

New Book Chronicle

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Storytime

RUTH M. VAN DYKE & REINHARD BERNBECK (ed.). *Subjects and narratives in archaeology*. 2015. vi+299 pages, 69 b&w illustrations. Boulder: University Press of Colorado; 978-1-60732-387-7 paperback \$23.95.



The books considered in this instalment of NBC raise questions about how we represent the past through words and images. In particular, five of the seven are either explicitly or

implicitly biographical, exploring a diverse spectrum of lives from twentieth-century archaeologists to a governor of Roman Britain. Further, with the exception of the first book presented here, all of these titles are written and packaged for a readership extending beyond the professional archaeologist, and they provide the opportunity to consider not only how archaeological narratives are constructed but also how these are communicated.

We start with *Subjects and narratives in archaeology*, edited by VAN DYKE & BERNBECK. In their introduction, the editors assert that much is agreed upon by the contributors and, they imply, archaeologists generally: the limitations of current archaeological writing, the need to communicate with the public and the fact that the latter is best done by archaeologists rather than by journalists and novelists. Reading the papers within, however, it is unclear that the contributors really do agree on all these beliefs, let alone on how to move forward.

Only a sample of the chapters can be considered here. Tringham, as with a number of contributors, argues against linear narrative, presenting a website that allows readers to recombine fragments of data endlessly. As the editors note, however, “most of us want to weave our open-ended, fragmentary montages into some kind of larger picture” (p. 6). How do some of the other contributors go about this? Van Dyke offers a first-person narrative account of a

young girl on a pilgrimage to Chaco, imagining her expectations and sensory experiences. Gibb, instead, turns to playwriting as an analytical tool. His aim is not to write a play but rather to get at the connections missed by conventional approaches. He sketches biographies and then lets his characters “take the story where they may within the constraints of their internal logic and setting” (p. 152). Gibb remains aware, nonetheless, that these characters are still *his* creation, “experiments, not statements about past events or persons” (p. 164). In the process, he asks questions such as: “how can we use imagination in a structured way?” (p. 164); he concludes that “Playwriting is merely a method for making explicit that which has long been done implicitly” (p. 165).

Adrian and Mary Praetzellis are well known for their ‘Archaeologists as storytellers’ conference sessions. Here, they argue that storytelling gives form and meaning to archaeological data, and that stories must have an emotional impact and a political or pedagogical purpose. Stories must also have authenticity and spark new ideas. They present a ‘Docudrama’ in the form of a TV chat show featuring James Deetz, Stanley South (Lewis Binford declined to appear . . .), Bill Rathje, Rosemary Joyce, Flavius Josephus and Adrian Praetzellis. The most controversial, and therefore interesting, guest is Josephus, who compares archaeologists to Jewish scholars interpreting the Torah.

The idea that the past is shaped by our imagination is pulled up short when confronted with the Holocaust. Gilead—who starts by disclosing that his relatives were killed at Treblinka—explores the ‘Limits of archaeological emplotments from the perspective of excavating Nazi extermination centers’. He considers critical responses to literary representations of the Holocaust that question whether it can ever be represented because it is beyond comprehension or imagination. This raises the question of whether archaeologists can be freer with some periods and events than others, yet Gilead concludes that the Holocaust should be studied “under the same principles and by the same methods as the study of other events in human history” (p. 242). As such, he stresses that narratives must be based on

archaeological information—but also notes that Nazi attempts to destroy the evidence of their crimes raise problems in this regard. In the end, however, “the most serious limit of alternative narratives is not related to science, politics, and ideology—the main limit is that most of us are not creative writers” (p. 245). In ‘The archaeologist as writer’, Thomas similarly isolates the same issue: talent.

Bernbeck identifies a core paradox: “The author who aims to include flesh-and-blood people in an archaeological narrative is forced to fictionalize the past” (p. 261). But “The invention of fictionalized subjects, however well meant the empathetic effort, implies a certain disrespect for past people” (p. 261). As we project our own concerns back in time, our inventions become reflections of ourselves—the same point made by Jacquetta Hawkes (1967: 174) when she observed that “Every age has the Stonehenge it deserves—or desires”. Yet Bernbeck goes further: “Such instrumentalization of past peoples’ subjectivities amounts to *diachronic violence*” (p. 262). Part of the problem, he argues, is that the personalisation of archaeological writing has conflated the voices of author and narrator precisely when we should be differentiating them to allow for multiple perspectives.

He turns to the principles of the *nouveau roman* as a model for archaeological writing, noting its characteristics: “fractured reality, a complex and often ruptured chronological system, the importance of a world of things, and the deliberate avoidance of protagonists with whom the reader might empathize” (p. 267). The result is “a cold, analytical gaze that refrains from flowery language and stays as descriptive and technical as possible” (p. 268)—a definition that sounds remarkably similar to the type of archaeological writing many of the contributors have set out to replace.

In the concluding chapter, ‘Wrestling with truth: possibilities and peril in alternative narrative forms’, professor of non-fiction writing, Sarah Pollock demonstrates that archaeologists are not the only ones struggling with the “slipperiness of truth” (p. 277). She highlights an important distinction: “Non-fiction writers imagine. Fiction writers invent. These are fundamentally different acts, performed to different ends” (p. 284). Accordingly, Pollock sounds a note of caution: “as scientists experimenting with new narrative forms, the authors [of this volume] would be wise to maintain an awareness of risk and a commitment to disclosure [...] Archaeologists [...] can give voice to long-passed peoples. But while

such stories may be science-based, they are not, in and of themselves, science” (p. 284). She is particularly concerned about narratives intended for the general public, as this group is the least well trained in differentiating truth from fiction. Better communication with the public is, however, the central motivation for many of the contributors.

This is a collection strong on critique and diverse in proposed solutions. If the editors see common ground between the papers in terms of ethics and epistemology, there are also differences; for example, between a commitment to telling a good story and the desire to banish linear narrative (cf. Tringham and Praetzelis) or on the role of empathy (cf. Thomas and Bernbeck). The volume is accompanied by online features, including colour images and audio recordings linked to individual papers; some contributors could have made more use of this opportunity. The publisher could also have provided a more user-friendly URL than: <http://www.upcolorado.com/component/k2/item/2712-subjects-and-narratives-in-archaeology-media>.

Biography

DOROTHY U. SEYLER. *The obelisk and the Englishman: the pioneering discoveries of Egyptologist William Bankes*. 2015. 304 pages, 29 colour and 40 b&w illustrations. Amherst (NY): Prometheus; 978-1-63388-036-8 hardback \$26.

ALAN KAISER. *Archaeology, sexism, and scandal: the long-suppressed story of one woman's discoveries and the man who stole credit for them*. 2015. xx+251 pages, numerous b&w illustrations. London: Rowman & Littlefield; 978-1-4422-3003-3 hardback £22.95.

NATALIA VOGELKOFF-BROGAN, JACK L. DAVIS & VASILIKI FLOROU (ed.). *Carl W. Blegen: personal & archaeological narratives*. 2015. xii+240 pages, 85 colour and b&w illustrations. Exeter: University of Exeter Press; 978-1-937040-22-0 hardback £25.



find—wider audiences, putting into practice a range

Subjects and narratives was primarily academic and analytical, identifying problems and sketching solutions; our remaining review books seek—and arguably will

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