

Truths Under the Carapace?: Historical Fact and Fiction, the Metahistorical Sublime and the Insane Rationality of the Bomb in *Tangled Saviours: A Novel*

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Abstract

Inspired by several key concepts and conventions from the Marxist, post-structuralist, post-colonial and Annales schools of historiography and the attributes of what Amy J. Elias calls the "metahistorical romance", I want to argue that my novel *Tangled Saviours*, due to be published in December 2025, is a form of practice-based research that, using the broad palette of literary-fictional tropes and devices, can provide insights into the nonlinear, multiplicitous and dialectical nature of history, and into how historical events can be creatively and dramatically recreated in order to contest dominant Western narratives and epistemologies about the Second World War that are riven with distortions, fabrications and a susceptibility to what Alfred de Zayas calls "fake history". Moreover, *Tangled Saviours* dissents from hegemonic trends in both historical fiction and historiography by exploring the interpellation of subaltern individuals and populations in Southeast Asian colonial and neo-colonial contexts, and ruminating on the "insane rationality" – to adapt a critical phrase from the philosopher Herbert Marcuse – of the Cold War nuclear age.

The Enlightenment conception of history as linear, rational, teleological and steered by 'great' men – or more latterly 'great' humans generally – remains prominent if not hegemonic in contemporary Western popular culture, informing the history imparted by mainstream TV and radio programmes, podcasts and non-academic books. It is also endemic in Hollywood historical romance movies, argues literary critic Amy J. Elias (2001: 150).

This Enlightenment model of history has been subject to attacks over the last century from Marxist, post-structuralist, post-colonial and Annales movement historians. Michel Foucault's insurgent categories crystallise one anti-Enlightenment position that is particularly relevant to this paper. 'Historical descriptions are necessarily ordered by the present state of knowledge', he wrote in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, since history comprises 'several pasts, several forms of connexion, several

hierarchies of importance, several networks of determination, several teleologies, for one and the same science, as its present undergoes change' (Foucault, 2002: 5).

Such critiques have percolated into a counter-hegemonic trajectory of what Elias dubs the 'metahistorical romance' genre of fiction, which includes novels by J.M. Coetzee, Salman Rushdie, John Steffler and others. Inspired by several key concepts and conventions from these schools of historical thought and tendencies within historical fiction, I want to argue that my novel *Tangled Saviours*, due to be published in December 2025, is a form of practice-based research that, using the broad palette of literary-fictional tropes and devices, can provide insights into the nonlinear, multiplicitous and dialectical nature of history, and into how historical events can be creatively and dramatically recreated in order to contest dominant Western narratives and epistemologies about the Second World War that are riven with distortions, fabrications and a susceptibility to what Alfred de Zayas calls 'fake history' (2022). Moreover, *Tangled Saviours* dissents from hegemonic trends in both historical fiction and historiography by exploring the interpellation of subaltern individuals and populations in Southeast Asian colonial and neo-colonial contexts, and ruminating on the 'insane rationality' – to adapt a critical phrase from the philosopher Herbert Marcuse (2002: 251) – of the Cold War nuclear age.

At the core of my novel is a fantastical literary conceit in which the very survival of Kirk Decker, a B-movie film actor in 1980s United States, is intimately bound up with that of a matriarchal barangay (tribal community) in the early modern Philippines, a connection made possible by a form of sympathetic magic that transcends the ordinary physical boundaries between time and space, so that actions taken in 1986 have a direct and immediate effect on events in 1577, and vice versa.

There are more indirect mirrorings, parallels and associations between other times and places rendered in the novel: 1560s/70s Luzon; 1930s New York; 1940s Manila; 1940s Portsmouth, UK; 1960s Vietnam; and finally a counterfactual 1986 in both the US and Philippines. Inspired by other multi-chronological novels, *Tangled Saviours* deploys a spectrum of thematic and symbolic motifs throughout its multiple historical settings. In David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) six characters living in different historical epochs all possess a comet-shaped tattoo, which suggests a cosmic and reincarnational relationship between them. In partial homage to this, the lineage of Philippine women characters in *Tangled Saviours* – including a datu (tribal chieftain) in the 1570s, a sex worker in the 1940s and a radical college professor in the 1980s – all bear a birthmark resembling tangled branches that is intended to represent the interconnectedness and interdependence of individual, national and cultural histories.

The similarly transhistorical climax of *Tangled Saviours* involves a shamanic ritual performed by the people of the barangay which seeks to cure Kirk Decker of his acute health problems and thus relieve certain demographics of the barangay – including babies and elderly men – of illnesses that

reflect Decker's. This passage is reproduced at the beginning of this paper. It mobilises several devices characteristic of the metahistorical romance, in Elias' judgement: 'Juxtaposition; Lateral Coexistence; Deperspectivized Space; Fragmentation; Metaphor; Anti-narrative; Absence' (2001: 147).

The sequence begins with drug- and drink-addled Kirk Decker suffering a heart attack in a US military hospital in the Philippines in 1986. Meanwhile, in 1577, the barangay is menaced by biblical storms and fires – the analogue of Kirk's personal bodily breakdown. As Kirk approaches death, he has a final chance to redeem himself thanks to the barangay's magic, transmitted to him from a distant time and place. The novel's narrative point of view switches from third-person description to first-person meditation by Kirk. This hitherto self-deceivingly patriotic and deeply reactionary individual is, for the first time in his life, capable of candour and clarity about matters of history, nation, desire, oppression, violence and nuclear annihilation.

That Mang, the shaman presiding over the ritual back in 1577, joins in Kirk's increasingly savage and sardonic outburst – while being perceived by the barangay dwellers as speaking in tongues because none of them know English – is intended to symbolise history as a dialectical and recursive phenomenon as much as it is a comment on the devastating impacts of Global Northern ideologies and policies on the Global South. Elsewhere in the novel there are dramatisations of successive iterations of colonial and neo-colonial oppression from the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in what was not yet called the Philippines in the late 16th century through to the American and Japanese occupations in the 1940s and US backing of the puppet dictator Ferdinand Marcos in the 1980s.

'We Are the Men Who Love Death' then morphs into the first-person plural 'we', implying that these reflections are representative of a dysfunctional social order and aspiring to what Elias, influenced by the American historiographer Hayden White, calls the 'metahistorical sublime': that which deviates so acutely from hegemonic Western notions that it cannot be articulated using the Enlightenment methodology of the 'privileging of realism as a representation of history, and the construction of history as narrative based on empirical evidence' (Ibid: 40). For Elias the metahistorical sublime is compatible with ethical and political causes, affording a space in which elite assumptions about history and politics – and indeed the politics of history – can be contested (Ibid: 45). The composition of 'We Are the Men Who Love Death' was partly informed by the philosopher Herbert Marcuse's critique of nuclear weapons in his book *One Dimensional Man*, first published in 1964 at the height of Cold War atomic anxiety. For Marcuse there was something fundamentally nihilistic and absurd about supposedly advanced post-Enlightenment capitalist societies devoting their resources not only to building and amassing nuclear weapons but masochistically desiring self-destruction from them: as Marcuse puts it, the 'preparation for total nuclear war may turn into its realization: the deterrent also serves to deter efforts to eliminate the need for the deterrent' (2002: 56).

I try to capture these contradictions in the sequence in my novel:

We love death but can't face it alone, so we crave the death of all humanity. Bring 'em all down with us. We love the end of the world. Nukes, meteors, aliens, rogue AI, volcanoes, disease, chemical warfare, social breakdown, too much cold, too much heat. ... We are the men who played poker with the Grim Reaper over Cuba, Berlin, Korea, Vietnam, Egypt, Bangladesh. That nuclear red button makes us harder than a medieval crook swinging on the hangman's noose (Sykes: 2025).

By the end of the Cold War, there was an end-of-history-style hope that the 'insane rationality' of nuclear weapons that Marcuse had problematised was a thing of the past. Humanity breathed a collective sigh of relief about having averted mutually assured destruction (appropriately acronymised as MAD). However, as per Foucault's remark above about present-day ideology filtering our view of the past, it is a lesson that the ruling elites of our own time have resiled from. In an age of renewed militarism and multipolar paranoia when the US, Russia, China and the UK are building new nuclear arsenals, metahistorical interventions like my novel can be seen as challenging a new hegemonic penchant for weapons of mass destruction, especially as admission to their global existential threat might once again belong to the unsayable, unthinkable realm of the metahistorical sublime.

But many other things about nuclear history are unsayable and unthinkable, at least in the terms of conventional history. The mushroom clouds of the Trinity Test and Hiroshima bombings have become protean metaphors in Western culture and politics, deployed at various times and places by various interests for various ends. Another iteration has been contoured by the metahistorical sublime: a mushroom cloud whose carapace hides or obfuscates other uncomfortable truths about atomic history, according to elite Western paradigms. These truths are also referenced elsewhere in my novel *Tangled Saviours* and I will conclude this paper by framing two of them as questions, for when it comes to the metahistorical sublime, fixed, unambiguous and absolute propositions are inappropriate.

Firstly, how valid is the hegemonic remembrance of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings as the only instances that nuclear bombs have been used in open warfare when we consider the activist and military analyst Daniel Ellsberg's (1981) claim that nuclear weapons have been used frequently and routinely as an instrument of post-war US imperialism against far weaker and poorer Global Southern nations seeking self-determination? In this context, 'used' for Ellsberg means 'in the precise way that a gun is used when you point it at someone's head in a direct confrontation, whether or not the trigger is pulled.' In the excerpt from my novel above I allude to real-life threats that were made by the US to deploy nuclear weapons against Beijing during the Korean War and Hanoi during the Vietnam War.

The second question relates to the pivotal event that led to the nuclear age, World War II, and oft-obscured facts about its main belligerents. If we acknowledge that Nazi Germany was directly

funded and developed by British and American capitalism in the 1930s and that the Pacific theatre of the war was borne from inter-imperial rivalry, Japan feeling that it too deserved colonial possessions in an Asia that had thus far been carved up between Western powers, where does that leave our conventional yet highly ideological binary distinctions between democracy and totalitarianism, liberalism and fascism, civilisation and barbarism, rationality and irrationality? It is my contention that an insurgent, metahistorical literary approach can productively grapple with these thorny questions and provide new, accurate and more ethical historical knowledge.

Excerpt from *Tangled Saviours: A Novel*

Chapter 15

1986; 1577

Fuck that hurt. Can't breathe too easy. Can't tell them neither. Hot American nurse putting mask on me. Better. Breathing easier. Blonde. Nice. She leans down. ID card droops over my eyes. Brunette in that picture. Under picture: SUSAN TAFT, US NAVAL HOSPITAL, SUBIC BAY. The fuck is Subic Bay? 'Forty-eight-year-old gentleman not responding to ventricular fibrillation—' Who said that? Who the bubba? Jeez, this agony. They stop wheeling me. Snap of swapped wires and tubes. Look up, see them cops' faces at the window. Young 'un with Blofeld scar under his eye. Leave me be, now. More voices overlapping. Some for me? 'Sir, just relax, you're going to be okay.' 'Did the charge nurse call at 2100?' 'Can we get 5 aspirin, 5,000 units IV heparin, 200 milligrams belinta—' 'Can we raise this up?' 'Dr Chaffee is going to take great care—' Oh fuck. I can't— What's happening already? 'Start CPR!' Icy hands on my chest. Plastic thingamajig hugging my face. 'Can we get him a shot of AVP now?' When medics sound tense, ain't a good sign. Despite it all, I smile.

Here it is then. Death, or close to it. Be alright, I know how to do this. Died a dozen deaths worse than this on the screen. And the way I've been living I shouldn't be surprised to croak now. Maybe I love death in a way. I am one of those men who love death.

'We are the men who love death,' screams Mang in a strangled, otherworldly voice. The people of the barangay stare up at him dumbfounded. The wind and rain straps their faces. The lightning seethes above them. 'We drink, smoke, snort, swallow and inject – and know full well it will kill us. We eat food riddled with trans fats, hormones, corn syrup, MSG and artificial colours, food that fries our cells and our organs. We drive cars that poison the air we breathe and doom us through collisions with others who love death too. We do jobs that snuff us slowly with stress and sitting on our asses all day. Radiation, chemicals in our clothes and furniture that'll send us to the Big Nowhere. And we do not give a flying fuck.'

We love death but can't face it alone, so we crave the death of all humanity. Bring 'em all down with us. We love the end of the world. Nukes, meteors, aliens, rogue AI, volcanoes, disease, chemical warfare, social breakdown, too much cold, too much heat. We lap up these death-fantasies in books, films, TV shows, videogames. But we are also the men who literally project our own deaths onto others, the men who load guns and take out our dead-ness within on college students, school children, mall shoppers, concert goers, Jews, Muslims, Protestants, Catholics, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, poor people, rich people, any old foe, scapegoat or just plain unlucky bastard. We are the men who played poker with the Grim Reaper over Cuba, Berlin, Korea, Vietnam, Egypt, Bangladesh. That nuclear red button makes us harder than a medieval crook swinging on the hangman's noose. We love killing others by sending them to fight our wars and we love watching them starve from our global money structures and we love hearing them scream as they're gunned down by our cops for being the wrong colour in the wrong place.

That President Reagan I can see? What's his face doing on the ceiling of a military hospital in the Philippines? The All-American Godhead moves in mysterious ways. Ronnie smirks, hikes his eyebrows. That's his style. People trust that. 'We are the men who love death,' he says and a crowd somewhere – I can't see them – cheer manically.

'My fellow Americans,' he continues, 'I'm pleased to tell you today that I've signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes.'

'Yes, Mr President,' I say.

'Hang in there Mr Decker,' says another voice. 'You're in good hands.'

'I do not care,' I smile. 'I could not give two flying Atlanta whorehouse fucks.'

'For the first time ever,' Reagan says, 'everything is in place for the Battle of Armageddon and the Second Coming of Christ.'

We are the men who love death,' say Reagan, Kirk and Mang in unison.

'What he say?' asks Nurse Susan Taft, as she channels the AVP through the cannula in Kirk's arm. 'Don't you be saying crazy stuff like that, Mr Decker. Nobody loves death and you sure won't be dying on my watch.' The Great Communicator's complexion turns ashen, the hair whitens and recedes and then falls out entirely. The skin tightens, flattens. Then the skin loses all colour, goes translucent and vanishes. Just a skeleton now.

The ECG line stays flat, an electronic blue em-dash with no beginning or end.

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