

# Story time? Investigating using stories about the French Revolution with Year 12

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## Introduction

In the 1990s, the history teacher and teacher educator Alan Farmer lamented that ‘the history story-teller, particularly at secondary school level, might be in danger of becoming something of an endangered species’.<sup>1</sup> Now, it is a totally different story. Energising history-teacher conferences are championing the approach; after years of relative quiet, storytelling authors are populating the pages of *Teaching History*; and even Ofsted are endorsing stories.<sup>2</sup> The storytellers are flourishing.

‘Story’ and ‘narrative’ have slippery and overlapping meanings. In almost every lesson we had previously taught, we had ‘narrated’ in the everyday sense of ‘saying what happened’, either in our expositions or in text.<sup>3</sup> How, for instance, could students explain why ‘something’ occurred without knowing the chronologically ordered sequence of events up to and including that ‘something’? Less routinely, we would ‘narrate’ in its second, more specific meaning of ‘making a story’ – sometimes referred to as ‘narrativisation’ or ‘storification’.<sup>4</sup> When narrativising, we would pre-package all initial content into a highly stylised story with a distinct beginning, middle, and end – usually peopled by a small cast of relatable characters and ‘told’ out loud to the class.<sup>5</sup> Narrativisation would require explicit literary considerations: such as whether to

include tropes like an ultimately resolved conflict, non-linear structures including flashbacks, or dramatic devices such as cliffhangers.

What was new – and exciting – about the new storytellers’ work was the sheer quality of their narrativisation. Entire lessons were built around vivid and dramatic stories expressed in excellent written prose, intriguing students and developing their sense of period. Furthermore, the stories were coherently sequenced, building on each other systematically, meaning the entire curriculum across an entire key stage itself became a narrative through time. Inspired, we collaboratively planned an A-Level enquiry, for 16- to 18-year-olds, built around stories for the department which Claire was leading and where Jim used to work.

Year 12’s AQA breadth study ‘France in Revolution, 1774-1815’ - and particularly the unit on the origins of revolution from 1774-1789 - seemed perfect for our enquiry.<sup>6</sup> Historians of the revolution such as Simon Schama have spearheaded the wider revival of narrative in historiography since the late twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> We were particularly struck by the cultural historian Robert Darnton’s book *The Revolutionary Temper: Paris, 1748-1789* and his aim of telling ‘the story of how Parisians experienced the sequence of events’ up to the Bastille’s fall.<sup>8</sup> Darnton’s work offered an entry point to redressing difficulties Claire’s students had presented previously. In particular, the students had often uncritically accepted the textbook’s framing of historical events primarily from the perspective of powerful elites. Consequently, students had been unable to conceptualise how factors such as ‘public opinion’ had manifested in people’s lives and helped precipitate revolution. Like other teachers, we hoped stories would provide a window into the lives of people in the past, making abstract concepts concrete.<sup>9</sup>

Beginning our planning, it was immediately clear we required stories (plural). This decision departed from many of the examples discussed above which have tended to base a Key Stage 3 enquiry, for 11- to 14-year-olds, around a single story, often from an individual’s perspective. Try as we might, we could not find a ‘Forrest Gump’ of the origins of the French Revolution, one person who had watched over all the events and phenomena we were required to cover by the specification (See Figure 1)! Making virtue of necessity, we used this narrative pluralism to introduce students to multiple perspectives of the events under investigation.

Here ends the beginning of our story. As we enter the middle, what is the conflict? Despite our excitement about stylised stories' many potential benefits in the history classroom, conversations with colleagues often revealed an ill-defined yet pervasive ambivalence. As research by Kate Hawkey has demonstrated, even history teachers who routinely tell stories often feel 'apologetic' about doing so.<sup>10</sup> With the recent work on stories producing a range of exciting experimentation by teachers in their classrooms, we judged it might be fruitful to engage in some exploratory classroom-based research to identify productive areas of debate and lay the groundwork for future studies. Consequently, our planning, Claire's teaching, and our analysis of the students' written work formed an investigation centred on two recurring tensions we encountered.<sup>11</sup> First, how best to balance effective storytelling with a disciplinary commitment to truth, especially at A Level? Second, what stories could we tell to ensure representativeness in the curriculum?

## Stories and disciplinary history

Stories appear in all known human cultures, and advocates of their use in the classroom often point to the cognitive satisfaction they provide.<sup>12</sup> First, stories draw on universally understood tropes which provide them with an immediate comprehensibility. Second, by focusing on the experiences of relatable characters rather than anonymous and abstracted social forces, stories strongly appeal to the familiar. Third, stories' chronological structure corresponds to students' everyday experience of time, as well as capturing the flow of events so crucial to history.<sup>13</sup> For these and other reasons, in the 1990s the historian and history teacher John Fines argued stories 'enchant' students because they are pleasurable, engaging and memorable.<sup>14</sup>

Stories' very seductiveness, however, can be a double-edged sword.<sup>15</sup> As the explosion of conspiracy theories in the information age has painfully shown, deceptions dressed as stories can also enchant. *Historical narratives* must aspire to truth, argue in response to questions, and be open to challenge by a probative community adopting disciplinary norms. Accordingly, while teachers' stories can serve as a launchpad for historical learning students also need – at some point and in some fashion – to gain insight into the disciplinary apparatus that sits

underneath historical narratives' construction.<sup>16</sup> Otherwise, students may leave school unaware of the difference between history and a likely story.

The relationship between storytelling and disciplinary history in both academia and schools, however, has been contested. From at least Herodotus in the fifth century BCE to the likes of Thomas Babington Macaulay in the nineteenth CE, historians in the western tradition often wrote narratively, tending to focus on high politics and war.<sup>17</sup> The formalisation of history as an academic discipline, however, precipitated a controversy about the relationship between 'story' and 'history' which peaked in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> 'Anti-narrativists' – often influenced by social sciences – appeared victorious, dismissing stories as essentially lesser order. Instead, the 'analytical' mode was preferred, where historical phenomena are distilled into constituent non-chronological 'factors'. An 'eclipse of narrative' had taken place.<sup>19</sup>

Eclipses, however, are only fleeting. In academic history, an increasingly numerous and vocal number argued historical writing had been impoverished by the abandonment of stories: human agency had been sidelined, chronology minimised, and individuals' perspectives ignored. By 1979, the historian Lawrence Stone could proclaim 'the revival of narrative'.<sup>20</sup> This revival was further stimulated by the new cultural history of the 1980s and 1990s, exemplified by historians such as Darnton.<sup>21</sup> Often incorporating methods from disciplines such as anthropology, these historians frequently 'thickly described' sections of non-elite societies in exemplary or illustrative 'micro-histories'. Ultimately, neither side scored a decisive victory in the narrative debates. Today, most historians treat genre pragmatically, accepting that narrative or the analytical mode might be more or less appropriate depending on the question. As the historian Sarah Maza notes, 'while a majority of popular histories remain wedded to a traditional narrative form most academic works engage, analytically, in a little bit of this and a little of that'.<sup>22</sup>

Similar trends occurred in schools. In the first half of the twentieth century, history teaching often centred on students learning stories of 'national heroes' by rote.<sup>23</sup> By the 1960s, widespread student disinterest in school history threatened the subject's very existence and prompted the Schools Council History Project's (later the Schools History Project (SHP)) programme of overturning this 'great tradition' of history teaching.<sup>24</sup> SHP's project made disciplinary history – at age-appropriate levels – accessible to all students,

helping ward off the existential crisis.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, the 'new history' in schools was often criticised by advocates of storytelling, perhaps most starkly by the methodologically and politically conservative historian Geoffrey Elton. For Elton, school history should only have told pupils unproblematised stories about 'great men', saving the disciplinary for the select few who studied the subject at university.<sup>26</sup>

As we experience a 'revival of narrative' in classrooms, the new storytellers differ from Elton in at least two ways. First, their stories certainly do not exclusively focus on great white men, often narrativising the lives of individuals such as Empress Zoe of Byzantium, Mansa Musa, and the Rani of Jhansi as well as less powerful figures who left extraordinary records such as Sir Christopher Trychay, the vicar in Morebath during the English Reformation.<sup>27</sup> Second, most history teachers now accept that history teaching requires a focus on both substantive and disciplinary knowledge and their interplay.<sup>28</sup> Given the impossibility of interrogating every proposition made in a history lesson, many new story tellers would argue in most cases the introductory story should be treated relatively unproblematically, but only to provide firm substantive and chronological foundations for subsequent disciplinary thinking. Beyond this broad agreement, however, views differ regarding how exactly how much should be 'up for grabs': when and how students ought to have space to make their own disciplinary arguments.<sup>29</sup>

## Planning the lessons

### Historical fiction and historical narrative

Balancing captivating storytelling while letting the reader see one's disciplinary spadework is a challenge for any writer of historical narrative.<sup>30</sup> It would be unnecessary – and deadening to her story – for historical novelists such as Hilary Mantel in *A Place of Greater Safety* to lard her prose with interpretative hedges such as 'Desmoulins *might have thought...*'<sup>31</sup> In our stories, however, we felt uncomfortable eliding in this way, in part because it would misrepresent history's disciplinary distinctiveness. Unlike literature, a historical narrative must demonstrate the relationship between the strength of one's claims and the publicly available evidence, requiring indications of judgement, persuasive emphases, and reference to sources.<sup>32</sup> We feared the unintended consequences

of adopting a misleadingly categorical and omniscient authorial voice that hid our speculations from students. If we ultimately expected students to argue the strength of their conclusions relative to their evidence, they needed this thinking modelled. More profoundly, if all conjecture is routinely hidden, are students not being misled?

Showing the students our inferences seemed particularly crucial when telling stories about those who appear only fleetingly in the sources. For example, Claire wanted to begin our enquiry with a story based on an extract from David Andress's *The Revolution and the People*.<sup>33</sup> Andress described a contract a father and son called Pierre and Mathieu Reynes negotiated to rent a farm, enabling Claire to exemplify to her students the rural and precarious nature of the *Ancien Regime's* economy, the significance of successful harvests, and the relationships between the three estates (See Figure 2). This was an example of the first of our three story-types: a thickly described vignette focused on individuals. Andress only provided a snapshot, however, meaning Claire had to flesh out the picture with inferences based on her broader knowledge of farming practices at the time. Consequently, much of her language was tentative, suggesting what the Reyneses 'might have done' and flagging to reader what 'we do not know'. More truthful, perhaps, but also potentially more boring to read!

The Reynes vignette exemplified two broader tensions we repeatedly encountered in our planning. First, given any attempt at rendering the past into history requires generalisation, simplification, selection, and organisation, should our guiding criteria in these processes be more weighted toward the 'fictional' or the 'historical'?<sup>34</sup> For instance, we wanted to demonstrate to students how public perceptions of financial mismanagement by the government contributed to revolution. Jim, therefore, wrote a more conventionally plotted story about the unprecedentedly public feud between Jacques Necker and his predecessor as Controller-General of Finances, Charles Alexandre de Calonne (See Figure 3). The ministers' intertwined fates had all the elements of a gripping tale – scandal, twists, and contrasting characters in conflict.<sup>35</sup> But in making this choice, were we simply mining the past, manipulating it to fit our pre-determined ideas of a 'good' story?<sup>36</sup>

Such concerns focused our minds on *historical* justifications for the story's inclusion. Sean Lang argues the general scepticism regarding narrative in the

classroom often more precisely relates to concerns that students will recapitulate one canonical story.<sup>37</sup> Written historical argument often reports different interpretations to the author's own, which are then either supported or contradicted.<sup>38</sup> Given history's lack of categorical answers, an adoption of a single, unequivocal voice throughout our stories risked dangerous oversimplification. Students might view historical explanation as a 'closed' story – objective, unelaborated and straightforward. A story that required students to judge the relative persuasiveness of multiple viewpoints, by contrast, made students' individualised arguments possible because they were obliged to take a stance.

### Whose stories?

The second tension revealed by the Reyneses's example regarded whose stories we could and should tell. Given the unfeasibility of conducting our own archival research, telling our students life stories of any length and detail largely involved relying on narratives written by others – for example in histories, memoirs, and biographies. While academic historians have increasingly told new types of emancipatory stories about previously underrepresented peoples, the most successful biographies written for popular audiences relevant to the French Revolution tended to be of individuals already well represented in curricula.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, for a busy history teacher it was far easier to write plotted stories of individuals such as Maximilien Robespierre or General Lafayette (See Figure 4).<sup>40</sup>

Exclusively relying on such narratives, however, risked perpetuating the top-down approach of the textbook. Consequently, our objective of helping students see how the 'public' – such as peasants or *sans-culottes* – made sense of, reacted to, and influenced the elites would be harder to achieve if they were predominantly described from the elites' perspective. More crucially, we feared perpetuating the pre-existing biases and silences that exist in the archive and historiography of populations whose lives have been under-recorded and misunderstood.<sup>41</sup> We endeavoured therefore, to continue Claire's previous work on representation in the A-Level curriculum. As Claire has argued elsewhere, representation is important in students' historical education, ensuring they continue to extend their sense of the 'world of the past' and of the possibilities of the discipline.<sup>42</sup>

Our concern, then, was how best to tell stories about the underrepresented individuals only glimpsed in the records, especially when the records were impersonal and written by institutional figures rather than in the individuals' own words. Our flagging of our speculations as speculations, therefore, served a second critical function, indicating to students that our claims were necessarily tentative due to the silencing processes undertaken against the people in the stories. Furthermore, to ensure our inferences did not go beyond what the evidence might bear, we often concentrated on the fragments in depth, necessarily sacrificing plot in favour of thick description of situations. For example, Claire used the story of Madeleine Pochet, a leader of one of the episodes of popular unrest that occurred during the 'Flour War' of 1775, in order to make resistance to the Controller General Turgot's reforms comprehensible to students and to give them a sense of the complex choreography involved in popular revolts. Madeleine's brush with the law had made her life 'visible' to the historian Cynthia Bouton in the archive, and therefore to us.<sup>43</sup> It was still necessary, however, to draw upon the remainder of Bouton's work as well as details from Darnton to add depth to the few details of Madeleine's life that the authorities chose to record.

### Little stories, big questions

A final consideration for us was what mediating processes were required by the teacher – if any – between Claire's telling of stories in one genre (story) and the students' writing in another (analysis). Any content a teacher introduces necessarily shapes and constrains the arguments students can ultimately make, and when a story is told through an individual's eyes, much remains outside of their field of vision.<sup>44</sup> Such stories tend to foreground the intentions, actions and talents of key individuals, 'explaining how' consequences came about by accounting for those people's actions.<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, narrative's biggest advocates have traditionally been military and political historians because, it is claimed, they consider these causal mechanisms most intuitively central.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, a focus limited to an individual's life emphasises the short-term, helping explain cultural micro-historians' use of stories.<sup>47</sup> Historians interested in broader groups of people, structures, and longer-term latent trends beyond one lifetime tend to employ narrative less. An exclusive diet of small-scale stories

about individuals, therefore, possibly risked leaving our students with a very specific view of how historical worlds work.

This issue was particularly pertinent for A-Level teachers because examiners actively penalise narrative writing while rewarding the analytic mode of social-scientific history.<sup>48</sup> Take the examination board's essay that we set as an outcome task for the students:

“The actions of the Parisian crowd were the most important cause of political change between May 1787 and October 1789’. Assess the validity of this view.

Here, students are required to fracture and thematise the stories they have encountered into non-chronological, supra-personal and potentially long-term ‘factors’ such as ‘the actions of the Parisian crowd’ and ‘Enlightenment ideas’. They must ‘explain why’ and rank factors by causal importance. Proponents for stories often argue that acquainting students with relatable examples helps concretise the general concepts those examples represent.<sup>49</sup> However, given Claire was teaching in a sixth-form college – and therefore the students she was teaching had come from different secondary schools – certain considerations were required. First, we were unsure which general concepts the students’ previous history curricula had already given them a strong command of. Second, we were uncertain how experienced they were in oscillating between depth and overview. How best, then, in Claire’s particular context, to help the students shuttle between the individual, concrete and short-term to the general, abstract, and longer-term?

Stories, of course, need not focus on the individual. As Rachel Foster has shown, for example, one way of bridging overview and depth is to tell stories of entities that span generations such as objects, families, or concepts.<sup>50</sup> To demonstrate how individual instances populated abstract generalisations about broader groups, our third story-type was a patchwork of evidentiary fragments, exploring a variety of experiences of a particular place and time. Drawing upon Darnton’s work, Claire chose to tell the story of the ‘public noises’ on the streets of Paris in the years immediately preceding the revolution by making the city the central ‘character’ (See Figure 5 for an extract). The resulting story ended up being an assemblage of smaller vignettes of life in the city that were unified by a common theme. While a story of growing unrest could be seen to provide a narrative arc in this case, it was notable that the boundaries between storytelling

and other forms of immersive writing seemed to blur when the focus of a story became its setting.

### **The students' written work - particular particulars**

In our analysis, we particularly concentrated on if and how the stories the students had encountered throughout the enquiry manifested themselves in their written work. The students were more likely to draw on examples from their textbook when providing concrete instantiations for their generalisations. When they did refer to the stories for this purpose, the plotted narratives of the better documented lives featured more often. For example, Student A populated her abstraction of 'the growing importance of public opinion' by weaving together details from the story of the Calonne-Necker pamphlet war, the textbook, and broader classroom discussions (See Figure 6). When evidencing their claims about the respective politicians' reputations, the student demonstrated a sophisticated grasp of how public opinion affected political events, albeit largely from the politicians' perspective. However, this particular student failed to overcome the common misconception that historical events were inevitable. This misapprehension persisted despite claims that stories focusing on individuals' available choices can help students consider contingent 'what-might-have-beens'.<sup>51</sup>

The stories' benefits appeared to be unlocked more fully when explicitly directed by the teacher – either by the tasks Claire set or through her questioning. For example, during a lesson the students initially seemed to struggle with Claire's open-ended task asking them to identify common themes related to the Enlightenment in the Robespierre and Lafayette stories. Thinking on her feet, Claire asked a more precise question, guiding the students to consider what the stories revealed about 'public opinion'. This led to discussion of how Lafayette's popularity was due, in part, to his seeming conformity to a Rousseauian ideal, an idea then explored by one student in their outcome essay (See Figure 7).

By contrast, the students rarely drew on the vignettes about the less well-documented individuals when substantiating their generalisations. For instance, after telling the Reynes story, Claire found it a useful reference point thereafter when trying to make the abstract structures of the *Ancien Regime* concrete to

her students. However, from the point Claire had initially told the story she wondered whether its tentative language and lack of narrative arc had meant it had failed to 'cut through' with the students. Sure enough, none of the students referred explicitly to the story in their writing, even when discussing abstractions such as 'vast economic inequalities'. Consequently, such generalisations often betrayed a shallower understanding, failing to capture the precarity of peasants' lives or the long-running social tensions prior to 1789. Madeleine Pochet's story seemed to chime more with the students, generating interesting classroom discussion and numerous references to the Flour Wars in the students' writing (e.g., Figure 6, Student A). In this work, however, no student mentioned Pochet by name, instead mostly choosing to present the public unrest from Turgot's perspective.

Certain storytelling tropes appeared to reveal themselves in the students' writing. The stories that appeared to resonate the most – of Lafayette, the pamphlet war and, to a lesser extent, Madeleine Pochet – had a unifying theme of conflict. Stories about relatively quieter episodes such as the Reynses's farming year or Robespierre's induction into the Academy of Arras, by contrast, appeared less in the students' work. Additionally, in our stories we often employed the 'narrative present tense' to describe events in the past (e.g., Figure 4). When writing sentences such as 'street singers are belting out songs celebrating the book's author – Jacques Necker', we hoped this stylistic device would heighten the sense of drama and immediacy by describing events as if they were still unfolding. Many of the students, however, adopted this present tense in their essays, despite past tenses being more appropriate in academic historical writing (e.g., Figure 6, Student B).<sup>52</sup>

The students' predilections for particular story-types seemed to have implications for the arguments they constructed in their outcome essays. Despite being required to discuss the 'Parisian crowd's' role in political change, the students made few references to the 'public noises' story which described the public's engagement with politics prior to the revolution. When students did reach for examples, more referred to the Day of Tiles in Grenoble in 1788 – an event outside Paris described in the textbook but in none of the stories. The general failure of the public noises story to resonate with the students is possibly demonstrated when one student argued 'between 1787 and 1788, political change stemmed largely from elite confrontation with royal authority'.

Finally, the stories appeared to have a limited effect on the generalisations the students deemed to have the most causal significance. The outcome essay was set two lessons after the last story was read in class. In the intervening time, the students studied the role of the peasantry and the actions of the National Assembly, mostly relying on the textbook. Despite Claire instructing the students that ‘factors’ such as ‘Enlightenment thought’ - which had been referred to in multiple stories - would be relevant in their essays, the majority relied on topics covered most recently as the bases of their optional paragraph points (See Figure 8). However, Student C did choose to concentrate on the Enlightenment and seemed to refer to the stories, if obliquely (See Figure 7). For example, while no direct reference was made to the narratives about Robespierre, Lafayette, the pamphlet war, or the ‘public noises’, those stories seemed to float beneath the surface of the student’s response.

## Conclusion

Those who like neat endings are perhaps going to be disappointed with ours. Our conclusions about storytelling in the A-Level classroom are unavoidably cautious. The research design means we cannot make categorical claims about whether our stories caused what we witnessed in the students’ writing, or what the longer-term consequences for the students’ learning might be. Furthermore, it would be inappropriate to insist our results would transfer to other contexts. Beyond these methodological caveats, however, the main reason for our tentativeness is that our findings invite multiple interpretations. As history teachers increasingly use stories in the classroom, we instead offer some thoughts which might provide avenues for further investigations. Hopefully, our readers will become the writers of the sequels.

One thing we *can* say with some certainty is that good historical stories in the classroom are easy to read precisely because they are difficult to write. Throughout our investigation, we wrestled with balancing enchanting storytelling, disciplinary rigour, and representation of a wider range of people of the past. We are unsure how successful we were in achieving all of our aims, or even whether an ideal compromise is possible. These competing goals first emerged in our preparatory reading and planning. Given popular narrative history’s readability and affordability we, like many authors in *Teaching History*,

have previously tended to rely on the genre to provide disciplinary warrant for our curricular theorisation.<sup>53</sup> Our planning processes for these lessons, however, suggested an overreliance on narrative histories misrepresents the pluralistic historical discipline. Furthermore, our reading of history teachers' previous writing on storytelling in the classroom revealed often tacit yet persistent scepticism. By identifying, voicing, and wrestling with some of those concerns we hope that they will be further acknowledged and attended to, allowing the benefits of storytelling in the classroom to continue to be explored productively without recurring impediments.

Reflecting on the lessons, the students seemed engaged by at least some of the stories. This engagement, however, did not mean the stories were manifested in the students' writing more than details they had encountered in their textbook. This finding does not necessarily mean these stories were not memorable to students. Another possibility is that, in the high-stakes context of an A-Level classroom, the students did not ascribe the same level of authority to a teacher's story as to an awarding body's endorsed resource, meaning they privileged the latter in their writing. Given such ambiguities, further research appears necessary into whether 'narrativisation' – building entire lessons around stylised stories – is of greater benefit to students' engagement and memorisation than 'narration' – the recounting of past events already common in most history lessons and resources.

The stories appeared to have the most impact on the students' historical thinking when Claire used them to help students concentrate on precise disciplinary objectives we had planned in advance. Without teacher direction in the form of tasks and questioning, for example, the stories did not automatically concretise the students' abstract analyses or enable them to interrogate inevitability. Furthermore, some students did not intuitively grasp that the narrative they were reading was inappropriate for the analytical genre they were expected to ultimately write. Two obvious, interrelated conclusions can be drawn. First, a skilled teacher must mediate the resource, adeptly guiding the students towards achieving curricular goals while not foreclosing the multiple, plausible ways students might interpret the story. The second is that a story alone is not a lesson, a sequence of stories in themselves is not a curriculum. While narratives may be necessary for students to adopt an analytical and disciplinary approach to history, they are not sufficient.

Our stories that seemingly resonated most with the students had at least four unifying features: they were from elites' perspective, used categorical language, were plotted with a narrative arc, and focused on conflict. Indeed, our students seemed so predisposed to the stories of political figures that some even reconfigured narratives written from a non-elite perspective, repositioning them from a powerful individual's point of view. In these cases, the students may have been operating with what psychologist James Wertsch has dubbed 'schematic narrative templates'.<sup>54</sup> For Wertsch, students have a tendency – often unwittingly and unreflectively – to organise information into easily understood patterns, generalised narrative frameworks. Students absorb these templates because they are commonplace in cultural traditions, for example in previous experiences of school history and wider public memory. In our case, students appeared to make certain stories conform to preconceived notions of a 'historical story' – privileging the intentions, decisions, and actions of political powerbrokers.

Furthermore, our stories that used speculative language appeared less likely to land with the students. Two interrelated challenges for teachers to overcome therefore present themselves. First, how to combine storytelling with allowing students to appreciate the relationship between claims and evidence? Second, by extension, how to help students adopt a conscious criticality to the stories they encounter? While narrative, engagement and memorability are crucial means, they are not, in themselves, historically specific ends. The student who leaves school unable to move beyond a starting point of recounting a great story cannot be said to have had a historical education.<sup>55</sup> What is also required is some appreciation of how historical narratives are constructed and challenged, and how the relative persuasiveness of such claims is judged. There is yet another reason why the stakes are high on this issue. Sacrificing history's distinctiveness from other disciplines that concentrate on stories (such as literature) potentially brings history's very status as discrete school subject into question.

Our study suggests that plotted stories of non-elites might have been more effective than the thickly described vignettes we used. There are at least two types of stories we could attempt in the future which might help to introduce the perspectives of the underrepresented in a more memorable way. First, stories can be told of people from generally under-recorded populations who were extraordinary (in its literal sense) in the lives they led and the records they

left. For example, an enquiry focused on some combination of enslavement, abolitionism, and civil rights in the United States of America might be based on the three autobiographies by the escaped enslaved man, intellectual, and influential social reformer Frederick Douglass. Douglass famously became the most photographed American in the nineteenth century and was recently the subject of a lauded biography by the historian David W. Blight.<sup>56</sup> Such individuals afford the teacher a relatively high amount of certainty in the stories they write, which in turn lends itself to engaging prose. By definition, however, there are limits on what the exceptional can tell students about the commonplace. An exclusive reliance on such stories might mean students do not appreciate the distortion of the traditional archive and the accompanying violence done to the vast majority who simply could not leave similar records.

How can teachers still tell plotted stories while saving under-recorded people from the 'discursive abyss'?<sup>57</sup> Another option is to follow the lead of historians such as Tiya Miles. Miles told the story of a keepsake – a sack – given by an enslaved mother called Rose in the 1850s to her nine-year-old daughter Ashley when the two were brutally separated forever by slaveowners at an auction in South Carolina. Miles recounts how the sack was lovingly passed down to two further generations of women in the family, Rosa followed by Ruth. Miles offered grounded interpretations based on material objects such as the sack itself as well as the oblique and scarce documentary records referring to the women. Once such sources were exhausted, ample supposition and imagination were employed. For instance, on occasion Miles described what was *likely* to have been the case by reference to records about similar people in different places. Miles made clear and justified her methodological choices to the reader in her introduction while also occasionally – but very deliberately – choosing to interrupt her narrative's flow to lay bare its constructedness.

A teacher could adapt this story and use it in the classroom in a number of ways. Students might be told in advance about the levels of speculation that have been effaced, the reasons why those speculations are necessary, and explanations for why, in this particular instance, the teacher preferred their story to flow.<sup>58</sup> Alternatively, enquiries might ask the students to focus on a teacher's story as an interpretation, inviting them to explore how and why it took the shape it did. Whatever option is taken, acknowledging people's absence from the evidential record is not (just) an exercise in academic protocol. It helps students

see that surviving evidentiary fragments are not simply juicy plot points for our stories. They are legacies bequeathed by real people; people who fought against attempts to debase them in their own lifetimes and who have been archivally diminished thereafter.

Generally, teachers tend to be wary of 'grand' narratives in the classroom, fuelled by a healthy scepticism that large-scale stories can be politically or ideologically instrumentalised.<sup>59</sup> While nothing about small-scale stories necessitates a focus on elites, specific sub-fields of history, or particular political ideologies, that is not the same as saying that they are immune to also being exploited. For example, one possible reading of our findings would be for the teacher to prioritise the trope of conflict in their stories, building a curriculum that presents the past as never-endingly cosmic struggle between religions, nations, classes, genders, races or civilisations. While potentially engaging, such an approach would not only misrepresent the past, it would also risk downplaying all peoples' shared common humanity. For this and other reasons, it is incumbent on curriculum designers to continue exploring approaches that balance storytelling with students truly taking ownership of their own interpretations.

The end.

- <sup>1</sup> Farmer, A. (1990). Story-telling in history. *Teaching History*, 58, 17-23, p.17.
- <sup>2</sup> Ark Soane History Conference 2024: *Stories in Time* (3/2/2024) Ark Soane Academy, London; Fearn-Davies, M. (2021). Does it matter who Vesalius's favourite lecturer was? Using individuals' stories to help GCSE students to explain change and causation. *Teaching History*, 182, *A Sense of Period Edition*, 20-30; Foster, R. (2023). 'Compressing and rendering': using biography to teach big stories. *Teaching History*, 190, *Ascribing Significance Edition*, 62-75; Hopkin, J. (2023). Are we underestimating the value of students' imaginations? Maximising the power of storytelling in the history classroom. *Teaching History*, 193, *Mediating History Edition*, 42-50; Ofsted Research review series: history <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-history/research-review-series-history>.
- <sup>3</sup> For further discussion of the difference between 'narration' and 'narrativisation', see Stanford, M. (1998). *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp.220-221.
- <sup>4</sup> For example, Holliss, C. (2021) 'Illuminating the possibilities of the past: the role of representation in A-level curriculum planning. *Teaching History* 185, *Missing Stories Edition*, 22-29.
- <sup>5</sup> Farmer *op. cit.*
- <sup>6</sup> AQA (2021). *A-Level History (7042) Specification. Version 1.5.* <https://cdn.sanity.io/files/p28bar15/green/e8af941793cb16ef8915d3678684853d6c8a5ca9.pdf> , p.43.
- <sup>7</sup> Schama S. (1989) *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*. New York: Knopf.; Husbands, C. T. (1996). *What is History Teaching?: Language, Ideas and Meaning in Learning about the Past*. Open University Press.
- <sup>8</sup> Darnton, R. (2023). *The Revolutionary Temper: Paris, 1748-1789*. London: Allen Lane, p.xvii.
- <sup>9</sup> For example, Foster *op. cit.*
- <sup>10</sup> Hawkey, K. (2007). 'Could you just tell us the story?' Pedagogical approaches to introducing narrative in history classes. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 37, (3), 263-277, p.270.
- <sup>11</sup> All students' names have been pseudonymised. This research received approval from the Department of Education, University of Oxford's Departmental Research Ethics Committee. Reference DREC – 1377160.
- <sup>12</sup> For example, Hawkey, K. (2004). Narrative in classroom history. *The Curriculum Journal*, 15, (1), 35-44.
- <sup>13</sup> Fines, J. (1975). The narrative approach. *Teaching History*, 14, 97-104.
- <sup>14</sup> Fines, J. (1997). Truth and imagination: A little investigation in three fits. In D. Davis (Ed.). *Interactive Research in Drama in Education*, 41-57, Stoke: Trentham Books, pp.52-53.
- <sup>15</sup> Megill, A. (2007). *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Historical Practice*. London: University of Chicago Press.
- <sup>16</sup> Bage, G. (1999) *Narrative Matters: Teaching and Learning History through Story*, London: Routledge; Hawkey (2004). *op. cit.*
- <sup>17</sup> Storey, W. K. (2013). *Writing History: A Guide for Students, Fourth Edition*. Oxford University: Oxford.
- <sup>18</sup> For a more in-depth overview of the 'eclipse' and 'revival' of narrative, see Carroll, J. E. (2021). Rethorising national assessment of the narrative mode for historical causal explanation in England. *History Education Research Journal*, 18, (2), 148-65.
- <sup>19</sup> Ricoeur, P. (1984) *Time and Narrative Volume 1*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, pp.95-96.
- <sup>20</sup> Stone, L. (1979) 'The revival of narrative: Reflections on a new old history. *Past & Present*, 85, (1), 3-24.
- <sup>21</sup> For example, Darnton, R. (1984). *The Great Cat Massacre and other Episodes in French Cultural History*. New York: Vintage.
- <sup>22</sup> Maza, S. (2017). *Thinking about History*. London: The University of Chicago Press, p.197.
- <sup>23</sup> Price, M. (1968). History in danger. *History*, 53, (179), 342-347.
- <sup>24</sup> Phillips, R. (1998). *History Teaching, Nationhood and the State: A Study in Educational Politics*. London: Cassell; Sylvester, D. (1994). Change and continuity in history teaching, 1900-1993. In H. Bourdillon (Ed.), *Teaching History*, 9-25, London: Routledge.
- <sup>25</sup> Hawkey (2004). *op. cit.*
- <sup>26</sup> Elton, G. (1970). What history should we teach? In M. Ballard (Ed.) *New Movements in the Study and Teaching of History*, 221-232. London: Temple Smith, p.221.
- <sup>27</sup> Counsell, C. (Ed.) *Changing Histories for KS3: Connected Words, c.1000-c.1600*, London: Hodder; Holliss (2021) *op. cit.* pp. 27-28.
- <sup>28</sup> Hawkey (2004). *op. cit.*
- <sup>29</sup> For example, the somewhat differing emphases were discussed by Allen, T. (9/5/2025). 'But how do we know?' Should all enquiries be interpretations and evidence enquiries? *Historical Association Conference 2025*, Hilton Liverpool.
- <sup>30</sup> Bage *op. cit.*
- <sup>31</sup> Mantel, H. (1992). *A Place of Greater Safety*. London: Viking Press.
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- <sup>33</sup> Andress, D. *The French Revolution and the People*. London: Hambledon.

- <sup>34</sup> Bage *op. cit.*
- <sup>35</sup> Hopkin *op. cit.*
- <sup>36</sup> White, H. (1978). *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- <sup>37</sup> Lang, S. (2003). Narrative: the under-rated skill. *Teaching History*, 110, 8–17.
- <sup>38</sup> Carroll, J. E. (2017). 'I feel if I say this in my essay it's not going to be as strong': multi-voicedness, 'oral rehearsal' and Year 13 students' written arguments. *Teaching History*, 167, *Complicating Narratives Edition*, 8-16.
- <sup>39</sup> Husbands *op. cit.*
- <sup>40</sup> Biographies we read in planning the enquiry included Auricchio, L. (2015). *The Marquis: Lafayette Reconsidered*. New York: Vintage Books and Scurr, R. (2007). *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution*. London: Vintage Books.
- <sup>41</sup> Trouillot, M. R. (1995). *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- <sup>42</sup> Holliss (2021) *op. cit.* p.26.
- <sup>43</sup> Bouton, C. A. (1990). Gendered behavior in subsistence riots: The French Flour War of 1775. *Journal of Social History*. 23, (4), 735-754, p.735.
- <sup>44</sup> Stanford, M. (2019) Did the Bretons break? Planning increasingly complex causal models at Key Stage 3. *Teaching History*, 175, *Listening to Diverse Voices Edition*, 8–14.
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- <sup>46</sup> Fulbrook, M. (2002). *Historical Theory*. London: Routledge.
- <sup>47</sup> Tosh, J. (2006). *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*. London: Pearson.
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- <sup>49</sup> Counsell, C. (2000). Historical knowledge and skills: A distracting dichotomy. In J. Arthur & R. Phillips (Eds.), *Issues in History Teaching*, 54–71. London: Routledge.
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- <sup>52</sup> Husbands *op. cit.*
- <sup>53</sup> For examples of us drawing on historians' work in the narrative mode with a popular audience in mind such as Christopher Clark and Richard Evans, see Holliss, C. (2014). Waking up to complexity: Using Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers* to challenge overdetermined causal explanations. *Teaching History*, 154, *A Sense of History Edition*, 48–54; Carroll, J. E. (2016). The whole point of the thing: how nominalisation might develop students' written causal arguments. *Teaching History*, 162, *Scales of Planning Edition*, 16-24. For other examples of A-Level teachers doing similar, see Laffin, D. (2012) Marr: Magpie or marsh harrier? The quest for the common characteristics of the genus 'historian' with 16- to 19-year-olds, *Teaching History*, 149, *In Search of a Question Edition*, 18–25; Massey, C. (2016). Asking Year 12, 'What Would Figes Do?': using an academic historian as the gold-standard for feedback. *Teaching History*, 164, *Feedback Edition*, 29–37; Ward, R. (2006). Duffy's devices: teaching Year 13 to read and write. *Teaching History*, 124, *Teaching the Most Able Edition*, 9-15.
- <sup>54</sup> Wertsch, J. V. (2005). Specific narratives and schematic narrative templates. In P. Seixas (Ed.), *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, 49–62. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- <sup>55</sup> Lee, P. (1991). Historical knowledge and the national curriculum. In R. Aldrich (Ed.) *History in the National Curriculum*, 39-65, London: Kogan Page.
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