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Sarah Waters

NATASHA ALDEN

Sarah Waters is one of the most popular and most widely read novelists of recent times. Critically acclaimed and commercially successful, her novels, and their adaptations, have foregrounded the reclamation of lesbian history, and are arguably both cause and symptom of the extraordinary rise of the acceptance of lesbianism in mainstream fiction, TV, and film since the 1990s. Her work has also brought increased visibility for aspects of British history which have been occluded or forgotten more generally, such as the experiences of different classes in periods of rapid social change, and her development of a flexible 'neo' form, which represents the past using literary models adapted from the period, is highly distinctive.

Waters has written six novels to date. *Tipping the Velvet* (Waters 1998), her first novel, drew heavily on Chris Hunt's *Street Lavender* (Hunt 1986), telling the life story of Nancy King, brought up in a Whitstable oyster parlour in the late nineteenth century. Falling in love with Kitty Butler, a male impersonator performing in the local theatre, Nancy follows her to London, where they begin both a relationship and a double act together. Kitty's inability to accept her sexuality leads to the relationship ending, and a traumatized Nancy begins a picaresque journey through a series of relationships and identities '… led by love, by desire and by the search for community and identity through a range of distinctly lesbian worlds' (Waters 2002b). Waters describes the novel as a 'historical fantasy' which developed from her interest in 'how we think about the gay past; what evidence we use and what evidence we make up. I began to see a picaresque novel that would put someone through a range of lesbian identities. Nan's a bit of a cipher really, someone who allows me to write about a range of experiences' (Cohu 2002). Cohu describes Waters as 'blithely unconcerned at making up what was unrecorded [and so] … commandeer[ing] other sexual cultures to invent a lesbian world … "A lot of work has been done on Oscar Wilde and his milieu … I was very taken by the glamour of it. But I wanted to steal it for a lesbian agenda" (Cohu 2002). *Tipping the Velvet* was rejected by ten publishers before Waters was signed to a literary agent, Judith Murray, who took it back to the feminist publishing house Virago (which had originally rejected it), which accepted it and which remains Waters' publisher. Waters described *Tipping the Velvet* as her 'attempt to write a Victorian-style novel telling a very lesbian story in a way that was half-authentic but half anachronistic too' (Waters 2002b).

Waters describes her second novel, *Affinity* (Waters 1999), as 'the most genuinely historical book [of her first three novels,] and an attempt to capture the authentic lesbian voice' (Waters 2002b). *Affinity*, Robert McCrumb suggests, is 'darker and weirder [than *Tipping the Velvet*], exuding a distinctive sensuality that propelled her heroine Margaret Prior into another transgressive new world of seances and spiritualism. Waters' Victorian exemplars such as Wilkie Collins, Charles Kingsley, and even Lewis Carroll sometimes hint at drug addiction, sadomasochism,

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and pornography. In *Affinity*, she just plunged straight in and made these Gothic themes vividly explicit, with relish …' (McCrumb 2009). Margaret Prior, bored, frustrated by family expectations of her as a gentlewoman, and grieving both the death of her father and the marriage of her first love Helen to Margaret's own brother, seeks distraction and purpose in becoming a lady visitor at Millbank prison. Here she meets and falls in love with Selina Dawes, imprisoned for fraud and assault. The development of their relationship, and of their plan to break Selina out of the prison and flee to Italy together, drives the narrative forward, but the novel has two timelines. We begin in the present of the novel, with Margaret's diaries, which describe the learning of the recent death of her father and marriage of her brother, and continuing with an account of her visits to Millbank and growing love for Selina. These chapters alternate with Selina's account of how she came to become a medium, the development of her career, and how she came to be in Millbank. The two timelines only converge at the end of the novel, in a shocking conclusion which is one of Waters' most tragic.

Fingersmith, Waters' third novel and 'the antidote to *Affinity*' is the last of her books to have a Victorian setting, and, with three roughly equal sections, mirrors the three volume structure of the Victorian 'triple decker' novel (Feay 2005). A much less bleak novel than *Affinity*, *Fingersmith* 'is a pastiche of the whole sensation genre, a gothic melodrama like Wilkie Collins … and Mary Elizabeth Braddon – fantastic novels that spiral out of control, and are often quite transgressive, if only in the way they destabilise the reader' (Waters 2002b). *Fingersmith* takes key characters and plot points from Collin's *The Woman in White* (1859) and adapts them for a queer agenda; there is more to Waters' innocent young gentlewoman than meets the eye. Like *Affinity*, *Fingersmith* has two narrators, and again, slowly reveals a deception which is key to the plot.

The Night Watch, published in 2006, was a departure for Waters in a number of ways. It features an ensemble of characters, rather than one or two, and is written in the third person, rather than the first person narration used in her first three books. But its most obvious departure from Waters' earlier work is its twentieth-century setting.

Waters' earlier novels built suspense through intricate plotting; here, the reader knows what will happen to the characters from the beginning of the novel, but this novel is as intricately plotted as the others.

The novel has a reverse chronology which begins in 1947, with a cast of gay and straight characters coming to terms with the aftermath of the war. Kay, mourning the loss of her partner Helen and of the sense of purpose, acceptance, and belonging she gained from driving ambulances in the war, seems stuck in limbo; Viv, whose affair with soldier Reggie once seemed so vital, is starting to move on, painfully; and Helen, who left Kay for Julia, is starting to suspect Julia of infidelity. The novel then takes us back to the characters in 1944, and the middle of the Second World War, with the third section moving back to 1941.

Like Waters' other novels, *The Night Watch* is densely researched, and it draws on this research, into the cultural and literary history of the period, to extend the scope of the 'neo' form she used in her Victorian novels. Waters draws on a range of mid-twentieth-century fiction about the war and about gay experience, and found while writing the novel that 'the feel of these novels [began to] dictate the mood and shape' of *The Night Watch*; '[I] watched my prose become slightly pared down, my tone more quiet, my focus more interior' (Waters 2006b).

The Little Stranger (Waters 2009) continued Waters' engagement with the neo form, and with the Gothic, but surprised her readership by not featuring any gay characters. Set, again, in the aftermath of the Second World War, the novel introduces us to the Ayres family, upper class but financially badly off, whose country house is dilapidated and who are struggling to adjust to the huge social change that came after the end of the war. The story is narrated by their doctor, Faraday (like the narrator of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, Faraday never reveals his first name). Faraday befriends the family, becoming indispensable to them as the burden of maintaining the estate with no money and of dealing with what appears to be a malevolent ghost takes an increasingly heavy toll on them. The novel is a departure for Waters in having a male chief protagonist and narrator, but echoes her earlier works in other ways; like *Fingersmith*, the novel is set in a

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country house which hides many secrets; like *Affinity*, the supernatural plays an important role, and like *The Night Watch*, the novel reflects Waters' fascination with the social changes of the postwar period.

Waters' sixth novel, *The Paying Guests*, returned to a lesbian storyline, and Waters describes it as her first 'proper love story' (Wise 2014). Set in the 1920s, the novel returns to the theme of the after-effects of war, and revolves around Frances Wray, left looking after her ageing mother after the deaths of her father and brothers. Like the Ayres' home in *The Little Stranger*, the family house is now too big and too expensive to run, so the Wrays are obliged to take in lodgers, or 'paying guests'. The Barbers, Lilian and Leonard, seem abrasive and out of place at first, but gradually Frances and Lilian warm to each other, and develop a friendship which becomes a relationship. The novel is split into two halves, with a single unexpected event separating the love story of the first half from the detective/court narrative of the second.

2014 also saw Waters' first play performed, co-written with Christopher Green. *The Frozen Scream* combined a retelling of a lost murder mystery from the 1920s with contemporary immersive theatre techniques.

Unusually for Waters, it met a mixed reception, with critics suggesting that despite containing many of the usual ingredients of Waters' fiction, such as suspense, a retelling of an older story, mysterious deaths, and unexpected revelations, the theatrical methods used weren't entirely effective. Waters' other works, however, have consistently been lauded, as is apparent from her record of prize nominations and TV and film adaptations. *Tipping the Velvet* won the Betty Trask Award; *Affinity* was shortlisted for the Mail on Sunday/John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, and won both the Somerset Maugham Award and the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award. *Fingersmith* was her first novel to be shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the Orange Prize, and also won the CWA Historical Dagger and the South Bank Show Award for Literature. *The Night Watch* was shortlisted for the Orange and Man Booker Prizes, and *The Little Stranger* was Waters' third novel to be shortlisted for the Man Booker, as well as being shortlisted for the South Bank Show Literature Award. Her most recent novel, *The Paying Guests*, was shortlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction (previously the Orange Prize). As a measure of Waters' popularity, although neither *Fingersmith* nor *The Little Stranger* won the Man Booker Prize, Pauli (2002) notes that sales figures from Waterstones showed *Fingersmith* was the most popular title on the longlist that year, and in 2009, *The Little Stranger* outsold the other books on the shortlist by 50% (Armitstead 2009).

All of Waters' novels to date have been adapted for film and TV. Sally Head Production's Andrew Davies-scripted adaptation of *Tipping the Velvet* (2002) for the BBC won a number of awards, and was nominated for a BAFTA. The BBC/Sally Head Productions adaptation of *Fingersmith* (2005) was nominated for a BAFTA, and Box TV's adaptation of *Affinity* for ITV (2008), also scripted by Andrew Davies, was award-nominated internationally. The most recent TV adaptation, a BBC production of *The Night Watch* (2011), won Anna Maxwell Martin the Best Actress Award at the Madrid LGBT Film Festival. Both *Fingersmith* and *The Little Stranger* have been adapted as films; *Fingersmith* is the basis of Park Chan-Wook's Academy Award winning film *The Handmaiden* (2016), and *The Little Stranger*, directed by Lenny Abrahamson, was released in 2018. A film adaptation of *The Paying Guests*, with a screenplay by Emma Donoghue, is currently in development.

Three of Waters' novels have been adapted for the stage. *Fingersmith* (written by Alexa Junge) was first performed at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2015; *Tipping the Velvet* (written by Laura Wade) premiered at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, before transferring to the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, in 2015; and Hattie Naylor's adaptation of *The Night Watch* was first performed at the Royal Exchange, Manchester, in 2016.

Made an OBE in the March 2019 Queen's Birthday Honours List, Waters has been the recipient of a number of honours and awards. In 2003, she was featured in Granta's 'Best Young British Novelists', was voted Author of the Year at the British Book Awards, and won the Waterstones Author of the Year Award. Awarded 'Author of the Year' at the Stonewall Awards in both 2006 and 2009, she has also been recognized in the Pinc List of leading Welsh LGBT people. Waters

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was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Authors in 2009 and was named Writer of the Decade at the Stonewall Awards in 2015.

Waters was born on 21 July 1966, in Pembrokeshire, in the south west of Wales. She had a 'very ordinary', happy childhood in a lower-middle-class family, spent mostly in Neyland, a small coastal town in Pembrokeshire where her family still lives, with periods in Middlesbrough, a large post-industrial town in North Yorkshire (Allardice 2018; Raymond 2014). Her family history reflects the postwar social change that she explores in *The Little Stranger* (2009) and *The Paying Guests* (2014); her grandparents were in service; her parents Ron and Mary were educated at grammar schools, and Waters herself was the first in the family to go to university. Waters' bookishness and love of narrative had been apparent throughout her childhood; she has described herself as a 'horrible swot' who loved *Doctor Who* and BBC2's *Hammer House of Horror* (Allardice 2018). 'It was a great childhood … we weren't especially wealthy or anything, but I felt I had a kind of safety and freedom. I was encouraged to be imaginative[,] and read[,], and it was a great childhood for a budding writer because I had the time and the freedom to go into a world of my own. I was always attracted to books and I used to go to the library all the time. I went to grammar school in Milford Haven and I got lots of encouragement there as well' (McCrumb 2011). After A Levels at Milford Haven Grammar School, she studied English and American Literature at Kent University, graduating in 1987, then completed an MA in Contemporary Literary Theory at Lancaster University in 1987–1988. After leaving university, she went to work in the Owl Bookshop in Kentish Town, London, then became a library assistant in Camden, London (a job she remained in until the success of her novels allowed her to become a full-time author in 2000). In the mid-1980s, Waters moved to Stoke Newington, known then for its high numbers of lesbian residents, and ' "became caught up in a heady moment of lesbian feminism, the bad haircut, the awful clothes, the strength marches, and everything politicised", she remembers. "It was so exciting" ' (McCrumb 2009). In 1992, she began a PhD in English Literature at Queen Mary, University of London. Her thesis, 'Wolfskins and togas: Lesbian and Gay Historical Fictions, 1870 to the Present', explored the way in which fiction and non-fiction responded to contemporary conditions in representing the homosexual past, looking at a series of moments in time (the 1900s, the 1930s, and the 1950s) when how the homosexual past was seen shifted. Waters was interested in how this was reflected in the way writing of the time figured the homosexual past, and how homosexual writers invoked the past to provide affirmative models, such as the way in which Sappho and Antinous were positioned as homosexual icons, though by different sexual discourses, which were not always aligned. Waters published two academic articles (see bibliography) on gay historical fiction, one on the American novelist Maude Meagher and one on rewritings of the Antinous myth, but her interests had shifted towards writing her own fiction during her PhD. *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) sprang from her research into the Victorian era, and homosexual life in London in particular, and from her desire to write the kind of book she wanted to read; one that focussed on lesbian experience, and showed life in an urban setting, rather than in an isolated refuge from the straight world. In doing this she was responding to what traces she could see of lesbian life in the writing of the Victorian era and moving them into the heart of her narratives. 'Lesbian desires […are] sort of there as a subtext to lots of Victorian fiction. But what I've been able to do, writing with our literary mores today, is to tease them right out and put them at the centre of the story rather than kind of at the edges' (Waters 2005).

Waters is quick to point out that she was far from the first gay historical novelist; when she wrote *Tipping the Velvet* it fitted into an already well-established, if somewhat marginalized, existing genre of gay historical fiction. It also came at a time when a burst of gay writing was garnering attention from the literary establishment in a new way:

> *Tipping the Velvet* has sometimes been credited with having founded a new genre; in fact, lesbian and gay authors had been producing lively historical fiction for ages before I came along, and I would never have written *Tipping* at all if I hadn't first been a fan of novels such as Isabel Miller's *Patience and Sarah*, Ellen Galford's *Moll Cutpurse* and Chris Hunt's

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> *Street Lavender* and *N for Narcissus*. (Nor, importantly, would those books have been available to me without the heroic gay and feminist small presses and bookshops of the era.) Inspiring, too, was the fact that ambitious gay writing was finding a place in the mainstream. I'd been gobbling up the work of Jeanette Winterson and Alan Hollinghurst alongside novels by AS Byatt, Peter Ackroyd, Toni Morrison and Angela Carter. Collectively these works, many of them with an eye on the past, seemed to show grand narratives being prised open and made to reveal – or forced to accommodate – feminist stories, queer stories, lost stories, radical stories. (Waters 2018)

Waters' own work prises open the stories and genres of the past, remaking them in a contemporary image and revealing their (mostly) hidden queer potential.

One of her major achievements could arguably be the mainstreaming of what has been described as the historical 'lesbo romp', though that description (famously Waters' own, albeit slightly tongue-in-cheek) oversimplifies her novels, and refers primarily to *Tipping the Velvet*. When *Tipping the Velvet* was published, gay historical fiction was far from mainstream, and critics found her work hard to pin down in terms of genre; Steel (1998) described it as developing a new genre altogether, the 'bawdy lesbian picaresque novel', and numerous critics compared Waters' novel to the work of Jeanette Winterson, on grounds that were not immediately apparent beyond their shared lesbianism. Waters has described this as 'lazy journalism' (Waters 2002a), commenting to Lucie Armitt that early reviewers tended to

> put me in the same bracket [as Winterson], but I thought it's just that we're the only two lesbian authors they can think of. I don't think I've got much in common with Jeanette Winterson at all, and I'm sure she'd feel she hasn't got much in common with me. She's much more in a modernist tradition, which I don't feel part of: I like her work, but we haven't got similar agendas, it seems to me. (Armitt 2007).

The increasing popularity and growing critical standing of Waters' novels has meant that her work has been read in more nuanced ways as time has gone by. In her review of *Fingersmith*, Julie Myerson remarked that she 'hesitate[s] to call it lesbian, because that seems to marginalize it far more than it deserves. Suffice to say, it is erotic and unnerving in all the right ways' (Myerson 2002). Having said that, though she describes herself as 'feel[ing] cheered' by not being constantly referred to as a gay writer, Waters herself is emphatic about the importance of not eliding the significance of homosexuality in her work:

> … if I do an event where [lesbianism] isn't mentioned, I think: 'Hang on a minute, this story could only happen in this particular way because the characters are involved in a lesbian relationship'. I'd hate that to get blurred or lost. (Cooke 2014)

The centrality of homosexuality to Waters' work has meant, especially at the start of her career, that other aspects of her writing were overlooked; it also led to surprise when Waters published *The Little Stranger*, which didn't feature lesbians at all. It is vitally important to understand Waters' work in relation to lesbian sexuality, but other aspects of her work are also highly significant, such as her use of the neo-Victorian and development of the neo-1940s ('neo' here referring to a type of historical fiction which reclaims and reworks aspects of the literature of the period it is set in), her intertextual engagements, her use of historical source material, her reworking of Gothic themes for a contemporary audience, her intricate and wildly various plots, and her engagement with love, loss, and what it means to be human. Waters once – again, tongue-in cheek – said that 'what [she is] after … is a gripping read, with stuff going on behind it' (McCrumb 2009); this jokey articulation of her method belies the seriousness and the sophistication of her intent, but does capture the essence of her novels.

Waters has championed an accessible, engaging style which, while changing and developing from novel to novel, has consistently captured an unusually broad reading public.

Her wide appeal has a number of reasons, but her talent for creating a 'gripping read', as she puts it, is a major one. Despite the differences between each of her novels, all of them share a compulsive, complex plot. One of the most striking things about Waters' use of such plots is

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the contrast between the strong narrative pull each provides, and the complex form of the novels. Waters employs shifts of time, shifts of voice, and shifts in point of view, all delivered in such a way as to wrong-foot the reader and engross us in the story before swiftly shifting to an often shocking revelation or switch of narrative voice. In *Affinity*, for example, an already complicated scheme to defraud one of the major characters is suddenly made very much more complex by Waters' handing the narrative voice from one of the two chief protagonists to the other; in *The Paying Guests*, a sudden violent event, played out in vivid and sickening detail over 30 pages, shifts the story from one genre – the love story – into the different gear of the detective and court drama. Waters has experimented with a range of different modes of plotting; *Tipping the Velvet* adopts a picaresque narrative form, whereas *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* both involve dramatic revelations leading to readerly reassessment at key moments. Waters' first novel not to have a neo-Victorian setting, *The Night Watch*, has a plot which is both extremely simple and extremely complex in taking an 'ordinary' love story, showing a relationship begin, flourish, falter, and end in abandonment, and then narrates it backwards, opening with the aftermath of the relationship's breakdown and ending with the intensely romantic moment at which the lovers first meet.

All six of Waters' novels to date, despite their differences in subject matter and style, share aspects of the psychological thriller form, often in a particularly dark mode. Waters' early novels were noted for their successful development of what Kate Mosse referred to as 'contemporary gothic' (McCrum, 2009). Gina Wisker notes that Waters' early novels are often Gothic but (unlike *The Little Stranger*), don't feature ghosts, relying instead on placing 'characters in variations of traditional Gothic locations and contexts: the back streets, side streets and morally dubious theatre world of London (*Tipping the Velvet*); prisons (*Affinity*); insane asylums dour, grand isolated houses with secrets (*Fingersmith*) … [women in conventional Gothic literature are] hidden, silenced, imprisoned … powerless, lured into romance or marriage by rogues, manipulated by men with salacious intent and easily dispensed with' (Wisker 2016).

These themes are not limited to the neo-Victorian novels, though; they form a continuous interest linking each of Waters' novels, both neo-Victorian and neo-1940s and 1920s. The later novels share the neo-Victorian novels' Gothic preoccupations with madness, backstreets, prisons (literal and metaphorical), remote country houses holding secrets, power, guilt, and fear. In *The Night Watch*, the familiar landscape of London is made utterly strange by war time bombing, creating new, dark spaces full of transgressive possibility. We return to labyrinthine prisons, but see that in war, they become even more hellish during bombing raids, and meet characters who ruminate obsessively about secret or forbidden relationships. In *The Little Stranger*, Ann Heilmann argues that 'Sarah Waters reconfigures, to chilling effect, key preoccupations of her previous historical fiction: neo-Victorian Gothic (*Affinity*), the claustrophobia and insurgent spirit(s) summoned by the disciplinary regimes of institutions (the prison, the family), class relations (*Tipping the Velvet*); psychopathological sexualities (*Fingersmith*); and the upheavals caused by war (*The Night Watch*)' (Heilman, 2012). Heilmann describes *The Little Stranger* as embedding neo-Victorian Gothic 'within her forties context'; '[i]n exploring the post-war transformation of social relations, Waters combines the twentieth-century theme of the demise of a country house and family with the Victorian trope of the Gothic mansion engulfed by the past' (Heilmann 2012). Gina Wisker reads 'the marginalisation of hope, destroyed dreams, containment, constraint, pretence, the dangerous illegality of a love that was seen not to even have a name, never mind dare to speak it' in *The Paying Guests* as positioning it as a piece of postfeminist Gothic (Wisker 2018).

These settings and tropes are ripe for appropriation by contemporary queer narratives; Philip Hensher suggests that Waters has made 'a great link between the secrecy of queer sexualities and the secrets and revelations of the Gothic tradition' (McCrumb 2009). Wisker, noting the same, points out that Waters' 'women-centred, lesbian-oriented version' of a queered Gothic, 'exposes the gendered conventions, threats and resolutions of more conventional Gothic' (Wisker 2016). Waters' female characters 'find an open recognition of their sexuality brings with it love, the pain

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and joy of relationships, authenticity and agency' (Wisker 2016).

Another aspect of Waters' writing which unites all six of her novels, and one which has generated a great deal of academic commentary, is her use of pastiche, or 'neo' forms. Louis Wise notes that '[f]rom the gothic supernaturalism of *Affinity* to the repressed 1940s hysteria of *The Little Stranger*, [Waters] takes a quiet delight in taking traditional fictional genres and upending them – often, as she puts it … on the lookout for untapped "sites of lesbian potential" … "I suppose, if you looked for something very definitive about my books, it would be that kind of gesture … To tease new stories out of very familiar scenarios"' (Wise 2014).

When Suzie Feay interviewed Waters in 2005, she commented that '[one] thing I noted from the press coverage was a tendency to describe her work in a rather pejorative way: "pastiche", it would say, or "faux-Victorian", or worst of all, "lesbo-Victorian romp". I tell her that I was taken aback to find that these all turned out to be her own descriptions of her work. "They are pastiches, really – is that a bad word? We've got so many good real Victorian novels, I've always thought, why just write another one? I've tried to take on the genre but do something a bit different, to tell a story they couldn't quite tell. Play around with it, have fun with it!"' (Faey, 2005). Faey adds: 'And particularly, get lots of lesbian sex in it' – while Waters' focus is on a wider range of lesbian experience than just sex (and depicting lesbian sex and sexuality is a vital part of her work), Faey is right in noting that Waters' re-invented Victorian and neo-twentieth-century novels place lesbianism, and other issues that interest Waters, such as class, or love, at the centre of her books.

The neo-Victorian genre arguably begins with John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Fowles 1969), but only developed into a mainstream literary form in the 1990s. The neo-Victorian can be broadly defined as a mode of writing which harks back to the prose style, themes, and narrative structures of literature of the Victorian period, but which does so with metafictional self-awareness and which self-consciously draws on the older forms to explore contemporary issues; in Waters' case, drawing out the queer potential of the original.

The recovery of lost voices and development of occluded or repressed topics is central to much neo-Victorian writing (see Kohlke 2008 and Kaplan 2009). 'Victorian writing doesn't have any explicit lesbian sex … but it does have a lot about gender and sexuality. Miss Wade in *Little Dorrit* is queer in all sorts of ways, and there is a thing between a woman and her maid in Hardy. There are strange, erotic situations and power dynamics, with innocence and corruption counterpointed' (Waters 2002b). Waters draws on fiction and prose of the Victorian era to explore the issues which interest her in different ways in each of her novels (though not always straightforwardly; *Tipping the Velvet*, like some of Dickens' novels, is quite picaresque, an eighteenth century genre; Waters borrows what is useful to her). Waters' fourth, fifth, and sixth novels move out of the Victorian era but continue to rework the literature of the periods of their settings, in a move which develops a neo-1940s and neo-1920s style, marking Waters out as distinctive among other historical novelists. Waters' adherence to this method isn't universally popular; reviewing *The Little Stranger*, Tracy Chevalier said that it had 'a slightly second hand feel to it', and that she looked 'forward to the book in which [Waters] leaves behind past templates, with their limitations, and breaks away to make her own literary history' (Chevalier 2009). Other critics have defended her use of earlier models:

> The [first three] books are indeed pastiches: Victoriana as a queer theorist might perform it, with costumes by Judith Butler, prisons and madhouses by Foucault. … But the books are less theatrical, less formulaic than the labels ['frissony', 'pastiche', and 'lesbo-Victorian'] make them sound; Waters is not at all one of those writers setting out to profit from what Henry James called the 'fatal cheapness' of period fiction. Her work is always rich in feeling, and clever and precise. (Turner 2006)

One great strength of this approach is that it allows Waters to foreground her reclamation of the past. She does this differently in each of the novels, but in each, she focuses our attention on a group of people or aspect of the past which has been neglected, repressed, or ignored. *Tipping the Velvet* is her most metafictional neo-Victorian novel:

> *Tipping the Velvet* was never intended to be a work of historical realism. Instead, it offers a

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> 1990s-flavoured lesbian Victorian London, complete with its own clubs, pubs and fashions. It conjures up an antique lesbian lingo, using, or cheerfully misusing, some of the words and phrases – 'toms', 'mashers', '*Tipping the Velvet*' itself – that I'd come across in dictionaries of historical slang and in 19th-century pornography. And it makes frequent little nods to lesbian and gay icons and classic queer texts – to Dorian Gray, Hadrian and Antinous, Woolf's *Orlando*, Zola's *Nana*, Compton Mackenzie's *Extraordinary Women*, Henry James's *The Bostonians* … The very patchiness of lesbian history, I was trying to say, invites or incites the lesbian historical novelist to pinch, to appropriate, to make stuff up. I wanted the novel not just to reflect that, but to reflect on it, to lay bare and revel in its own artificiality. (Waters 2018)

Waters' next novel, *Affinity*, is significantly less metafictional, and could be described as belonging more to the faux-Victorian mode. Stylistically, it echoes Victorian literary conventions, particularly those of Gothic fiction of the time, while extending its reach to explore lesbian experience with a directness that we don't see in its source material. *Fingersmith* is also less playfully parodic than *Tipping the Velvet*, though more overtly engaged than either *Tipping the Velvet* or *Affinity* with reworking specific literary texts in a way that draws the reader's attention to the process of reclamation going on. John Mullan argues that 'its most important [literary] kindship is with Wilkie Collin's *The Woman in White*', with key aspects of the plot queering and complicating Collin's account of Laura Fairlie being falsely incarcerated so others can claim her fortune (Mullan 2006). Waters' first novel to leave the Victorian era, *The Night Watch*, borrows from novelists such as Neville Shute, Elizabeth Bowen, and Mary Renault in its depiction of gay (and straight) lives in wartime and postwar London; *The Little Stranger* echoes numerous authors of ghost and detective stories – Henry James, Agatha Christie, and Edgar Allan Poe (particularly 'The Fall of the House of Usher') – as well as offering an implicit critique of the class politics of Josephine Tey's *The Franchise Affair*, while *The Paying Guests* draws on women's writing of the inter-war period, such as the work of Elizabeth Bowen and Ivy Compton-Burnett.

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Waters' development of a neo form which ranges across a variety of different periods, using the same techniques to produce novels which necessarily, bearing the traces of the period of their settings, differ from each other yet all follow the same methodology, in order to explore neglected or repressed aspects of British life, arguably marks her out as unique among contemporary novelists. She is unique in the way that she has brought gay historical fiction into the literary mainstream, as the most prominent and widely read gay historical novelist. Alan Hollinghurst is arguably the only writer who can be compared to her in this respect, having also had his work adapted for prime time TV productions and having growing academic interest in his work, but his readership is less broad than Waters'. Emma Donoghue's lesbian historical fiction is the most alike to Waters' work in terms of topic, form (she has also used the neo-Victorian form, though not consistently), and popularity, but she has a less well-developed profile as an author of LGBTQ fiction, moving between historical and contemporary settings, and being mainly known for her contemporary novel *Room*. No other author, writing about gay or straight experience, has used the neo form as Waters has, revisiting an increasingly varied range of periods to reanimate the past using the forms of that past, with a politicized agenda of telling stories which either weren't, or couldn't be, told at the time. Waters has thus carved out a particularly individual niche for herself, and this goes some way to explaining the intense academic interest in her work. The first single-author monograph on her was published in 2017; Claire O'Callaghan's *Sarah Waters: Gender and Sexual Politics* offers a detailed reading of each of Waters' novels using both feminist and queer theory, arguing that existing criticism has tended to focus on one or the other, while Waters' work demonstrates a complex intertwining of the two. Two edited collections of essays on Waters preceded this. The first, *Sarah Waters: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (Mitchell 2013), is part of Bloomsbury's popular Contemporary Critical Perspectives series, and its publication demonstrated the by then well-established interest in Waters' work among literature and gender scholars. The collection ranges across all of Waters' novels to date, exploring issues of space,

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representation, gender politics, history, and narrative technique. *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, edited by Claire O'Callaghan and Adele Jones and published in 2016, focuses more closely on how Waters' work reflects and engages with feminist and gender politics. In a series of wide-ranging essays, the collection explores Waters' engagement with patriarchy, repression, relationships, desire, and aesthetics. Before the publication of these three books, criticism on Waters had been restricted to book chapters and articles, though there were substantial numbers of these. Interest in Waters' neo-Victorian novels began early, with pieces such as Mark Llewelyn's work on *Affinity* (Lewellyn 2004) and Sonja Tiernan's work on *Tipping the Velvet* (Tiernan 2005). As the academic industry around Waters' work has grown, work on her has diversified, with distinct sub-fields emerging, such as neo-Victorianism (Yates 2009/10, Lewellyn and Heilmann 2007), queer and gender politics (Carroll 2006), historiography (Boehm, 2011), adaptation (Gamble 2009), and the Gothic (Wisker 2016, 2018), among others.

Little is known about Waters' next novel other than that it continues her movement through the twentieth century, is set in the 1950s, and is 'a kind of cousin to *The Little Stranger*, but with working class people' (Allardice 2018). The plot is embargoed, but it's safe to assume that it will, like her previous novels, combine densely researched archival and literary material with a compelling plot, the power of which propels the reader into a vividly rendered world which brings the lives of the historically disenfranchised back into the light.

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