

## Obligations of Historical Fiction Writers

Historical fiction purports to describe actual events and people. In his 1960 play *A Man for All Seasons* (later adapted as a film), playwright Robert Bolt fictionalizes some of the events surrounding the efforts of King Henry VIII of England to divorce his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, and marry Anne Boleyn. Henry's Chancellor at the time, Sir Thomas More, was roundly critical of Henry's desire to divorce Catherine. Henry had More tried for treason and executed. Thomas Cromwell, one of Henry's chief ministers, supported Henry in his divorce efforts.

In Bolt's play, More is a pious and courageous man, devoted to his family and unafraid to speak truth to power. Cromwell, on the other hand, is conniving, corrupt, and jealous of More's purity of soul.

*Wolf Hall*, a novel by Hilary Mantel, fictionalizes the same events. In her novel, however, More is rigid and sadistic, a man who belittles his wife and enjoys burning heretic Protestants at the stake. The Thomas Cromwell of *Wolf Hall*, on the other hand, is a man who achieved his success in life through his abilities and hard work, not by birth. He is honest, kind, and tolerant, with little taste for the religious persecution common at the time.

Obviously, these portrayals cannot both be correct. It seems quite likely that either Mantel or Bolt has depicted a man as more villainous than he really was. Other historical fiction writers have also misrepresented historical figures.

### Study questions:

1. Do writers of historical fiction, or writers of any fiction based on a true story, have any obligation to represent events accurately? How does the desire to create a good story impact this question?
2. Is it morally wrong to depict an actual historical figure as more cruel or less virtuous than he or she really was?
3. Usually, most people think harming someone involves causing him or her to suffer. Since they are dead, neither More nor Cromwell can experience suffering. Can defamation of a person's character harm him or her even after death?