

History – the Present looks at the Past

What is it?

Study and knowledge of the past – both “what” and “why”

Why do people read it?

- Subject/Setting – learning about a certain time period or part of the world
- Characterization – strong personalities
- Plot/story – events; especially if it is an “offbeat” subject
- To attempt to make sense of the present in terms of what has happened in the past

Who reads it?

- Readers who enjoy historical fiction and biographies
- Readers who, consciously or unconsciously, want to know about the subjects

Genre & Sub-Genre Overview

Defining Times/Pivot Points

The Great Upheaval: America and the birth of the modern world, 1788-1800 (Winik)

How the Irish Saved Civilization (Cahill)

Yalta: the price of peace (Plokhy)

1491: New revelations of the Americas before Columbus (Mann)

History’s Darkest Hours/Disaster History

The Last Day: wrath, ruin, and reason in the Great Lisbon Earthquake . . . (Shrady)

Epic History (Great Big Chunks)

The Pursuit of Glory: Europe, 1648 – 1815 (Blanning)

Postwar: a history of Europe since 1945 (Judt)

Empire of Liberty: a history of the Early Republic, 1789-1815 (Wood)

Ideas of History, or Social/Cultural History

The Rest is Noise: listening to the twentieth century (Ross)

The Age of Wonder: how the romantic generation discovered . . . (Holmes)

At Home: a short history of private life (Bryson)

The Brother Gardeners: botany, empire, and the birth of an obsession (Wulf)

Journeys in History (Immersion History)

A Voyage Long and Strange: rediscovering the new world (Horwitz)

Walking the Bible: a journey by land through the five books of Moses (Feiler)

New Perspectives on History

Betsy Ross and the Making of America (Miller)

Making Haste from Babylon (Bunker)

Revolutionaries: a new history of the invention of America (Rakove)

Microhistories

Cod, a biography of the fish that changed the world (Kurlansky)
A History of the World in Six Glasses (Standage)
The Ninth: Beethoven and the World in 1824 (Sachs)
Ancient Greece: a history in eleven cities (Cartledge)

Historical Biography

A Gambling Man: Charles II's Restoration Game (Uglow)
The Young Romantics: the tangled lives of English poetry's . . . (Hay)
The Hemingses of Monticello (Gordon-Wood)

Military History

An Army at Dawn: the war in North Africa, 1942-1943 (Atkinson)
The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War (Halberstam)

Trends

- Anniversaries/milestones – e.g. D-Day, 1989 Revolutions, 200th anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin on the same day; 400th anniversary of landing at Jamestown (2007)
- New Research – declassified documents; newly-available archives (e.g. Russia); going back to the original, primary sources for different views; death or aging of subjects and witnesses
- Competing narratives on same subject, - e.g. two new books on the populist beginnings of the American Revolution: *Revolutionaries* by Jack Rakove and *American Insurgents, American Patriots* by T. H. Breen
- Subjects – ancient world; American Revolution and Founding fathers continue to be popular, though there is a “push” to continue beyond into the Age of Jackson, the coming of the Civil War, and so forth; WWII is always popular
- New ways of framing events
- Overlap with Historical Biography – degree to which subject is important to history and has shaped it

Authors to Know

•Stephen Ambrose •Doris Kearns Goodwin •Nathaniel Philbrick • Barbara Tuchman
•Simon Winchester

Some Major Awards

The Pulitzer Prize for History and the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction
The Bancroft Prize
The Frederick Jackson Turner Award

Resources

The Real Story, Chapter 6, “History”
The Readers' Advisory Guide to Nonfiction, Chapter, 10, “History and Historical Biography”
John Arnold, *History: a very short introduction*