

How to Write History that People Want to Read, Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath (UNSW Press 2009)

Writing Histories: Imagination and Narration, ed. Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath (Monash University ePress 2009)

Why do novelists choose to write historical fiction? History is where you find the best stories – and who can tell them better than a novelist? Historians disagree. Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath argue that historians too may write compelling, evocative and compelling prose. Even better, what historians write is true to the spirit of history. Both have impressive lists of titles and established academic careers, and it is from this background and experience that they have collaborated in writing two books to advise and guide others.

How to Write History that People Want to Read, and *Writing Histories: Imagination and Narration* both provide very practical and accessible guides to fledgling historians. Tensions between historians and historical novelists, dating back to the time of Sir Walter Scott, may have inspired these two books. This tension was evinced in our own time by the reaction of historians to Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*. The historians argue that novelists who are not subject to the rigorous demands of serious research and analysis may write what they fancy. Novelists may counter with the argument that few fancy what the historians write as they pinion all sense of drama and personality into the strait jacket of statistics and objectivity.

Writing Histories: Imagination and Narrative has been published in print form and as an e-book followed a three week writing workshop for PhD candidates in history and related disciplines. Nine historians who presented at this workshop stress the importance of good writing. The message that comes through, loudly and clearly, is that the writing of history is as important as the initial research and should be as enjoyable. It is not just a necessary chore at the end of the process. The passion and enthusiasm, which prompted the research in the first place, should flow through to the final text, be it thesis, book or article. How is this to be accomplished? There is no single template. Bill Gammage in writing about *The Broken Years* stresses the importance of choosing a voice adding, 'which voice you choose will depend on what you want to say'. (02.4) Ann McGrath in 'Self Reflexivity and the Self-Line' expresses freedom in being able to write from personal experience and use the I word, while warning that any reflexivity must have substance and relevance. Greg Denning objects to the term non-fiction. He is a storyteller and in writing history he is writing real stories with imagination.

Imagination is seeing what's absent, hearing the silence as well as the noise.
Imagination is taking the cliché out of what has been said over and over again.
Imagination is taking the purpose of the rules that confine us and running with it. (06.2)

There is much within this small volume to help both students and those who teach them. The contributors suggest how to enliven description or narration, how to structure a text, and employ literary techniques. It would serve as a guide to similar workshops or seminars or be helpful to students who work in isolation. Apart from the suggested writing exercises there is practical advice on writing techniques, a reading guide and bibliography.

Advice on how to write excellent history, in every sense, is developed in *How to Write History that People Want to Read* and this second book is a logical development from the first. The authors tell us that their book has grand ambitions.

We see it as a kind of GPS navigation tool for historians. You can take history's main streets, the wide highways, the back roads or the red dusty side roads. What we have tried to do is lay out a map of the Country of History, and indicate the routes most likely to take you where your readers will follow. (1-2)

The intended readers are not confined to postgraduate students. The book provides essential information for anyone who wishes to write history, be it a thesis, local history, a family history or an article for a newspaper. There is still the disquiet concerning the encroachment by fiction writers on the historian's discipline. 'It's as if historians have no style, unlike those cool 'creative' novelists'. This lament is followed by a paragraph defending the historian who can be 'riveting, entertaining, and richly informative' (2).

The chapter headings provide clear indications of their content. Chapters one to four describe a number of methods to source history. Chapters five to eleven concentrate on writing techniques, from beginnings and endings through choosing the appropriate style and language and editing and revising. The epilogue covers the after publication party, marketing and reviews. These authors are taking their subject and readers seriously.

One test of this book is to ask whether it is one you would want to read. The style is informal, the voice friendly and unthreatening, the text interspersed with personal anecdotes set in separate boxes, as are pointers which summarise the main chapter points. The reader is also encouraged to think beyond the box. Research can go beyond books and articles to visual, oral and material sources. 'Objects can symbolise momentous stories, signify important moments of history and play a role in identity narratives.' (85-86).

Writing that combines narrative, analysis and description in an authentic yet readable style is difficult. The writers warn: 'If you want to stay with history, you won't have the same kind of freedom as the historical novelist. You can't fill in the gaps the way a novelist can. You might want to speculate but if you do make it clear that you *are* speculating – and do not invent' (182). Given these strictures there are then very sensible and practical guidelines on all stages of the process from the first inspiring idea to the final, carefully revised, edited and proof read text. Their Country of History is mapped with clear signposts and place names, providing a useful tool for any historian who wishes to set out on a journey into the past.

Emily Sutherland

2

Book reviews. Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath. *How to Write History that People Want to Read* and *Writing Histories*. Emily Sutherland. *Transnational Literature* Volume 2 No 1 November 2009. <http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>