

**Storytelling and the Crusades: an examination of the importance of
storytelling in our understanding of the crusades from the earliest written
accounts to a present-day novel, 'Kyrie Eleison'**

PhD thesis

Department of English, Creative Writing and Australian Studies

Faculty of Education, Humanities and Law

Flinders University of South Australia

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Adrian Thurnwald

BA (Hons.), Flinders University

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Declaration

I certify that this work does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed:

Summary

While it is generally accepted that the crusades significantly shaped the evolution of chivalric romance, courtly love and the knightly stereotype, the First Crusade (1096–1099) in particular has a resonating significance that even continues to shape contemporary ideas, representations and beliefs.

The participants of the First Crusade were shaped by fictional narratives of various kinds. The Bible, itself reinterpreted to suit changing circumstances in history, was a key text, even shaping military strategy. Similarly, when recording and making sense of the historical facts about the capture of Jerusalem, ecclesiastical historians drew on phrases and tropes from epic literature, suggesting that such texts influenced individual and cultural understanding of identity and the world.

After the military successes of the First Crusade, knights were seen to have gained the approval of God in a holy enterprise, which gave lay knights a special prestige and a new sense of self-worth. Crusading ideals, coupled with troubadour conventions, gave rise to the heroes of chivalric romance, who, though a step removed from the crusaders of medieval history books, represented the crusader ideal *par excellence*—men with the strength, morality and spirit of the crusaders, but stripped of all suggestions of ecclesiastical control. These narratives, in which morality was enforced through a code of violence by knights who were a law unto themselves, quickly influenced the self-identity of European aristocratic and knightly classes, where powerbrokers play-acted as narrative heroes in the everyday world.

Miguel de Cervantes in *Don Quixote* satirised those who would idealise storybook knights, and his layered work called into question storytelling itself and fiction's influence on society. *Don Quixote* was a challenge to the fictionalised crusader-cum-chivalric knight, but despite Cervantes the ideal would survive.

Historian Jonathan Riley-Smith has demonstrated that Walter Scott's historical novel, *The Talisman*, play-acted in costume by more recent Western powerbrokers such as the German Emperor, may have forever changed modern Middle East/West relations, standardising perceptions of crusading and Saladin in the modern Middle East.

The crusaders understood themselves through fictional narratives and storytelling, and, as fictionalised characters themselves, they have influenced Western culture and identity ever since. Some suggest that the current age is one of a clash of cultures and that cultural values and exports—be they explicit or subtle—can exacerbate cultural tensions.

However, although crusading ideas still reappear occasionally in political rhetoric, the West is wary of crusaders and their anachronistic ideals and quick to spot them in their native form. But, perhaps because of such wariness, crusaders have taken on new guises in the modern age with the result that the values of the chivalric knights, those idealised crusaders, have been sustained. In popular culture in general and in American comic books in particular, superheroes are lone champions who yearn for an unreachable ideal, answer only to themselves, and enforce morality through violence; such figures can be seen as carrying medieval values into the modern world. In such popular guises, crusader narrative fiction and its ideals may still be influencing the self-understanding of those in the West and dictating how the West represents itself across cultural divides. The presence of such disguised versions of the crusades and crusaders in our collective consciousness hinders our proper understanding of what the crusades meant, not just to the crusaders themselves but for us.

These ideas and more are synthesised in the creative work, ‘Kyrie Eleison’, which uses storytelling to suggest how crusader identities were formed and then re-interpreted through fiction. At the same time, the creative piece attempts to present the crusaders in recognisable human terms so as to try and overcome the difficulties modern readers might have in understanding crusader motivations, both because the crusader mindset is so different to our own and because we are likely to be influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by simplistic conceptions of the crusades which still permeate popular culture.

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General Introduction

Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has already been, in the ages before us.

Ecclesiastes 1:10 [NRSV]

each definition [of crusade] runs the risk of detaching it as a specific war of the Church from the general development of medieval society, of making it an event [occurring] on the borders of Christendom, as opposed to locating its deep-rootedness in Christendom's central structures.

Norman Housley, *Contesting the Crusades*¹

When I set out to write the creative piece 'Kyrie Eleison', an historical trilogy set during the First Crusade, two challenges immediately presented themselves. As a student of literature I wanted to keep *narrative* in focus, both in my thinking about the medieval world and my recreation of it. I felt I should try to reproduce convincingly the world and the mindset of the pilgrims at the time, as understood by historians of our own time, and my representations of participants and conditions must remain within the bounds of plausibility.

To understand further how the crusaders saw themselves, I also read beyond modern history books, returning to the crusaders' own histories. Such histories show that the bounds of what an audience will find plausible have shifted. It has been noted that history itself can be represented in a number of genres which might suggest various intentions, and the medieval histories can be classified as belonging to different genres to those of today, with more explicit foci on storytelling, supernatural influence, morality, didactic instruction, and the overt championing of ideologies.²

¹ Ernst-Dieter Hehl, 'Was ist eigentlich ein Kreuzzug?', in *Historische Zeitschrift* 259 (1994), 297-336, at p. 333, quoted in Housley, *Contesting the Crusades*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 6-7.

² Perhaps history can never escape such traps. Richard T. Vann, paraphrasing Isaiah Berlin, suggests that 'as long as history is written in ordinary language, it will be suffused with the moral meanings and connotations which are inextricably embedded in everyday speech.' Richard T. Vann, 'Turning Linguistic', in *A New Philosophy of History*, ed. by Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), pp. 40-69 (p. 43).

In these histories we see that the crusaders themselves were heavily influenced by narrative. The stories of the Bible were so real to the crusaders that they attempted to recreate scenes from biblical tales, hoping for the same results. They walked barefoot around Jerusalem, like Joshua at Jericho, during a desperate siege and when troops were harassing them with arrows from the walls. The narratives of figures such as Christ, Job and Abraham heavily informed the Church's reasoning for offering crusaders an indulgence and thus the entire reason for individuals to go on crusade. The crusaders were continuing the narrative of a Jerusalem that for them continued from the Bible: indeed they felt they might be writing a new biblical chapter. It became clear to me as I read the early accounts of the crusades that the crusader pilgrims understood themselves through story, and story influenced their actions, on both the strategic and personal levels. The Bible positions the world itself as part of a story with a beginning, middle and end, which continues to influence Western consciousness even today.

It is thus clear that the Bible influenced the crusaders and so must help shape my creative piece. The medieval histories, influenced by the Bible and with narrative elements that have been discounted by historians today, would also be useful. What other stories did the pilgrims tell themselves? There is a shift in Western literature right around the time of the First Crusade. Pre-crusade we see the heroic epic—stories such as *Beowulf*, in which heroes struggle violently against monsters. The heroic epic itself shifts with *The Song of Roland*, written at about the time of the First Crusade. The version it offers of the story of Roland's death reveals the influence of the Crusade: violence and the personal capacity for feats of arms are both celebrated, and the monsters are Muslims; I note in passing that in the real historical episode represented in *Roland* the antagonists were Christian Basques.

First Crusade histories drew upon the epic genre, deploying the language of the epic and casting some of its figures as epic heroes in a vein similar to *Roland*.

My first problem was thus to attempt to represent the crusaders as they understood themselves. It became apparent to me that storytelling influenced both the self-understanding of the crusaders and how they comprehended their roles as they journeyed to Jerusalem. Storytelling also shaped how the people of the

Middle Ages came to understand and reinvent the crusader as a lasting heroic icon. If I was to represent the crusader accurately, I must engage with the kinds of storytelling that formed and reshaped the crusader. I understood from the histories that a similar kind of intertextuality to that of the histories would be needed in my creative piece.

Shortly after the First Crusade came the birth of troubadour poetry, celebrating love, eroticism, and a longing for the unattainable woman. The King Arthur legend also begins to take hold of the Western imagination around this time. These converge in the chivalric romance, particularly in the Arthurian romances, in which noble knights serving great kings perform deeds of arms, but now always in service to their inner selves and in answer to their psychic struggles. They long for women who seem as unattainable and ethereal as that other great romance quest object, the Holy Grail. These stories may well have been influenced by the obsession over personal guilt and redemption that flowed from the indulgence granted to the crusaders. Crusaders had quested, fought and suffered to make up for their sins in the eyes of a divine and unknowable Christ and his Virgin mother, and crusaders themselves had entered myth as celebrated heroes and as models for the heroes of romance.

Once again, in this post-First Crusade era, fiction influenced people's personal lives, as manuals on chivalry were written, Arthurian fantasies acted out and Arthurian objects fetishised like holy relics.

The First Crusade was a liminal moment. Whether it truly birthed these literary ideas or simply reflected them is open to debate, but the historical fact of the First Crusade is indelibly imbedded in this artistic shift. This awareness brought me to my second problem in representing creatively the First Crusade: in a post-9/11 world where heroic ideas are arguably still influenced by these knights of chivalry, when these post-crusader echoes are only once removed, how was I to unravel my own biases and those of my contemporaries? The facts of the First Crusade, and even the original stories that influenced its participants, had been obscured behind a tangled growth of literature. I realised I would have to address some of these later narratives in my book. How to do that when, on the one hand, I wanted my crusaders themselves to be plausibly located within a strictly specific historical period?

My solution was to write my story on two ‘levels’. One level would be that of the more-or-less straight historical novel, in which I play with the idea of how the crusaders were subconsciously and almost helplessly influenced by the culturally dominant narratives of their day. The second level would be of stories within the story, told by a storyteller character existing on the first level. These stories would embody my reflections on post-First Crusade narratives. They would reflect upon how the crusade and its ideals have been echoed, reinvented, and further fictionalised ever since. Reading the medieval histories, we see the participants of the crusade transforming into figures of myth and legend, and so my storyteller would start as a gossip, repeating the histories of the characters around her, and grow to become a storyteller, mythologising the crusaders even before they reach Jerusalem.

Echoes of the literary crusader might be heard at any time in the last nine hundred years of Western literature, but I have chosen a few key texts that were influential, enduring, and particularly suited to the metatextual ‘discussion’ of my creative piece.

Miguel de Cervantes lived in the twilight of the crusading era, fighting for the Holy League against the Ottomans in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571 and spending time as a prisoner of the Muslims, and he wrote that great satiric book mocking the fictional knight, Don Quixote. Even more widely, *Don Quixote* lampooned those who were blindly influenced by fiction, and specifically by reading. *Don Quixote* seemed to have so much in common with my way of thinking about the crusades that it became a key text. Its metatextuality influenced how I would deconstruct the storybook crusader in my creative piece. The romance knight would survive Cervantes’ expert assault, and be rejuvenated by many later writers. One of these was Sir Walter Scott, whose novel *The Talisman*, set during the Third Crusade, may, modern historian Jonathan Riley-Smith argues, have influenced the popular perception of the crusaders and their opponents in the modern world, both in the Middle East and the West.

In the modern reimagining of the crusades Sir Walter Scott looms large. The 2005 Ridley Scott film *Kingdom of Heaven* owes more to Scott than the work of historians. Despite the best efforts of modern historians and historical novelists, it is arguable that we are still in the ‘Scott era’ when it comes to the popular and mass media understanding of the crusades—Westerners full of spirit but often

thuggish oppose mysterious, almost magical, ideologically driven but extremely enlightened Muslims. We must remember that, in the case of this view of Muslims, positive stereotypes are still stereotypes which obscure the facts. When it comes to literature that influenced the writing of my trilogy and stories which are discussed in the 'literary game' of the novels, I stop at Scott, only because the myriad voices that have come since have never quite drowned him out. I focus on Scott at the expense of figures between him and Cervantes because Scott's stories about the crusades influence modern popular understanding of them so much.

Key pieces of storytelling from beyond the era of the crusades thus also inform this second 'level' of my creative piece, as I attempt to suggest through intertextuality and metatextuality how storytelling has continued to shape and reshape understanding of the crusader.

A question that extends from this study can be asked: in what ways are the crusaders and their fictional echoes continuing to influence personal identities in the West today? Are we as blind as the crusaders, following narratives as if we have no choice, even into distant wars, hoping that the 'Western story' will see us redeemed at the end? Thus, in the final part of this exegesis I step beyond the works that directly influenced my creative piece and discuss how this idea of the narrative influence of crusader ideals might be extending into the modern world. Though chivalric knights from romance are not crusaders themselves, they are only a step away. They are 'fictionalised crusaders' in an idealised form. I suggest that American comic book superheroes are only one further step away from chivalric knights, and are in some ways the same fictional figures at heart, simply with different costumes. We are wary of crusaders now, and so they have had to change their garb if they were to continue promoting their ideals in earnest. Superheroes may influence personal identities, and I believe they may influence cultural tensions in a post 9/11 world. I hope to suggest that the ideals of the crusaders, ideals that have been expressed strongly in idealised fictional versions of the crusaders, are still speaking to the West, and the West might do better to be more aware of them and their continuing influence. This, I hope, implies that my creative piece itself has relevance and value to the modern reader—the processes it describes may still be having an impact today.

The creative piece intends to show how the crusader began and how he transformed himself down the ages. I hope to show the literary crusader's warts

and his strengths, so that we are more aware of how crusaders, and stories, continue to touch and shape people in the West. I hope to hold a funhouse mirror up to the West and some of its stories, so that, looking at this slightly enlarged and distorted version of themselves and their hidden cultural values, the Western reader might become more aware of subconscious narrative influences he or she might otherwise take for granted. Walter Scott's crusaders may have influenced the West's relations with the world in the past, and caped crusaders may be doing the same today, so it would seem advantageous to be aware of the descent of some of these anachronistic moral (or amoral) archetypes.

My structure is itself indebted to a great narrative tradition—Esther, my storyteller, is like Scheherazade of *The Arabian Nights*. The frame story of the *Nights* existed in the Middle East in some form in the eighth century, translating from Indian texts, possibly including stories from the *Panchatantra*, *Baital Pachisi* and the Buddhist *Jataka Tales*, but by the tenth century had taken on its own Arabic identity.³ It continued to grow to the thirteenth century and beyond. It had its modern title by the twelfth century. The oldest surviving Arabic manuscript dates from the fifteenth century.⁴ These stories-within-stories most likely influenced Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1353), and *The Decameron* almost certainly influenced Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (late fourteenth century).⁵ Here is a positive transmission from Muslim culture to Christian (along, perhaps, with the troubadour tradition).⁶ These stories are post-crusades but, as they are themselves so important in the history of literature and as they suggest a positive creative link between cultures, they seemed the perfect texts with which to be creating allusive connections. *The*

³ See Robert Irwin in the Introduction to, *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1001 Nights*, 3 vols. (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 2, ix-xviii (p. ix).

⁴ Irwin, p. x.

⁵ 'In 1372, still only about thirty years old, Chaucer traveled as part of an embassy to Genoa and later visited Florence, where he might have met Petrarch and Boccaccio, two famous poets he draws on repeatedly throughout his work.' Joseph Glaser in the Introduction to Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales in Modern Verse* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2005), p. 1.

⁶ The possible links between Boccaccio, Chaucer, and an early as yet unknown translation of the *Nights* are fascinating, and *The Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales* contains elements from the *Nights*. For example, the unique 'mechanical flying horse of brass...is not the only element of Arab origin in the "The Squire's Tale"; for the episode in which Princess Canacee (who has acquired a magic ring that allows her to understand the language of birds) eavesdrops on a female falcon which tells of its desertion by a tercel, or male hawk, must derive ultimately from "The Tale of Taj al-Muluk and the Princess Dunya" in the *Nights*', Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (London: Tauris Paperbacks, 2010), Amazon Kindle e-book, location 1737-42.

Canterbury Tales is a story of pilgrims entertaining each other with stories on the way to visit a holy place, and this has parallels with my trilogy. *The Arabian Nights* is about a woman who tells tales to a powerful man so her barren kingdom can once again be fruitful, and so that she herself can be saved, and this is thematically very similar to Esther's story in my trilogy, whose life has become empty since the death of her husband and baby; she must rejuvenate her own creative possibility, as well as her identity as a woman in the medieval world.

Throughout my thesis, words and ideas such as 'fact', 'truth', 'fiction', 'literary', 'narrative' and 'popular culture/literature' all need careful deployment. The idea of history itself is full of subtleties; ways of presenting and understanding the past have changed down the ages. When I speak of history, I am speaking of history as understood by the consensus of historians today. Let us call it 'historical fact', and note that for 'facts' to have cultural meaning, they must be interpreted. The resulting interpretations can be shaped by ideology, and by the power relations of those making historical claims over those who remain silent. 'Fiction' can contain truth; great fiction may be true in terms of the way it reproduces human truths within a signified and conventional artificiality. As Hess notes,

Pablo Picasso is reported to have said: art is a lie that makes us realize the truth. The art of fiction tells truth because it is the truth of life that goes into making good fiction: love, hate, fear, courage, delight, sorrow, betrayal, loyalty, confusion, choice, circumstance, luck, injustice.⁷

'Fiction' in this thesis can mean narrative texts generally understood not to be literally true. I will include the Bible in this, as even medieval scholars championed the value of allegorical truths in biblical tales. 'Literary' I might use loosely from time-to-time, as what is 'literary' from one era to another can change. Indeed, while 'literary' today implies cultural value, artistic worth and cultural elitism, what was written for a less discerning audience can become 'literary' over time. We will assume that literary means 'written down', of cultural value, and perhaps 'influential'.

⁷ Carol Lakey Hess, 'Fiction is Truth, and sometimes Truth is Fiction', *Religious Education: The official journal of the Religious Education Association*, 103:3 (2008), 283-285 (p. 280). Hess cites Dore Ashton, *Picasso on art* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988) as the source of this Picasso quotation.

‘Popular culture’, finally, and ‘popular literature’ are fraught terms. One might say that the chivalric romances, for example, were ‘popular literature’, and part of the mass media of their day, but such ‘popular literature’ was still only enjoyed only by a wealthy elite and existed in very few copies (and may indeed have been largely oral in its presentation and tradition). Here, ‘popular literature’ is lay literature, a literature of the people which may or may not have aligned with the interests of the Church. ‘Popular’ means that a work of secular fiction was widely disseminated and influential across space and/or time.

Popular fiction, whether transmitted in writing or orally, influenced the motives and actions of the crusaders, and this process is represented in my creative piece ‘Kyrie Eleison’. Popular fiction influenced the people who made history, in the sense of participating in and representing events that are remembered today. These real people and their ideals were then transformed again in fiction, which represented essential aspects of their ideals. Fiction both warped the crusaders and the facts of their lives and caused them to endure in the imagination of the West, and to influence future human beings. This process of the crusades being fictionalised, and the layers of fiction gradually obscuring the facts of the crusades from modern eyes, is represented in the creative piece ‘Kyrie Eleison’ through the character of Esther and her various stories-within-the-story.

Stories shaped the crusaders, and stories have shaped our view of them since, and thus ‘Kyrie Eleison’ is, like *The Arabian Nights*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and *Don Quixote*, a story about storytelling.