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YOUNG ADULT

A Victorian Novel for the 21st Century

By AMANDA FOREMAN
Published: May 12, 2011

Once upon a time, Henry Treece, Roger Lancelyn Green, Rosemary Sutcliff and Elizabeth George Speare — all authors of historical novels for children — were household names. The genre was so vibrant that writers like Joan Aiken and Susan Cooper could veer into "alternate history" sagas, confident their young readers would have sufficient knowledge to appreciate the subtle interplay of historical "fact" and historical "fiction."

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Then came the downgrading of history from a discipline in its own right to a subset of something vaguer called the humanities. The 1980s and '90s were lean years for children's historical fiction; with a few exceptions, the quality of that era's novels was nowhere near as high as that of their predecessors. These attempts also felt, for want of a better word, old-fashioned. If the historical novel was going to come back, it would have to be not only reimagined but practically reinvented.



FALLEN GRACE

By Mary Hooper
309 pp. Bloomsbury. \$16.99.
(Young adult; ages 12 and up)

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Excerpt: 'Fallen Grace' (Google Books)

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Rick Riordan blazed the way by fusing history with ancient myth to create a hybrid that introduced a whole new generation of children to the classical world. But for the most part, popular young adult authors have been more comfortable imagining future dystopias than reviving the past.

This is why Mary Hooper's latest book caused such a stir when it was published in Britain last year. Set in Victorian

London, "Fallen Grace" unashamedly revels in all the tropes and flourishes of the 19th-century novel, all the while speaking directly to a generation that knows the words to every Lady Gaga song.

Any reader of Dickens will recognize the driving elements of "Fallen Grace": orphans deprived of an inheritance, philanthropic strangers mysteriously connected to the heroines, seemingly beneficent employers who harbor nefarious designs, and the sudden, violent end to the chief villain. The orphans in question here are 15-year-old Grace and her older sister Lily. Forced to sell watercress in the streets of London, Grace can hardly believe her luck when the Unwins, the owners of a funeral parlor, offer them employment, Lily as a maid and Grace as their new "mute" — the silent attendant in Victorian funerals, paid to add solemnity to the occasion. One day Lily disappears from the house; run off with the groom, Grace is told. Convinced the Unwins are deceiving her, she goes on a desperate search to find out what really happened to her sister.

Complicating matters, and part of what makes "Fallen Grace" vastly superior to its competitors, are its psychological complexities. For one thing, Lily suffers from some kind of mental deficiency. Furthermore, both sisters were raped at their charity institution,

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leaving Grace pregnant. (The book begins with Grace hiding the corpse of her baby within a rich woman’s coffin — the only way she can give it a proper burial.) These girls are hardly in a position to “run off” on a romantic escapade.

Hooper writes in beautiful 19th-century cadences, but her story lines pack a 21st-century punch. Nothing feels forced or inserted for mere shock value. “Fallen Grace” has been impeccably researched, and it shows in every paragraph. There is even an appendix with five historical essays and a bibliography for readers interested in learning more about the era. It should come as no surprise to Hooper’s fans that “Fallen Grace” has been nominated for the Carnegie Medal, Britain’s equivalent of the Newbery; this is historical fiction worthy of the genre.

Amanda Foreman is the author of “Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire.”

A version of this review appeared in print on May 15, 2011, on page BR24 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: The Hard-Knock Life A Victorian orphan goes in search of her missing sister in Mary Hooper’s historical novel..

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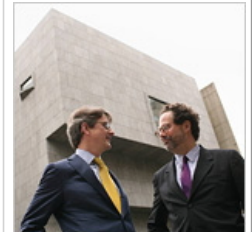
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