless we are willing to expand the “network of myths and imaginings” (92) to include the stories recorded in Sikh history books, the Sikhs will remain ambiguously other? In the conclusion of *The Weathermonger*, after the Changes end because Merlin has gone back to sleep, Mr. Furbelow and the children agree that since they cannot tell adults the facts about what happened, they must make up a story. Moving from history to poetry, they demonstrate that the stories we make up are never separate from the histories that produce us, and that the “almost” of history continues to disturb the legends of what it is to be English.

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