

## **“Tracing the Edwardian Artist in Contemporary Fiction”**

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Contemporary popular representations of the Edwardian period, of which the ITV Drama *Downton Abbey* has become a symbol, often take us back to country houses inhabited by idle aristocrats. This image can be found in literature as well, as it is the case with Isabel Colegate's *The Shooting Party* (1981). On the other hand, other neo-Edwardian stories like, for instance, the TV series *Mr Selfridge*, try to avoid this *cliché* by choosing self-made characters who improve their situation thanks to their hard work and the opportunities offered by the rise of consumer culture.

However, the turn of the century, often neglected for being considered a mere transition between the Victorian period and the Modernist period, is not only crucial from a social and an economic point of view, but it also fosters great interest from an artistic perspective, for it covers the last years of the *Belle époque*, one of the most nostalgically remembered periods in the history of art.

It seems that contemporary authors do not ignore this fact, neither the quality of art as a tangible way to connect with the past. Thus, they tend to recur to the figure of the Edwardian artist and artisan as an alternative to the above-mentioned options, often deconstructing and even gothicising our own ideas and expectations about the Edwardians, as several characters in A.S Byatt's *The Children's Book* (2009), the protagonists of Jonathan Smith's *Summer in February* (1996) and those of Imogen

Robertson's *The Paris Winter* (2013) and Kate Mosse's *The Taxidermist's Daughter* (2014) show.

Therefore, parting from the hypothesis that the Edwardian artist allows mobility through different scenarios, this paper aims to examine portraits of real and fictitious Edwardian artists in recent novels through a close analysis of a set of novels published between the early 1990s and 2014, exploring the possible reason(s) behind such a recurrent figure.

For this purpose, it will be necessary to delve into the latest theoretical approaches to the neo-historical novel, like, for instance, the ones exposed in Elodie Rousselot's volume *Exoticizing the Past in Contemporary Neo-Historical Fiction* (2014), and, more specifically, those focusing on the role of artists in literature (i.e. Lisa Hadley's article "Artists as Mothers: A Response to June Sturrock"), which will bring to the forefront debates concerning the clash between nostalgic and postmodern views of the past in historical fiction.

Finally, this paper will demonstrate that the inclusion of bohemian characters opens up a wide range of plots and styles in neo-Edwardian fiction beyond the scope of the upstairs-downstairs dynamics that is settled in the collective imagination with regards to this subgenre.

**Keywords:** Nostalgia, Neo-Edwardianism, Contemporary fiction, Historical fiction, Art.