Feminist Philosophy
Time, history and the transformation of thought

Edited by
Synne Myrebøe,
Valgerður Pálmadóttir
& Johanna Sjöstedt

Södertörns högskola
Chapter 8  
Possessing the Past  
– Revisiting (a Feminist) Swedish 19th Century  
in Contemporary Fiction

Claudia Lindén

What does the historical novel have to do with history? History and fiction – are they not opposites? Today we experience a wave of historical novels, films, and TV series, both internationally and in Sweden. Since these fictions often attract large audiences, they contribute to and shape our contemporary historical consciousness and national self-image. At a time when there is a politically charged struggle over Sweden’s history and national identity and museums and institutions are looking for new ways to represent cultural heritage, it is particularly interesting to look at how Swedish history is depicted in contemporary historical fiction.

Our image of nineteenth-century Sweden has in fact been shaped by literature. The impact of Vilhelm Moberg’s emigrant epos and Per-Anders Fogelström’s Stockholm series cannot be measured.¹ With numerous editions and adaptations in film, a TV series, a musical, and in theater continuing to be made, shaping our historical consciousness, the work of Moberg and Fogelström constitute our cultural memory of that epoch.² Nineteenth century Sweden appears as poor, dirty and miser-

² In 2017 Stadsteatern in Stockholm staged *City of my dreams* as a play spanning over the whole pentology, directed by Linus Tunström, and a new TV-series adaptation of *The Emigrants* started filming in 2020.
able, and the present becomes a positive development away from the past, especially for women. The legacy of Moberg, Fogelström and the project of modernization can be discerned through an ambivalence toward the past in Swedish fictions situated in the nineteenth-century.

How then, does the image of Sweden’s history and our relationship to the past appear in contemporary historical fiction with their female protagonists and stories from the margins about unmarried mothers, prostitutes, oppressed Sami or forbidden same-sex desire? In some stories, especially those dealing with prostitution and sexual harassment, the past is not past, but very much alive and haunts the present. Historical fictions provide other models for understanding the past and for criticizing how the past is constructed. Temporality creates a relation to history and therefore shapes historical consciousness, as well as an understanding of the feminist task in the present.

In England, the historical novel is an established genre and a field of research, in its own right. However, in the Nordic countries, there is virtually no research at all on the historical novel as such, despite our long tradition of this genre. I will therefore situate this article in the context of British research. Taking as my starting point William Godwin’s defense of fiction, as the best genre for history writing, I will argue that historical fictions, with their ability to transgress the borders between past and present and between fiction and facts, engineer what Ethan Kleinberg has labeled “deconstructive history”. Through a reading of a few contemporary historical fictions, especially the TV series Fröken Frimans krig (Miss Friman’s War), I will show how these historical fictions establish a temporality, which transgresses past and present, and which in turn shape our historical consciousness. In this way, these historical fictions serve as both the history of feminism and as critical historiography, creating new knowledge, not only about the women of the past but our ongoing relationship with them.
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Women, History, and the Historical Novel

The historical novel’s regained influence coincided with theoretical developments within historiography and theory of history after it began to reflect on the relation between history and literature. What could be labeled the ‘narrative turn in history’ had its equivalent in a ‘historical turn in narrative’. New theoretical developments within literary theory, such as Hayden White’s metahistory, Linda Hutcheon’s ‘historiographic metafiction, and Amy Elias ‘meta-historical romance’ a “postmodernist historical fiction which is obsessed with historiographical questions in a self-reflexive mode”, all contributed to the development of the historical novel. Inspired by critical discourses like postcolonialism and feminism the metahistorical fiction was grappling with the meaning of history, in the manner of realist historiography.

According to Alan Robinson, criticism of historical novels is still dominated by a now outdated model of historiographic metafiction: “it is also inadequately narrow in reducing historiography to epistemological issues and in neglecting the crucial importance of temporality in the interplay between past present and past future and present past.” The issue of temporality runs as an undercurrent in both history and historical fiction. Derrida has been an important influence on the fields of both history and literature. Inspired by Derrida, a few historians have developed the concept of history as haunting especially when it comes to unresolved political traumas but also as a deconstructive ap-
proach, as “haunting history”.6 Another discussion of temporality is rooted in German history and cultural memory studies with, among others, Reinhart Koselleck and Aleida Assman, and post-colonial studies where history’s hauntings of the present is described as a kind of “entanglement” of time dimensions.7

For centuries, the historical novel has been the only genre of history open to women. Women have been excluded from recorded history both as subjects, writers, and readers before they were admitted to the universities around 1900. A historical setting has frequently been used by women (and male) writers “as a way of writing about subjects which would otherwise be taboo, or of offering a critique of the present through their treatment of the past” as Dina Wallace has pointed out. She continues: “It is not surprising that in women’s hands the historical novel has often become a political tool. Perhaps even more important for women writers has been the way that the historical novel has allowed them to invent or ‘re-imagine’ […] the unrecorded lives of marginalized and subordinated people”.8 In historical fiction, the time that separates the present from the past can be transgressed and we, as modern readers, can for a moment situate ourselves in another historical room.

Women’s reading and writing of historical fiction have often been regarded as escapism. These two uses of history – escapism and the political – are connected, according to Wallace, since escapism indicates dissatisfaction with what is available. Marginality or exclusion breeds skepticism toward the grand narratives of history and makes women into “resisting readers” as Judith Fetterly once coined it. Wallace continues: “But the understanding that much of history is ‘invention’ as Austen puts

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it, ‘narrative’ or ‘fiction’ as a postmodernist theorist such as Hayden White might argue, may also bring certain freedoms.”9 If history has traditionally excluded women, the historical novel, on the other hand, has “offered women readers the imaginative space to create different, more inclusive versions of ‘history’, Wallace concludes.10

The contemporary interest in transgressing the borders between history and literature, is often perceived as an exclusively postmodern discourse (White, Ankersmit, Kleinberg etc.) with no historical precedent. But the debate between the historian and the writer of fiction can be traced to the inception of the modern era. Before Walter Scott’s immensely popular historical novels and Ranke’s criticism of them in 1824, the philosopher and writer William Godwin (1756–1826) argued in “Of History and Romance” that “[t]he writer of romance is to be considered as the writer of real history.”11 According to Godwin, a novel is a superior form of history-writing because it relates human action to character and circumstance. My point is that Godwin from his 18th-century pre-Ranke perspective could express a very similar idea as the contemporary deconstructive historian does. He could do that because he built his argument on romance or the gothic novel, an early form of the historical novel. The genre that Austen’s heroine Catherine Morland in Northanger Abbey prefers is “history, real solemn history”.12 However, contemporary philosophy of history is not aware that the gothic historical novel theorized the relationship between history writing and literature already at the formation of the science of history. I will start with recapitulating Derrida’s reflections on the ghost in Spectres of Marx, and then turn to Ethan Kleinberg’s idea of haunting history that builds upon Derrida.

9 Wallace 2004, p. 3.
10 Wallace 2004, p. 3.
11 William Godwin “Of History and Romance” 1797, https://web.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/godwin.history.html
12 Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey (1803) ch. 14 https://www.gutenberg.org/files/121/121-h/121-h.htm
From there I will move to a closer analysis of Godwin’s text, before offering a reading of *Fröken Frimans krig.*

**Derrida’s Spectres**

In his very influential book *Spectres of Marx* (1993), Jacques Derrida develops a theory, or rather a metaphor, for understanding history. Starting from the first sentence of Marx’s Manifesto “A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism”, in combination with the famous line from the opening scene where Hamlet speaks with his father’s ghost and utters “The time is out of joint: Oh cursed spite/That ever I was born to set it right”, Derrida creates the neologism *hauntology*, a word-mix of haunting and ontology. Haunting is repetition and a first time, it is a ghost, something that is both present and absent at the same time. “After the end of history,” Derrida writes, “the spirit comes by coming back [revenant], it figures both a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again.” That which repeats itself is of course something that cannot be confined to a single given space and time.

What is important for Derrida’s argument, concerning Marx and Marxism, is how the image of the ghost, the spectre, helps to deconstruct the notion of historical time as an irreversible linear succession of events. To understand the history and legacy of Marxism and how it has haunted not only history and our present but also threatens to haunt the future, it is necessary to talk of both history, something contemporary and a possible future and to be able to do so from different historical viewpoints. Derrida emphasizes an idea of history where the relation between past, present, and future are both looser than traditionally understood, and yet are connected at the same time.

Even though Derrida primarily discusses the legacy of Marx and Marxism his ideas have gained relevance for historians interested in another way of understanding and writing history.

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The notion of history as a ghost that returns to haunt the present, as something not necessarily confined to a given time and place, opens up for seeing how the past is not only stuck in the past but continues to live on and affect us in the present. History of oppression often works in this ghost-like way, as a revenant. Holocaust and antisemitism, slavery and racism as well as centuries of legal and moral differences between men and women are all examples of oppression in history that continue to haunt the present.

Haunting History

In his book *Haunting History*, the American historian Ethan Kleinberg, following Derrida, argues for an understanding of the past as polysemic, conflicting, and as both present and absent at the same time. This understanding sets itself against the current trend toward a fetishization of lived experience, materialism and the “real” (ontological realism). The main reasons why deconstruction never has gained influence on the practice of history, Kleinberg argues, “is a commitment to history as an endeavor concerned with events assigned to a specific location in space and time that are in principle observable and as such are regarded as fixed and immutable.”

This leads to the wrong assumption that there can be something like a permanently enduring past. Getting the past right becomes a question of historical method.

History, Kleinberg argues, is a replacement where the past event or figure is silently determined by the retelling that replaces it. He embraces Hayden White’s emphasis on language and constructivism in the historical endeavor, and he looks to Derrida for a hauntological approach to history that “accounts for the entangled and unstable relation of presence and absence without privileging one over the other.”

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16 Kleinberg, *Haunting history*, p. 3.
calls this a “past that is” to emphasize something that is at the same time both present and absent.¹⁷

As Derrida did, Kleinberg turns to literature when he tries to map out a deconstructive history. The example he chooses is Washington Irving’s gothic novel *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1820) about the headless horseman. The story is set in 1790 where the schoolteacher Ichabod Crane comes to a small, former Dutch, settlement called Sleepy Hollow, a place renowned for its ghosts and the haunting atmosphere that pervades the imaginations of its inhabitants and visitors. To Kleinberg *Sleepy Hollow*:

is a story of a past that haunts history – a past of American Indian dispossession, of the revolutionary war, of the unspoken atrocity that took place at Major André’s tree /…/ Sleepy Hollow is laden with the ghosts of a past half-remembered if remembered at all. This is the latent past beneath the ghosts that haunt the inhabitants. /…/ It is a past that we cannot touch but that nonetheless touches us. The histories, the tales, the haunted spots are all partial configurations, like a headless horseman.¹⁸

History is, according to Kleinberg, the presence of absence, of things hidden, buried and forgotten. “And when what is latent appears returns, history is haunted, and we are confronted with the possibility that our understanding of the past is polysemic and contradictory.”¹⁹ Haunting history is a past that comes again with the possibility to still affect, disturb or even hurt us. Kleinberg argues: “Insofar as history serves to make the past legible in the present, it should be seen as a writing whose function it is to make present what is absent, to render legible that which would otherwise be illegible”.²⁰ (my italics).

When Kleinberg needed an example of how a haunting history may function, he turned to the gothic – the genre that invented the writing of the haunted, to begin with. Gothic, or romance as it is called in the 18th-century, was not only literature of terror and haunting – it was historical fiction. Not with exact dates and places, as Walter Scott would later practice it, but history with a vague sense of pastness that often hides secrets that affect and haunt the protagonists in their present. As a fiction with multi-layered temporality, it is a genre that already from the beginning destabilized the relation between past and present.

Despite Kleinberg’s reference to *Sleepy Hollow* it is just an example or at best a metaphor (the headless horseman) of how a deconstructive history should be understood. Literature, fiction, is never allowed to be a *method*. Even though he notices that Derrida’s interest in transgressing the border between “fiction’ and ‘fact’ as well as between the living and the dead, the past and the present, presence, and absence” Kleinberg never himself crosses that line.21

Fiction is – in fact – the ghost that haunts history writing. The historical scholar Michel de Certeau has said that “fiction is the repressed other of historical discourse.”22 In commenting on this quote, Hayden White asks “Why? Because historical discourse wages everything on the true, while fictional discourse is interested in the real – which it approaches by way of an effort to fill out the domain of the possible or imaginable.”23 To think the possible, also opens up for the fictional, for the invented. And, as we have seen from Kleinberg, it is what we are willing to accept as ‘past possibilities’ that also “conditions what we are willing to accept as possible pasts”.24

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Why the Writer of Novels is the Better Historian

If we now move to William Godwin’s 1797 essay “Of history and Romance” we can see that thinking about the relation between past possibilities and possible pasts is a key question for him concerning writing on history. The Godwinian scholar Pamela Clemit has pointed out that Godwin in this essay extends his claims for the educative power of fiction into the realm of history, “arguing that the imaginative study of the past liberates the mind from prescription and prejudice and stimulates ethical enquiry.”

Godwin was a leading radical political philosopher, novelist, and social thinker of the British Enlightenment. The same year he wrote “Of History and Romance” his wife Mary Wollstonecraft worked on a gothic novel Maria: or the Wrongs of Woman perceived as the sequel to Vindication of the Rights of Women. In the same way as Godwin, Wollstonecraft had moved toward a greater reliance on the mainstays of fiction: emotion and imagination. As Deborah Weiss has pointed out, the novel “illustrates how female experience and female feeling can be

26 Godwin had written both a famous philosophical book An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (1793) and a novel dealing with the same themes: Things as They are: or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams (1794) and had a new book set for press: The Enquirer. Reflections On Education, Manners, And Literature. In A Series Of Essays (1797). Godwin had met Mary Wollstonecraft the year before and during 1797 she was expecting their child. A pregnancy that ended in her tragic death in September the same year, and left Godwin alone with Fanny, Wollstonecraft’s daughter from her former relationship, and the baby who was to become Mary Shelley, the author of Frankenstein.
27 The Wollstonecraft research differs over how to interpret the unfinished novel. Even though many scholars see Maria… as a sequel to Vindication, there are others interpreting it more as a betrayal of Vindication than a continuation. The latter tradition regards the novel’s investigation of Maria’s emotions, especially her love for Darnford, as proof that Wollstonecraft did not believe anymore in the development in women’s rationality. For a summary of the different traditions see Deborah Weiss, The Female Philosopher and Her Afterlives Mary Wollstonecraft, the British Novel, and the Transformations of Feminism, 1796–1811. Palgrave Studies in the Enlightenment, Romanticism and the Cultures of Print. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 81.
used to generate social theory.” 28 In this sense *Maria*… was a forerunner to a long tradition, leading up to today’s feminist literature.

Wollstonecraft and Godwin both used the novel as a tool for their progressive political agendas and theorized the relationship between history, politics and fiction almost two centuries before the postmodern critique of history writing. Godwin provides an early argument for how historical writing can and should serve the transformation for a different future. But most of all it acknowledges that the border between fact and fiction are always already transgressed when it comes to historical writing.

In “Of history and Romance” Godwin makes a distinction between “two principal branches of history; the study of mankind in a mass, of the progress, the fluctuations, the interests and the vices of society; and the study of the individual.” 29 The former looks for facts, but even if that history comes closest to the truth, a mere chronicle of facts, places, and dates is, in reality, no history, writes Godwin. Godwin criticizes a history that only gives bits and pieces of facts but does not talk of individuals and their motives. Those who disdain the records of individuals but find this fact-history the only kind deserving serious attention, they think, Godwin writes: “To interest our passions, or employ our thoughts about personal events, be they of patriots, of authors, of heroes or kinds, they regard as a symptom of effeminacy.” 30 What Godwin here points out is that the difference between history and romance is what we today would call gender-coded, where fiction is perceived as feminine. Later in the article, he also highlighted how this genre paradoxically sells well but is assumed to be read only by “women and boys”. Diana Wallace has also pointed out how “Godwin summarizes critics’ reactions to historical romances in fascinatingly sexualized

28 Weiss, The Female Philosopher and Her Afterlives, p. 77.
29 Godwin, “Of History and Romance” 1797.
30 Godwin “Of History and Romance” 1797.
terms” when he writes that history in romance fiction is “debauched and corrupted.”

In the same way as Derrida and Kleinberg, Godwin connects the study of the history of individuals to a possible story of power, and above all, that knowledge of the past has implications for the future: “It is thus, and thus only, that we shall be enabled to add, to the knowledge of the past, a sagacity that can penetrate into the depths of futurity”, Godwin writes. Godwin takes as his example the study of Antiquity and how we regard those men as intellectual giants. Still, this knowledge is more like a fable. “Let us take it for granted that it is a fable. Are all fables unworthy of regard?” Such fables have, according to Godwin “a moral perfectly adapted to the human heart. I ask not, as a principal point, whether it be true or false? My first inquiry is, ‘[c]an I derive instruction from it?’ If so, he continues, is it not better to be profoundly versed in such a fable, “than in all the genuine histories that ever existed. It must be admitted indeed that all history bears too near a resemblance to fable. Nothing is more uncertain, more contradictory, more unsatisfactory than the evidence of facts.” (my Italics) So, all history is like a fable, according to Godwin.

It is remarkable, I think, to find that Godwin, before the advent of conventional history, with its methods, and long before Hayden White, Derrida and Kleinberg, saw that the writing of history always resembles a fable, but foremost that ‘facts’ can never be mere facts but are also uncertain and contradictory. This leads Godwin to conclude that if “history be little better than romance under a graver name,” we might as well enquire into “that species of literature, which bears the express stamp of invention, and calls itself romance or novel.”

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31 Diana Wallace, “Difficulties, discontinuities and differences: Reading Women’s historical fiction”, *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction*, Katherine Cooper & Emma Short (Eds.) (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 208. William Godwin, “Of History and Romance” 1797.

32 Godwin, “Of History and Romance” 1797.

33 Godwin, “Of History and Romance” 1797.

34 Godwin, “Of History and Romance” 1797.

35 Godwin, “Of History and Romance” 1797.
Romance, or the gothic historical novel, transgress the border between past or present.

Romance then, strictly considered, may be pronounced to be one of the species of history. /.../ The historian is confided to individual incident and individual man, and must hang upon that his invention or conjecture as he can. The writer collects his materials from all sources, experience, report, and the records of human affairs/.../ The writer of romance is to be considered as the writer of real history; while he who was formerly called the historian, must be contended to step down into the place of his rival, with the disadvantage, that he is a romance writer, without the arduous, the enthusiastic and the sublime license of imagination, that belong to the species of composition.36 (my italics)

If we follow Godwin’s argument, we can see how he opens up similar questions, pointing to the same problems that Kleinberg identifies: Facts without a story are not really history, they are just facts bound in time and fixed to a certain place. In this, Godwin echoes Aristotle’s distinction from the Poetics between history and poetry, namely a difference between the particular and the universal, making poetry the more philosophical and elevated form of the two.

**Fact, Fiction, and Temporality**

Literature can mix fiction and facts in all imaginable constellations and allow for a transgression of past and present. But literature does not offer only examples, or metaphors for a haunting history. *It is a method in itself.* Godwin had deconstructed the demand for ontological realism in history writing even before it was truly invented. Long before Derrida, before the advent of the science of history with Ranke, Godwin showed that fiction can be a better form of history because it not only deals with facts, but also can stage affection and thus be open to moral reflection.

36 Godwin, “Of History and Romance” 1797.
The fact that literature creates affective links between the reader and the protagonist is of course nothing new. So how does this have a bearing on the more philosophical debate about temporality in relation to history, and on feminism? Fiction’s ability to awaken emotions, to make the reader feel lust and fear, can make the reader experience the effect of past events or what previous generations may have felt. The difference in reading as, not only about, puts the reader in an affective connection with the past, which also opens for an ethical commitment to the past. Godwin would later use the first-person perspective in his historical novels just as a way to create affective links between the reader and the protagonist in the past. Such an identification with the protagonist allows the modern reader/viewer to identify with a person from another time. It opens up an anachronistic relationship to history in a positive way.

For Kleinberg, the important thing is to get away from ontological realism and its way of regarding people and events as bound up in specific times and places, in order to create a thing of the past that allows for a simultaneous presence and absence. But the question of presence and absence is still bound to the notion of the real. A truly deconstructive history needs to move beyond the absence/presence dichotomy to the question of temporality. A true hauntology must destabilize time as well. In fact, by putting his emphasis on the fact/fiction dichotomy Godwin comes closer to destabilizing the dichotomy between past and present than Kleinberg. That is because the fact/fiction dichotomy opens up to the question of temporality.

“History” creates versions of the past, a textual substitute for something that is not there, which is absent, empty and without content. History is a replacement, a way to put something in place namely the missing absent other – the past. The conditions for the discipline of history are, however, that the past in a fundamental way is cut off from us. The historical novel, on the other hand, perverts history or our perception of the difference between past and present, between fact and fiction, since it lures the reader to take it not as a substitute, but as the thing itself. Jerome de Groot has pointed out that historical fiction “forces
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the reader into a temporal distortion. The historical fiction requires a changing and fickle relation to time and perhaps most obvious, the temporal otherness.”37 By transgressing the gap between then and now, historical fiction creates alternative temporalities.

Feminist Re-negotiation of Sweden’s Past

The ability of historical fiction to cross both the line between fact and fiction, and between then and now, gives it unique opportunities to (re)interpret, (re)discover and (re)write history.38 As Wallace pointed out, contemporary historical fiction often has politico-critical ambitions. They question established history writing at the same time as they bring previously concealed horrors to light. As Alan Robson claims, “historical fiction resembles historiography in that its interpretive employment constructs a subjective present past; this differs from a wholly invented spatiotemporal world, as it is modeled on and anchored in a former actuality.”39

Renegotiations of the past are important for today’s understanding of history and identity, especially in a national context. The established success story of folkhemmet’s path from “dirt-Sweden” (“lort-Sverige”), as the critic Ludvig Nordström labeled it in a radio program 1938, to the welfare state and a successful industrial nation with equality between men and women, is both problematized and confirmed in the novels by Ola Larsmo, Lena Kallenberg, Anneli Jordahl, or in the TV series Fröken Frimans krig (Miss Friman’s War). The role of women in the transformation of society, and the relevance of feminism and women’s emancipation for the modernization project are still, to a large extent, underground knowledge shared between gender scho-

38 This is Heilmann’s and Llewellyn’s definition of Neo-Victorianism, but it could be said of most historical fiction. Ann Heilmann & Mark Llewellyn, Neo-Victorianism: the Victorians in the Twenty First Century, 1999–2009 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 12.
39 Robinson, Narrating the past, p. 28.
(Re-)writings of the Past. Prostitution and Syphilis, the Ghosts that Haunt the Story of Modernity

History becomes a haunting history especially in historical fiction that deals with prostitution because we still have prostitution and dangerous, even lethal, venereal diseases in the same way as in the nineteenth century. Even though we have a variety of laws and women’s situation in society is very different, stories of the horrors of prostitution and trafficking are still part of our popular culture, such as Jens Lapidus’ books *Snabba Cash* (2006) and *Livet deluxe* (2011), and the movie trilogy based upon them.

Many women were forced into prostitution in the 19th century driven by poverty when the emerging industrialization led to quick urbanization. As a result, this development led to rampant syphilis and other venereal diseases in the cities. There were significantly more men than women who were infected with venereal disease, which was taken as proof that women were the main source of infection. Women were made responsible for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and regulations of prostituted women were introduced in Sweden, according to the model that already existed in Paris and other European cities. Between 1847 and 1918, women, who the police considered to live an “immoral life”, were registered at the Prostitution Bureau.
or Inspection Bureau, as it was also called. There were about seven thousand women who at some point during the period 1856–1918 had their names printed in the rolls of the inspection office.40

The enrolled women were required to follow strict rules in their behavior and to go for health examinations twice a week. If they were found to be sick they were sent to special hospitals, and if they did not show up for the checkup, or in any other way broke the regulations, they were sentenced to a fine or penal servitude up to one year.41 Stockholm grew explosively as a city during this time, and the work of creating a functioning sewage system was an ongoing project that was referred to on a metaphorical level. As Lennartsson writes: “Through a metaphorical language, the sex trade, and indirectly also the women within it, were equated with sewers and drain pipes”.42

The women’s movement protested intensely at the time against the treatment of prostitutes and regulation. But, when regulation ceased in 1918, and Swedish women finally got the right to vote in 1919, the memory of the state’s atrocities against women was forgotten. It would take almost a hundred years before feminist researchers began to examine the deeply problematic regulation and its far-reaching consequences for the view of gender difference and sexuality well into the 20th century. Dissertations by the historian Yvonne Svanström Policing Public Women: The Regulation of Prostitution in Stockholm 1812–1880 (2000) and the historian of ideas Rebecka Lennartsson’s Malaria Urbana. Om byråflickan Anna Johannesdotter och prostitutionen i Stockholm kring 1900 (2001) paved the way for deeper knowledge about regulation of prostitutes in 19th century Sweden.43 Lennartsson’s book also contains large quotes
from the authentic diary of the prostitute, Anna Johannesdotter.⁴⁴

The prostitute, or the issue of prostitution, was definitely present in nineteenth century literature, but usually in the periphery of the plot.⁴⁵ A rare exception is Anne Charlotte Leffler’s daring, socialist drama Hur man gör godt (“How to do good” 1885) where the prostitute actually is one of the main characters. In contemporary historical fiction, on the other hand, both the prostitute herself and the question of prostitution is at the very center of the story. Amy Elias has pointed out that one important feature of the postmodern historical imagination, is that it is a post-traumatic imaginary, that rather confronts than represses the historical knowledge.⁴⁶ The Swedish historical fictions testify to this especially in the stories about prostitution.

Lena Kallenberg’s Apelsinflickan (The Orange-Girl 1997) and the sequel Stockholmskärlek (Stockholm love 1999) portrays poor women who are driven into prostitution (“Orange-girl” was an epithet for prostitutes). Prostitution is also portrayed from the inside in Henning Mankell’s Minnet av en smutsig ängel (Memory of a Dirty Angel 2011) in the story of a Swedish woman who becomes the owner of a brothel in East Africa around 1900. In Ola Larsmo’s Jag vill inte tjäna (I Do Not Want to Serve 2012), the regulation of prostitution is


⁴⁴ Johannesdotter’s diary was edited and published by Klara Johansson in 1907. The original is lost, but Johansson claimed that she had only made corrections for spelling errors and such. Johansson, Anna Mathilda Cecilia Johannesdotter, Den undre världen. En lifshistoria (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1907).

⁴⁵ Arvid, the protagonist in August Strindberg’s The Red Room (1879) goes to a brothel with his friends. In Gustaf af Geijerstam’s Erik Grane (1885) as well as Hjalmar Söderberg’s The Serious Game (1912) and Anne-Charlotte Leffler’s Sanna kvinnor (True women 1883) the men pick up ‘a girl’ in the street. In Leffler’s drama it is William, Bertha’s brother-in-law, who has brought home a prostitute, thereby causing a crisis in his marriage. In Elin Wägner’s Pen Woman (1910) the protagonist’s old friend Klara earns her living by selling sex.

depicted from a doctor’s perspective through his contact with a young woman who chooses prostitution over life as a maid. Although medical science as an institution of power, is problematized in the novel, the protagonist in Larsmo’s novel becomes a representative of the “good” doctors when he performs a forbidden abortion and thereby saves the woman’s life. The book can be read not only as a defense of the right to abortion, but a deeper reading of the complex relation between science and women’s emancipation. The doctor in the novel has problems with his career and he is assigned the post as a medical examiner of those prostituting women who come in for the required examination. Through his work the reader comes in contact with what seems as authentic excerpts from nineteenth century medical records. Retroactively these quotes from medical records tell us something about the individual women’s fates. In this sense, Larsmo’s novel is given a double function as fiction and facts about the women that were forced to register at the Inspection Bureau. Syphilis as an effect of prostitution also appears in Annelie Jordahl’s Augustenbad en sommar (Augustenbad: A Summer 2011). In Fröken Friman’s krig (Miss Friman’s War 2016) season 3, the topic is the regulation of prostitution and the women’s movement’s fight against it.

Our present historical fiction has often taken part of feminist research. Contemporary historical fiction, therefore, functions as a way of spreading this feminist research of historical knowledge to a wider audience. This is especially true in the case of Fröken Friman’s krig (Miss Friman’s War) a mini-TV series inspired by the life of educator and women’s rights activist Anna Whitlock, produced by Swedish television in three episode installments across four seasons 2013–2017. The series aired during the Christmas holidays every year and therefore attracted large audiences. To many people this was the first time they encountered the history of feminism and the conditions of women in 19th century Sweden when women did not have the right to vote, and husbands were women’s guardians. The series built on a lot of previous feminist research, both the story of
Svenska hem and the women’s movement pictured in season two, as well as the story of prostitution and regulation in season three, a fact that was not fully acknowledged. When the producers after the last season made a separate program with the history “behind” Miss Friman’s War they were severely criticized for not crediting all the feminist research they had built upon.

In season one, the women’s rights activist Dagmar Friman and her friends decide to open the cooperative grocery store in Stockholm Svenska hem (Swedish home). They worked with women in all chains of the food production to sell good food at reasonable prices, and where customers received a refund on their purchases. Friman and her friends face a lot of resistance from the established retailers. The cooperative store Svenska hem did exist and was very successful in Stockholm for ten years between 1905–1916. In 1915, the number of members was 3,134. In 1916, Svenska Hem merged with the then newly started cooperative Konsum in Stockholm and was subsequently shut down. All stores then changed their names or were closed. The female managers were replaced by male ones.

In season three of Fröken Frimans krig, the sister of Lottie Friman’s maid is unwillingly forced into prostitution by a member of parliament. She is just a young, poor, woman from the countryside, who gets seduced by a rich man. While leaving her to sleep in the hotel room, he goes directly to the regulation bureau and reports her as a prostitute, to make her go to the checkups that will mean she is “safe” for him. The police then come and pick her up in the morning. They find money on her and refuse to listen to her protestations about being a prostitute. The result is that Miss Britta becomes registered as a “byråflicka”, that is, a prostitute. She then faces three months in prison if she does not report herself regularly to the bureau as someone practicing as a prostitute. With the help from Dagmar and Lottie

Friman and their friends, and with some unexpected help from the real women of the trade, Miss Britta is finally released from the regulation bureau.

Through the story of Miss Britta, the series manages to give the viewers a glimpse of the history of prostitution in Sweden, regulation and the women’s movement’s fight against regulation, as well as their ambivalence toward prostitutes. Engaging in the question of prostitution could be a sensitive issue for the women’s movement who wanted to be taken seriously in their demand for the vote. In the series, Dagmar is afraid of letting Swedish homes address the issue and its regulation while her more radical friend Kinna disagrees. They argue, and Kinna shouts at her: “Food controls, there you dare to fight, but when women are controlled as goods, then it is not as important”. Kinna’s words echo the wording in Svanström’s book: “There existed two examples of inspection bureaux in the nineteenth century: the inspection bureau for public women, and the inspection bureau for meat. Both usages of the word indicating merchandises, which needed to be inspected and found healthy before being put on the market.”

In the following episode one of those critical of regulation is upset by the way prostituted women are described, she mocks the ineffective system and wonders why men stick to defending regulation: “Infectious material in the population’ – as if they were not even human! They know that the system is ineffective, they know that it is wrong to hold women solely responsible, morally, and medically. Why hold on?” Dagmar then responds by connecting the support of regulation to the resistance against women’s demands for the right to vote: “Because they can. It benefits them and they can. The right to vote, prostitution, there is no difference. A woman is less worthy, that’s just the way it is. Nobody has ever told them anything else.”

49 Fröken Frimans krig, Episode 1, min. 34.33–34.39.
50 Svanström, Policing women 2000, p. 41.
51 Fröken Frimans krig, Episode 2, min. 01.35–01.49.
vote and the critique of legalized prostitution, she echoes the real nineteenth-century women’s movement and again the connection to feminist history. Here, the research about the connection is made explicit. In this way, *Fröken Frimans krig* serves as both a history of feminism and as critical historiography. Since it creates new knowledge of women’s conditions in Sweden a hundred years ago for a mainstream audience. It thus serves as a critique of the previous silence about regulation, prostitution and syphilis.

The regulation is a forgotten trauma in the general historical consciousness, in the same way that sterilization was for a long time. It was legislation whose consequences for gender difference and sexuality still affects us. In this respect, historical fictions about prostitution and regulation become a critique of conventional history writing, where the usual history teaching in schools, for example, have not related these facts and events. Contemporary popular historical fictions like *Fröken Frimans krig*, therefore, function as a (feminist) history for a wider audience. It often builds on feminist research but reaches far outside the research community. Since, to a large degree, it is a former unknown history, historical fictions, like *Fröken Frimans krig*, help to shape our historical consciousness.

*Fröken Frimans krig*’s gender-critical perspective on prostitution, different sexual morals for men and women, men who exploit women, sexual harassment and feminism’s fight against all this, establish affective links to the women of the past that obliterate the difference between then and now. Stories of a feminist engagement with nineteenth-century misogyny in historical fictions like *Fröken Frimans krig*, establish a temporality where the past is still active, a haunted history. Nineteenth-century misogyny is a spectre that, to paraphrase Derrida, we would like to believe belongs to the past, but which returns and haunts us even today.