

Making history 'sexy': Solid academic credentials with a lively and enthusiastic performance is the formula to success for presenting history

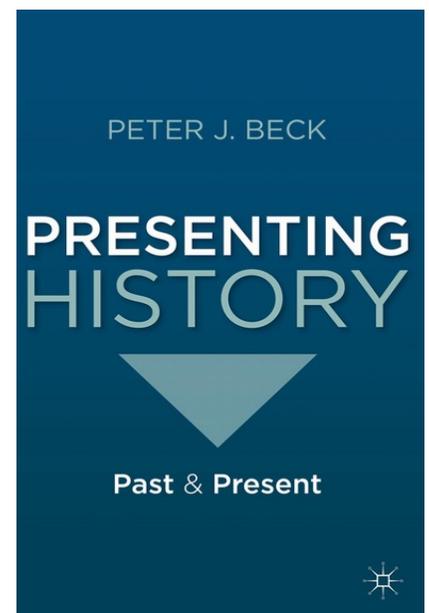
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*Through case studies of leading historians, historical novelists, Hollywood filmmakers and television history presenters, **Peter J. Beck** looks critically at alternative literary and visual ways of presenting the past as both academic history and popular history. **Catherine Hezser** notes the book will be of interest to any historian whose job is to communicate his or her research results to the general public, although a more analytical examination of the actual outputs of historical popularisation is needed.*



Presenting History: Past and Present. Peter J. Beck. Palgrave Macmillan. November 2011.

As the recent history BBC TV series presented by Mary Beard, *Meet the Romans*, and Lucy Worsley's many series on the home and most recently, the lives of women in the Restoration era, have shown again, public interest in seemingly obscure historical subjects can be generated and maintained, if the topics are presented in an exciting and stimulating, or "sexy" way. In these programs, which have taken TV history further by focussing on women's history and daily life, the presenter becomes as much the focus of the show as the historical objects they handle and the stories they tell. Beard's idiosyncratic style and Worsley's cuteness attract the viewer's attention as much as what these historians say. TV history dons have become celebrities who receive popular feedback on their dress style. Despite these perhaps unwarranted side-effects, their programs are able to elicit interest in historical subjects amongst wide ranges of viewers including women, young adults, and the elderly.



Beck, who is an emeritus professor of history at Kingston University and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, argues that presenting history in a tantalizing way to the general public becomes increasingly important nowadays. Especially since academic research is now judged on

the basis of its impact within society, academic historians need to consider how best to communicate their research results to the broader public. Academics should show how important historical knowledge is for present and future decision making. The book presents case studies of different forms of popularisation of history: on TV, in Hollywood movies, historical novels, children's books, and books and journalistic articles reaching a non-academic audience. The author's choice of case studies is not entirely convincing, though. For example, he deals with less recent, exclusively male TV presenters only (A.J.P. Taylor, Simon Schama, Niall Ferguson), whose subject areas are limited to (early) modern and mostly British history, that is, his own research focus. The chapters on Marxist and feminist history are not so much about presentation as about approaches, which are linked to particular representatives here (Eric Hobsbawm and Joan Wallach Scott). The focus on a particular historian is even less useful for discussing Hollywood cinema's approach to history: the chapter vacillates between discussing particular films and introducing Robert A. Rosenstone's propagation of history films.

The study shows that TV history presentation developed from mere lectures on screen (A.J.P. Taylor) to much more visual and personal performances in which the presenter takes centre stage. The programs we see on TV today, such as the series presented by Beard and Worseley, are all modeled on Simon Schama's TV series which started in the 1990s, providing "personality-led, popular narrative histories" (92) in which the presenter is "shown on location", "handling artefacts", "pointing to sources", and "offering viewers context, description and narrative" (102). Rather than presenting a pseudo-objective and uncontroversial account, these programs allow their author-presenters to transmit their own interpretations of the past to wider audiences. Sometimes, as in the case of Niall Ferguson's "virtual" ("What If") histories, this approach may be supported by a small number of academic historians only. TV's role is entertainment, after all, not the trustworthy representation of scholarly debates on obscure subjects. What governs TV producers' choice of subjects and presenters is therefore primarily viewing quotas and ultimately money. Traditionally, topics such as World War II and Hitler, and certain epochs of British history have drawn most viewers in the UK. Presenters had to be good actors, combining charisma with "showmanship" (p. 120), to seduce TV audiences. Current history programs show that British TV has moved on from there, investing money in subjects that may attract specific viewers (e.g., Worseley's "History for Girls") and go back to antiquity (e.g., Beard's "Meet the Romans").

Another form of in which history can reach a wider public are novels, whether for adults or children. The chapter on historical novels features Philippa Gregory, although other writers such as Hilary Mantel are as prominent in this category. Philippa Gregory's historical novels with their romantic plots are especially targeted at women readers. While Gregory is concerned about the historical accuracy of her novels, she sees herself primarily as a novelist who tries to entertain her readers. In the postmodern context of blurred boundaries between history and fiction historical novels gain a new significance. At the same time scholars such as Hayden V. White (*Metahistory*, 1975) have challenged traditional attempts to create historical plots. On that basis the difference between

academic historians and historical novelists is only gradual: all of these writers fill the gaps left by the evidence with their own creative thinking. Since total historical objectivity is impossible, no historical writer can prevent “viewing the past through the prism of the present” (p. 207). The children’s historian Terry Deary is quite outspoken about the way he chooses stories for his “Horrible Histories” series: “I simply share my enthusiasm.... I can choose the fact that will appeal to my readers” (p. 231).

According to Beck, especially these two characteristics of public history presentation – communicating one’s enthusiasm and catering to one’s audience or readership – should be heeded by academic historians. Like the general public, today’s university students have a shorter attention span. Therefore, “whatever the format, the essence of being a successful presenter is to communicate history in a manner which not only meets appropriate historical standards but also engages the interest, imagination and intellect of the target audience(s)” (p. 301). Rather than leaving public history to history presenters without an academic training, academic historians should think of ways to reach a wider public and communicate their research results to them: “Public history is too important to be left to historical novelists, journalists, filmmakers, television historians, and ‘internet historians’” (p. 300). The above-mentioned examples of Beard and Worseley show that combining solid academic credentials with a lively and enthusiastic performance is the formula to success in history presenting.

Presenting History should be of interest to any historian and perhaps to any academic whose job is to communicate his or her research results to students and the general public. However, a more analytical and critical examination of the actual outputs of historical popularisation rather than descriptive and detailed accounts of the various historians’ biographies would have been preferable.

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