

## THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL—AND SCHOLARLY, AND CREATIVE

[slide 1: title]

Today I'm going to talk about the role of embodiment in creative and scholarly enquiry, as it pertains to the writing of my novel, *HILD*, set in early seventh-century Britain. Along the way I'll read one 8-minute chunk and three snippets from the book, and make brief detours into cognitive poetics and narrative empathy--but my focus will be on my strategy of embodiment and how it helped me find Hild and write her origin story.

This should take  $\cong$  40 minutes. And then we can have a long juicy Q&A. I hope you have lots of Qs. I'd love for us to have a lively back-and-forth; it's my favourite part of events like this.

I'd like to start by posing a question for you to consider as I speak. Do you, as a scholar of the early medieval, have an origin story? And do you ever share that story with your students? By that, I mean, do you tell them: This, this right here—this book, or shield boss, or poem, or teacher, or mineralised textile—is what made me fall in love with the early medieval?

I ask because every novelist who's ever given an interview about their book is asked: What made you want to write it, why, say, the seventh century? Readers always want to know. It like seems such a simple question, doesn't it? But I believe it cloaks a deeper and more personal enquiry. I think what a reader is really asking is: Who are you? Why might what you have to say matter to me? They want to know who the novelist is—what we think, where we come from, where our bias lies—because they want to know if they should let that perspective—let us—inside their skull. Readers understand that a well-

written novel is an empathy machine; it can change you, change the way you see the world and how you feel about it. Readers know that lowering your barriers to a good book is a risk. They want to know what they're risking.

[slide 2: Hild cover]

HILD is a novel about the woman, born 1400 years ago, who is today known as St Hilda of Whitby. In my PhD thesis, I describe the book as

- 1) a "second-order discourse regarding the 'contingency of events' and illusory nature of history's seeming solidity" and
- 2) about the formation of the girl, and young woman, whose lived experience (to quote from a lovely article by Robin Reid) "foregrounds the intersectional construction of gender, sexual orientation, class and race."

But when I first encountered Hild I didn't know a second-order discourse from a hole in the ground—or, more accurately, would not have dreamt of using the phrase about one of my novels. And I'm pretty sure most readers could not care less.

This tradition—of asking about a novel's origin story—is so ingrained in journalists and feature writers on the book beat that I've even been asked for an origin story for my data-driven research. Four years ago, my analysis of gender bias in literary prizes showed that, not surprisingly, literary awards for fiction almost always go to books by men. Also not surprisingly, those prize-winning books by men are almost always about men. But here's the kicker: when the occasional woman does win an award, their prize-winning books, too, are almost always about men. In other words, the way to win a book prize is to write about men. And the more prestigious the award—as measured by the increase in the winning author's subsequent book sales—the more likely that is. Men's stories matter.

[slide 3: pie chart]

Here's an example of one of my charts of Man Booker prize winners since 2000. The dark red is books by men about women. The light red is books by women about men. And the little blue segment represents the three books by women about women. The Pulitzer looks worse, but I didn't have time to find and prettify that graphic.

I'm going to tell you the origin story of that research now, because it's relevant.

When a novel is published it's part of the author's job to write publicity pieces to accompany the launch. In 2015, as Hild was about to be reprinted as a paperback in the UK, one of the things I set about was a list of five historical novels that had influenced HILD. Five titles dropped into my head immediately. Each was an old friend, read and reread for decades:

[slide 4: novel list]

Four out of five were by women. I felt pretty pleased with that ratio. But when I started to write the piece I realised that none were about women. Every single one was about a Great Man of history (4 of them Arthur: what's up with that?). These were the stories I loved, the books that had formed my notion of historical fiction; stories of leadership, personal and political change, great deeds, and underpinned by the wild magic of landscape. Stories of the lives that history tells us *matter*. Men's stories.

[slide 5: my story mystery]

I expanded the list to 10—but got the same result: all about men. It wasn't until I increased the number to 20 that woman finally started to pop up. But even then they were women who were noteworthy for the men they were associated with—men they were fought over by, or refused to have sex with, or gave birth to. They were women with no agency; objects, not subjects. I started thinking about that, and why those books were so much more prominent than books about women, and as a result went off to assemble literary prize data.

Now let me tell you the origin story of writing HILD because it's connected.

In my early twenties I was living in Hull, a depressed (and depressing) industrialised city in the north of England. One weekend, for a break—for my sanity—I hiked up the coast, to Whitby.

The first thing I saw was the ruined abbey on the cliff. I didn't even stop to unload my backpack before climbing the one hundred and ninety-nine steps.

Have any of you fallen in love at first sight? It happens just like *that*, when you're least expecting it. One minute you're sticking your head into what you think is a perfectly ordinary wardrobe and the next minute you're in Narnia. Your whole world is different.

Something very like that happened to me at Whitby. When I crossed the abbey threshold it felt as though history was fisting up through the turf, and through me. It turned me inside out like a sock. I can't really explain it; it just happened. I fell stone in love with that abbey. After that I went back every year, sometimes twice year. I walked the coastline. I roamed the moors. I spent hours at the abbey, imagining how it might have been.

I read the tourist pamphlets which explained that the abbey had been founded by a woman called Hild. And that Bede wrote about her in his *Ecclesiastical History*. To find out more I went to the library but I couldn't find a single book about her, not one. Not only was there no scholarly monograph, there was no popular bio, there was no racy romance. There was nothing, not even a kids book. So I read Bede, and learnt she had taught five bishops, encouraged Cædmon, hosted the Synod of Whitby, and was a counsellor to kings.

Bede was a monk, steeped in the Pauline misogyny that seems inseparable from the Christianity of early medieval Britain. Lees and Overing point out that the *Ecclesiastical History* is 'the site for many treasured assumptions about Anglo-Saxon culture.' And in it, women barely exist except as virgins, martyrs, and mothers.

Those Bede-based assumptions are what I brought to the abbey that day, though I didn't understand that at the time. And those assumptions—that women don't matter; that women of elite status, like Hild, lived trapped in a cage of domesticity whose purpose was the continuance of the male line—are the foundation on which so many historical novels built. Books in which women are gender clichés: rape toys, baby machines, and warty old wise women of the woods.

So now I was confused. If women didn't matter, how come this magnificent abbey, founded by a woman, occupied such a stunning and physically impressive site? If women didn't matter, how come kings and princes sought Hild's advice, and listened? And if women didn't matter, how come it was Hild's foundation that hosted one of the most momentous meetings of the seventh century, one that changed the course of English history? No one could tell me.

I'm a writer. I write to find out. So in one way Hild would be a perfect subject: writing her story might answer my question. Plus, I love to write about nature. And I was born and raised in Yorkshire—in Elmet and Deira where Hild most probably lived. Perhaps I threw sticks in the same rivers, climbed the same kind of trees, lay on the same hillside and watched the same stars, wondering, like Hild, what they were and where they came from. I longed to travel back to the 7th C and see how the sky might have looked, the moors smelt and birds sounded in Hild's time.

In other ways, though, I really *didn't* want to write her story. I prefer to write about women with agency, women *doing* rather than being done to. I didn't want to spend time in the head of a woman caged by domesticity, which is what history had taught me she would be. So I turned to other projects. Years passed.

But I couldn't let go of Hild. I kept coming back to her, to Whitby, to this era of change so full of unknowns. I tried to put her era in context. I began with a battered 1959 Pelican edition of Trevelyan's *A shortened history of England*. Then Stenton's *Anglo-Saxon England*. And now I was seriously intrigued. Clearly, Hild's time was one of massive culture change. She was born into a heathen, aliterate tribal society—one in which kings were little more than petty warlords—but died as part of a Christian proto-state with nascent bureaucratic apparatus. And just as clearly Hild not only witnessed but drove some of this change: She trained those 5 bishops, encouraged the creation of arguably the earliest English literature, and hosted the Synod that changed the course of English history. How on earth did she do that?

I kept following my nose. In the mid 90s I found an early medieval listserv, the Heroic Age. I started tracking down texts discussed on the list. I was hooked.

Without having made a conscious decision, I found myself spending hours a day with interlibrary loan, wrist-deep in the bibliographies of the kind of heavy, expensive textbooks whose pages are stuck together because no one has ever opened them. When I found myself reading almost exclusively about material culture I realised what I was trying to do: understand Hild and her culture through her physical experience. I was trying to reconcile two competing truths in my head: Hild as the constrained powerless handmaid of male destiny history had taught me women were, and Hild the powerful authority that both the existence of the abbey and her legend argued for.

I'm a creature of the body. It's how I experience the world; how I explore, describe, and interact with it. Embodiment is my primary personal and creative strategy. To create Hild I would recreate her world—a working world; its people, places, and web of political, religious, and personal relationships—then replay known events, and see what shape a person with Hild's known background and achievements could take. In other words, I would build the seventh century and grow Hild inside. Run a simulation if you like.

But to feel confident that the Hild I imagined could have been possible—for the experiment to be robust—I could not contravene what was known to be known, even in the smallest detail.

So now the *real* research began. I read everything I could lay my hands on about the late sixth and early seventh century. Ethnography, archaeology, numismatics, jewellery,

textiles, languages, food production, flora and fauna, weapons and warfare, medical approaches, religious belief—even the weather.

On top of that I read lots of Old English poetry—mostly in translation but with the occasional attempt at the original. Ditto Welsh poetry. I imagined Old Frisian and Pictish, testing the shapes and sounds in my head. Gradually I worked my way into recent and even not-yet-published research. I found early career researchers' blogs. I started my own research blog. I got drawn deeper and deeper into the world of academic discipline: citing sources, disagreeing with footnotes. (And, incidentally, fell in love with scholarship and went on to get my doctorate. But that's another story.)

By this time I'd progressed through 20th C historiography: Trevelyan to Stenton—who seemed to base their work largely on documentary evidence—through late 20th C scholars such as Yorke and Higham, McKitterick and Hook and Kirby and Blair, whose viewpoints included material culture. Then I moved on to those whose focus was on what were traditionally regarded as gendered spheres: food, the family, burial rituals. Then I began to read the kinds of analyses only made possible by decades of feminist and gender scholarship: Stafford, Hollis, Lees and Overing. And as I read I could feel the ground shifting slightly, and the master story becoming less monolithic.

I grew up with the notion of capital-H History—history as objective and immutable. Now I began to realise that was nonsense. History is just a series of stories we tell about how the world came to be as it is. And as the world changes, the story changes. And those stories are contingent on the experience—the reality if you like—of the storyteller, whether novelist or scholar. In other words, what we think we know of the past depends on

the questions we ask, which depend on what interests us—which depends on who we are, as people.

That day in Whitby what I encountered was the gap between a) what I had been taught of the story of the past and b) my own visceral understanding of how human beings behave—the truth based on my personal experience. I'm a queer woman with power and agency and I was absolutely sure there would have been queer woman with power and agency in 7th c: how could there not be? Women are human. Our sensory apparatus, our thought process, our hopes and fears and drives 1400 years ago would have been the same as they are now. Cultural constraints would be different, yes, but not the people themselves. It was that gap that drove me crazy. And it was trying to *bridge* that gap that finally drove me to write.

Ah, but how to begin? Few of my assumed readers would have any kind of understanding of the differences between the material and social cultures of the early 21st and the early 7th Cs—not to mention those between the early-, mid-, and late-7th centuries. I wanted readers to absorb the world gradually, naturally, without being overwhelmed by exposition or clumsy infodump dialogue. "As you know Arthur, Britain's in a terrible state and that sword's been in the stone a long time now..." So what better way to begin than with a child, so we can learn alongside her, encounter the world as a child does, gradually, through physical, lived experience?

Here's that beginning:

The child's world changed late one afternoon, though she didn't know it. She lay at the edge of the hazel coppice, one cheek pressed to the moss that smelt of worm cast and the last of the sun, listening: to the wind in the elms, rushing away from the day, to the jackdaws changing their calls from "Outward! Outward!" to "Home now! Home!" to the rustle of the last frightened shrews scuttling under the layers of leaf fall before the owls began their hunt. From far away came the indignant honking of geese as the goosegirl herded them back inside the wattle fence, and the child knew, in the wordless way that three-year-olds reckon time, that soon Onnen would come and find her and Cian and hurry them back.

Onnen, some leftwise cousin of Ceredig king, always hurried, but the child, Hild, did not. She liked the rhythm of her days: time alone (Cian didn't count) and time by the fire listening to the murmur of British and Anglisc and even Irish. She liked time at the edges of things—the edge of the crowd, the edge of the pool, the edge of the wood—where all must pass but none quite belonged.

The jackdaw cries faded. The geese quieted. The wind cooled. She sat up.

"Cian?"

Cian, sitting cross-legged as a seven-year-old could and Hild as yet could not, looked up from the hazel switch he was stripping.

She said, "Where's Onnen?"

He swished his stick and said, "I shall hit a tree, as the Gododdin once swung at the wicked Bryneich."

But the elms' sough and sigh was becoming a low roar in the rush of early evening, and she didn't care about wicked war bands defeated in the long ago. "I want Onnen."

"I could make a sword for you, too," he said. "You shall be Branwen."

"I don't want a sword," she said. "I want Onnen."

He sighed and stood. "We'll go now. If you're frightened."

She frowned. She wasn't frightened. She was three; she had her own shoes. Then she heard firm, tidy footsteps on the woodcutters' path, and she laughed.

"Onnen!"

But even as Cian's mother came into view, Hild frowned again. Onnen was not hurrying. Indeed, Onnen took a moment to smooth her hair, and at that Hild and Cian stepped close together.

Onnen stopped before Hild.

"Your father is dead."

Hild looked at Cian. He would know what this meant.

"The prince is dead?" he said.

Onnen looked from one to the other. "You'll not be wanting to call him prince now."

Far away a settling jackdaw cawed once.

"Da is prince!" Hild said. "He is!"

"He was." With a strong thumb, Onnen wiped a smear of dirt from Hild's cheekbone. "Little prickle, the lord Hereric was our prince, indeed. But he'll not be back. And your troubles now are just begun."

Troubles. Hild knew of troubles from songs.

"We go to your lady mother — keep a quiet mouth and a bright mind, I know you're able. And Cian, bide by me. The highfolk won't need us in their business just now."

Cian swished at an imaginary foe. "Highfolk," he said, in the same tone he said Feed the pigs! when Onnen told him to, but he also rubbed the furrow under his nose with his knuckle, as he did when he tried not to cry.

Hild put her arms around him. They didn't quite meet, but she squeezed as hard as she could. And then they were wrapped about by Onnen's arms, Onnen's cloak, Onnen's smell, wool and woman and toasted malt, and Hild knew she'd been brewing beer, and the afternoon was almost ordinary again.

"Us," Cian said, and hugged Hild hard. "We are us."

"We are us," Hild repeated, though she wasn't sure what he meant.

#

In the hall with Ceredig king and Hild's mother the lady Breguswith, were two men. The smell of travel, of horse, was clearly on them, and their bright, checked cloaks were much muddied at hem and seat. Breguswith, distaff tucked under her left arm and rolling her fine-yarn spindle down her thigh with her right, stared absently at the fire, though Hild knew even as her mother's fingers were busy, busy, busy teasing out the yarn, her attention was focused on Ceredig king who laughed and leaned from his stool and let firelight wink on the thick torc around his neck.

Onnen pushed Hild forward. The visitors, both slight, with magnificent moustaches and the air of brothers, turned.

"Ah," said the taller one in British. Strange British, from the west. "You have your father's hair."

Yffing chestnut, her mother always called it. And her outside one big prickliness like a chestnut, too, Onnen would say, and they'd laugh. No one was laughing now but Ceredig, and it was his laugh-because-I-am-king laugh, the one for important visitors, to show ease in his own hall.

And then the stranger looked beyond Hild. "And who's this?"

Hild twisted to look. Cian had followed her into the firelight, ready to snatch her back as he had done in spring, when the ram had charged as she got too near.

"He is nobody," said her mother, in Anglisc. "My woman's boy." And as she turned — with that long, careless grace that made men look, made the strangers look — Onnen put her arm around Cian and tugged him gently back into the shadow. But this visitor was quicker than most.

"Wait," he said. "You." He crooked his finger, and Onnen and Cian stepped back into the light. "Your name?"

"Onnen, lord."

"And this is your son?"

"He is, lord."

"And yourself, Onnen, you were born here?"

"Indeed, lord. Six and twenty years since." She stood a little prouder. "I am cousin to Ceredig king."

"You're all cousins in this benighted wood," said the second stranger, but he was already turning away and beckoning for the first to do likewise. And Hild

understood that although her mother and Onnen had told nothing but the truth, the visitors had been fed an essential lie.

This opening relies not only on visual information but as many physical senses as possible: scent, sound, texture, temperature. There's a good reason for that.

I'm not sure how many of you are familiar with the concept of mirror neurons. Mirror neurons are human brain cells activated both when we perform actions and when we see others perform those actions. When I pick up this glass of water, neurons in the left parietal lobe fire in my brain. If I hooked you up to a functional MRI and scanned your brain while you *watched* me picking up this water, we'd see the same neurons lighting up in your brain. In other words, your brain recreates an observed experience as if you were experiencing it directly. You share it; it becomes yours. You can run a simulation and extrapolate from it. If you see me do this you can guess what happens next. Just as if I do this [mimic throwing] some of you might duck. Mirror neurons let us recreate others' experience, emotions, and motivations inside ourselves; they may be foundational to human empathy.

The interesting thing is, you can trigger mirror neurons not just by *seeing* an action in real life but by *reading* about it. But because you as a reader can't *see* a character the way you can see me, I have to put you there using other sensory detail. And that detail has to be specific. I don't say 'a cup' when I can be more particular. To be specific, of course, it helps to know what the cup a king or a ceorl might use. This is where reading those endless lists of grave finds come in handy. With the king Hild might drink from a light, smooth cup

turned from maple, perhaps with a decorative silver rim that's cold against her lip. With a cool she might share a heavy elm bowl.

Triggering a reader's mirror neurons so that a reader to feel what a character is feeling—the light cup, the cold rim—is called narrative empathy. And interestingly, if you create narrative empathy, you can persuade the reader to feel that they share a character's direct experience, even when the reader is, say, a straight white 50 year old man and the character is a teenage bisexual girl. And if you can do that, research suggests you can actually change a reader's standpoint, just for a little while. Just for a little while, you can norm the Other.

I wrote my PhD thesis on this. If you want to know more you can [download the PDF](#) from my website.

[slide 6: PhD screenshot]

Using narrative empathy is how, with Hild, I sought to write queer women back into the early medieval. I immerse the reader in Hild's environment, natural, built, and and cultural, so that they live Hild's experience. So, for example, as Hild enters puberty and starts to have these weird feelings—as she first begins to experience desire—the reader learns with Hild about her culture's attitudes to sex and sexuality. In this way we also share her understanding of how the discourse of gender and sexuality during the conversion period began. I reasoned that without the influence of Judeo-Christian notions of women's sexuality, no one would much care if women had sex with each other.

Here's Hild's mother giving her the elite 7th C version of the birds-and-bees chat when Hild is about 13:

"Well," Breguswith said. "Don't get yourself with child. Do everything but that. The king will have no use for a swollen seer, and you'll be more interested in your belly than anything else in the world. Oh, yes, even you. So anything but that. And don't attract the attention of priests. Why Christ or his priests should care what we do with each other, I don't know. But they do like to meddle. One thing. Whatever you do, make sure it's not with your gemæcce: When these things go wrong, and they always do, you need her to be on your side, the constant. Oh, and you'll need to find someone for her. I'd suggest you buy her a slave. In Kent you can buy gelded ones."

Hild stared at her mother.

"No? Perhaps not. Filthy Frankish custom..."

This is just one of the moments in the book that explore the influence of the Roman church and its patristic misogyny on the construction of the discourse surrounding gender and sexuality. The novel doesn't argue that Christianity *created* the anti-woman and anti-queer discrimination we see today, only that Christianity gave a particular shape and rationale to that discrimination. But rather than doing that through exposition, I do it through narrative empathy.

Writing *Hild* was a balancing act. As a reader, I love epic sweep—world-changing events, people whacking each other's heads off with swords—but as a writer I needed this novel to be full of intimate moments, those moments when the reader is inside Hild, and

Hild inside the reader. To maintain constant narrative empathy Hild has to be present on every page. That makes the 'epic' part difficult, because 'epic' requires scope, which usually involves moving into other points of view—*We now leave the plains of Rohan and check in with Sam and Frodo in Mordor. Or, Meanwhile back in Winterfell.* But I found a way to both have Hild on every page of the book—for the reader to stay in her head and body—and to get inside the perspective of others. And that was through embodiment.

Here's a scene from an early chapter when Hild is riding with her uncle Edwin on the war trail—which as I imagined it mostly meant the Northumbrians threatening northern tribes with their overwhelming numbers and extracting payment. Here, Hild is witnessing the Bryneich and their leader, Coledauc, sullenly rendering tribute:

Watch men and women, her mother had said. Put yourself inside them. Imagine what they're thinking.

The little muscles round Coledauc's eyes tightened. He was weighing information. He closed his eyes briefly, then smiled, as men do when they're about to do something difficult but want to seem at ease, and walked his mount forward. And when he spoke he shaped the Anglisc carefully, like a man mouthing something disgusting. Every shape the man's body made refused the words.

Maintaining the reader's intimacy with Hild while creating a widescreen epic was a challenge; but maintaining Hild's agency in the final chapter of the book felt like summiting Everest. The story ends with Hild's marriage and wedding night but I didn't want it to

convey the traditional subtext of marriage: the woman's surrender to the authority of a man.

Sex, and the traditional language of sex that has evolved over the last thousand years of English literature, is very much based on the male being active, the subject, and the female passive, the object. (A classic example of a subject-verb-object sentence is 'Man fucks woman.')

A look at the language of basic biology texts on mammalian reproductive process illustrates this nicely: sperm penetrates the egg; I have yet to read of an egg subsuming sperm. So I started thinking about the inherent dynamism and power-differential of verbs, trying to find a way to show Hild being the primary agent and subject of her own life: belonging to no one but herself.

And instead of passive verbs, I chose active verbs for everything Hild—Hild's body—does. Here's the penultimate scene of the novel.

She did want him, She wanted all of him, everything, wanted to fill herself with him until she couldn't breathe. Wanted to pull him through her from the outside, to pull his skin through her skin, his muscle to her muscle, his bones to her bones.

And she did.

She closed tight around him, tight as a fist, tighter, and his eyes were the bluest blue she had ever seenk, bluer than the sky, bigger than the sky, wide, endless, the horizon of home.

My challenge with *Hild* was always to balance the imagined reader's understanding of the position of women in the early seventh century with the portrait of a girl, living in precarious circumstances, who becomes a young woman of great personal and political power. This imaginary reader's understanding is based on the discourse constructed during well over a millennium of written history, which begins with Bede. I had to counter that understanding. I knew *Hild* had to be possible because I was possible: I exist. I also understood on a visceral level how the intersection of misogyny, homophobia, and ableism can build an almost impossible barrier to even questioning the master story of How Things Are. The strategy I chose was embodiment—my own knowledge of and identity as a woman, a queer woman, with agency.

When I finished the last scene and wrote, - End - , I felt triumphant. I felt triumphant as I drank my celebratory wine that night, and triumphant as I fell asleep. It wasn't until the next morning, when I settled down to read the first draft of this super awesome piece of amazingness, that I realised: My beautifully constructed destroyer of medieval assumptions was 100% shiny white.

I've written seven novels. This was the first time I'd ever written all white characters. But I had focused so hard on deconstructing assumptions about early medieval gender and sexuality that I hadn't even *thought* to try identify all the other assumptions I'd absorbed with every book and every film about the middle ages. I'm just glad I was able to see it in time to rewrite before publication.

Sadly, I *was* too late to do anything about my other giant assumption and prejudice about all things early medieval.

In 2015, two years after *Hild* was first published, I realised: Of all the 200 named characters in the book, not a single one is disabled. Not one. It's not a coincidence that this realisation occurred just as I really claimed my identity as a cripple, and started thinking about the social model of disability. It was only then that I could begin to see the ways I had absorbed and internalised the ableist crap we're all fed every day, in every sphere. Including the early medieval.

That's the problem with implicit bias: we don't recognise it. That's what gives it such terrible power.

Look at the recent kerfuffle over the Viking warrior grave in Birka, Sweden.

There are plenty of stories of women warriors in the heroic cultures of northwest Europe; they are scoffed at by many scholars and regarded as myth. This dismissal depends on circular reasoning: Heroic Age society was patriarchal; only men were warriors. Warriors and buried with swords. Therefore, if a skeleton is accompanied by a sword, it must be a man, because in a patriarchal Heroic Age society only men are warriors.

The Birka skeleton, first excavated in the late 19th century, was assumed to be male. The skeleton was tallish (170 cm, about 5'7") and buried with a sword, shield, axe, battle-knife, bow, and armour-piercing arrows; two horses (one stallion, one mare); plus a board game usually associated with military strategy. For nearly 100 years no one questioned the classification as a high-ranking warrior. But then, in the 1970s, osteologist Berit Vilkans pointed out that the skeleton in the grave exhibited female characteristics. No one paid any attention: it was a classic example of a warrior; it was male. Then recently the body's genome was sequenced and revealed to be a woman. And suddenly everyone questioned the classification. The weaponry became purely symbolic. Well, yes, it's a woman with a

sword, but she's not a warrior. She can't be because Viking society was patriarchal.

Obviously the sword belonged to her father/brother/son; it's an heirloom, a symbol of family rank. Implicit bias in action.

When I was first writing Hild I imagined her learning to use the sword. But decades of scholarly dismissal of armed early medieval women had an effect: I could not convince myself that readers would believe it. So instead Hild learns to fight with a staff. On balance I like the solution I came up with; it matches the imagery we have of Hild (often holding a suspiciously crozier-like staff). I do like to think, though, that writers of realistic fiction set in the past might now feel a little more free to write women with swords. Women are people, human beings in, of, and for ourselves. We are stakeholders in our own lives. Of course we fought. We have always fought.

The data are right in front of our eyes. We just don't see it because our bias gets in the way. We don't even ask the questions because our bias precludes them. But the more we learn about our own biases the more able we are to counter-programme them. A good way is to visit Harvard's Project Implicit and take some of their tests.

[slide 7: Project Implicit]

If you take the tests you'll get a better understanding of your implicit bias. Then you'll have a better understanding of the gaps in your thinking. Because we all have them. Every single one of us. But if you know what they are, you can watch for it.

Our actual lived experience, and more particularly examined experience, matters. Our identities matter. As artists and researchers, who we are influences our perspectives.

And just as readers need to know who the writer is, what sort of perspective they are letting into their heads, I think students and fellow researchers of history might be helped by understanding their teacher or research colleague's perspective. If I were Empress of the Universe, one of my rules would be that every researcher must have a bias buddy, sort like a diving buddy. Only instead of checking each others' diving equipment, we check each other at every stage for bias.

We are not perfect. We are all flawed. We all have bias we can't see past. Because of that bias so many of us are missing from the great story of the past. So many of us who are members of traditionally marginalised groups have been written out of history.

- Women are written out of history
- People of colour are written out of history
- Queer people are written out of history
- Disabled people are written out of history

We are missing.

[slide 8: Hild cover section]

In many ways, *Hild* the novel is an active intervention into that straight white male construction of a created past. It's not nearly enough—but that's why I'm writing more. The sequel *Menewood*, with lots of disabled characters, is in train, and after that there will be the third and final volume. It's a start.

Adrienne Rich said, "We must use what we have to invent what we desire," and I desire a world where we are all, regardless of our identities, regarded by one another as

human beings. I built a seventh-century—not the 7th c, but just one possible version—and populated it with women and other members of traditionally marginalised groups who behave, and expect treatment, as full human beings. History is our interpretation of what happened, our shared understanding of past events in the light of what we know today. By writing Hild's story I'm looking at where we came from—the past—and believing we could have survived there as ourselves. By imagining Hild as possible, I am recasting what today we think might have been possible. By reclaiming the past, retelling it to include women and others as people, I'm remaking the present, and, I hope, changing the future.

In my version of the world, none of us are missing.