



The Art of History: Unlocking the Past in Fiction and Nonfiction

Christopher Bram , Charles Baxter (Editor)

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One has to look no further than the audiences hungry for the narratives served up by *Downton Abbey* or *Wolf Hall* to know that the lure of the past is as seductive as ever. But incorporating historical events and figures into a shapely narrative is no simple task. The acclaimed novelist Christopher Bram examines how writers as disparate as Gabriel García Márquez, David McCullough, Toni Morrison, Leo Tolstoy, and many others have employed history in their work.

Unique among the "Art Of" series, *The Art of History* engages with both fiction and narrative nonfiction to reveal varied strategies of incorporating and dramatizing historical detail. Bram challenges popular notions about historical narratives as he examines both successful and flawed passages to illustrate how authors from different genres treat subjects that loom large in American history, such as slavery and the Civil War. And he delves deep into the reasons why *War and Peace* endures as a classic of historical fiction. Bram's keen insight and close reading of a wide array of authors make *The Art of History* an essential volume for any lover of historical narrative.

The Art of History: Unlocking the Past in Fiction and Nonfiction Details

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From Reader Review The Art of History: Unlocking the Past in Fiction and Nonfiction for online ebook

Karen says

Listening to a great literary competition on NPR and it was voted on by the author of this new book.

Glenn Hammer says

Did not real show how to write from history. Listed several interesting books to read.

Jay says

Disclaimer: I received this book from the publisher as a result of Goodreads Giveaways and in exchange for an honest review.

Despite the subtitle "Unlocking the Past in Fiction and Nonfiction", Bram spends a majority of the book discussing fiction and not actual nonfiction - he seems to have missed the idea that popular histories aren't always "nonfiction."

That said, the book does an excellent job of explaining how authors treat history in their works, and may inadvertently help explain why movies based on history may get much more history "right" while at the same time getting so much more history "wrong."

The initial chapters are engaging, but the work suffers toward the end. Ironically, the last chapter about endings and epilogues read like a bad ending in itself - after steaming happily along, Bram seems to have run out of things to say and botches the conclusion.

Moreover, while this work may "unlock" history for the average reader, it does little for the academic historian to understand why writers generally treat history recklessly. A better subtitle would be "Introducing the Past in Fiction."

So, why the three star rating? Well, it won't actually make you a worse person for having read it (my one-star rating since Goodreads won't let one give zero stars to a work), and the writing - for the most part - was engaging, pushing it past the "OK" mark. So I guess my "real rating" would be 2.5 stars, which I'll be generous and round to 3 stars.

I would be interested to see some reviews from English academics, but this just didn't work for me. If I'd bought it, I'd consider myself cheated if I spent more than \$5.

Jude Morrissey says

I received this book through a Goodreads Giveaway, and was thrilled to have won it! It's a wonderful

exploration of the art of writing history - both historical fiction and narrative history. Either one, well done, reads as a story, and in *The Art of History: Unlocking the Past in Fiction and Nonfiction*, Christopher Bram does a masterful job of laying out how those stories are told. In the process, he looks at a number of works incorporating history to some degree, including *Love in the Time of Cholera*, *War and Peace*, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, and *Beloved* - as well as a number of other books (along with mentions of shows like *Game of Thrones* and *Downton Abbey*). An excellent and engaging short book, highly recommended for those who like reading historical works, fiction or nonfiction, or who enjoy literary analysis generally.

Phil Devereux says

A funny, thoughtful and easy read on just how history has been used in both fiction and non-fiction to great (and not-so-great) effect. And Bram has suggested a lot of interesting books to add my reading list!

Mary says

I approached this book as an enthusiastic reader and an aspiring writer of historical fiction, not to mention a former student of history and history of science. The book gave me a lot to think about regarding how historical stories (both fictional and nonfictional) can be told. I think some of the insights will enrich my future reading, and I hope they'll help me if/when I begin writing my own historical stories. I came away with some useful notes and also a reading list; this is definitely a book that opens doors.

Sandra says

Bram offers insight into both fictional and non-fictional historic texts, using a sampler of published works that exemplify "the right details" that bring the past alive. He also spends some time on "replacing distant spectacle with personal drama" and on micro and macro periods of time that help with figuring out these details, what to keep—what to keep out, and pacing, including how to find an end to the narrative, as events tend to keep rolling along to the next consequence.

I appreciate the difficulty of Bram's task, though I would argue with him on his interpretations of some examples as apparently others have. In his favor, I do believe these difference will arise whenever dealing with the subject of history, a most slippery devil. For example in my case, I think he is too critical of Cormac McCarthy in *Blood Meridian*, characterizing him as "a really mean adolescent who's seen too many Sergio Leone movies."

Bram goes on to say "[t]he American West is a frequent setting for comedy, both fiction and nonfiction." Though I do not dispute that, I do think, on further consideration, McCarthy is not incorrect to write so graphically about the kind of cruelty that was practiced, a brutal carnage of Mexican and indigenous populations that went unchecked and unpunished during the settling of the West and that we have not wanted to confront. That Bram earlier raised the question about how do we write about the unthinkable, mostly in regard to issues of slavery, it is curious that he does not see McCarthy doing just this in another unthinkable situation. That it is so graphic is just what makes it so stark, a flip side of what comedy has done to heighten horror in other works such as *True Grit* by Charles Portis that Bram eloquently cites.

Paula says

So interesting and a fast read, this book makes me want to revisit the books I've already read and read the ones I haven't.

Aatif Rashid says

It's hard to take seriously a historical fiction writer who dislikes Hilary Mantel and Umberto Eco. Sorry, but those are popular books and you have to at least try to understand why they're considered good instead of just dismissing them. If you like history as a charming backdrop but not as anything to think about seriously, his analyses are for you—but for those of us who see historical fiction as more profound than a background for human dramas, he'll be disappointing.

Also, too many of these Graywolf "Art of" books devolve into a series of summaries rather than anything profound. If you're going to spoil War and Peace for me, at least make it worth it by giving me some insights.

Korie Brown says

I enjoyed reading this, but I skimmed through the last few chapters.

Will Meyerhofer says

I can't think of anything more fun than reading Christopher Bram when he's writing about books. For starters, he's read *everything* and more importantly, everything he has to say about them just seems instantly true as soon as you read the words on the page. And it's all so unpretentious. I was an English major but I think, until I read Bram write about books, I always more or less hated "literary criticism" - I even hated that term, "literary criticism". I hate calling this book - or his other one "Eminent Outlaws" (which is also just incredibly good) "literary criticism" because it isn't like those other guys. It isn't hard to understand - in fact, Bram's whole genius is that he makes hard things so easy to understand. He never hesitates to offer an opinion - as in, if he doesn't like a book, he'll say so. But mostly he does what your English teacher was supposed to do - opens books up so you begin to understand them in a new way. That sounds utterly cheesy, so I'll just say read this and you'll love it and won't be able to put it down and then for at least a few days or weeks all you'll want to do in the world is read read read read and read some more.

Jim Lyons says

A book about writing and literature was an unusual choice for me, but The Art of History: Unlocking the Past in Fiction and Nonfiction's cover and size (i.e. short) spoke to me from our local library's "new books" shelf. I ended up finding author Christopher Bram's book to be a delight. His knowledgeable insights on historical fiction and "historical non-fiction" (my term) were thought-provoking, and his willingness to separate the good from the "non-good" (also my term) is refreshing,

including his rather gentle dismissals as something like "didn't work for me". A great "recommended" book list is included as well.

David says

Christopher Bram is a wonderful writer, and this little book is a delight. It is part of a series of "the Art Of" books focused on some particular issue of the writer's craft, and judging by the other authors in the series, it is probably worth reading them all. I read this one partly because of the author and partly because of the topic, and I am glad I did. Besides being a good read in its own right, it is also a guide to further reading I might enjoy. With 700 books on my To-Read list, you might not think that would be important, but you would be wrong - I always enjoy adding to that list! And since this book references a number of books I have already enjoyed, I feel I can trust this author's taste.

I got this book from the Mechanic's Institute Library, but I think I will need to buy a copy of my own.

Kathy says

Or 2.5. My low rating comes from the high expectations I had for this book, for its potential to help me (because it's all about me) in my writing. I was wanting some new and brilliant insight into making history writing sing, but what I got was a series of extended book reviews. Maybe I'll think back and realize there are some useful nuggets here, but mostly it covered what is pretty evident from just reading history & historical fiction. AND he dissed Wolf Hall, hard. I agree that it's mostly close-up, but for me, it works.

Conrad Wesselhoeft says

A concise, engaging book that straddles the confluence of history and fiction.

Bram has chosen a bevy of renowned novels, biographies, and histories to inspect and dissect. In doing so, he has rekindled my interest in titles read long ago ("Little Big Man," "The Killer Angels," "True Grit") while sparking an interest in new ones ("Ecstatic Nation," "Saturday," "Eminent Victorians," "The Leopard," "Love in the Time of Cholera.")

I agree with his skewering of Tolstoy for the dense epilogue at the end of "War and Peace" but disagree with his negative assessment of "The Killer Angels," a great novel deserving of its Pulitzer Prize.

Bram fills 160 pages with musings and insights that are often inspired and always entertaining. Anyone contemplating writing historical fiction will find "The Art of History" especially relevant.
