Northumbria University NEWCASTLE

Mar 05, 2018 16:30 GMT

EXPERT COMMENT: Horrible Histories: bringing children an irreverent take on the past for 25 years

Professor of History at Northumbria University,Tom Lawson,discusses Horrible Histories for The Conversation.

My children watch Horrible Histories on television every day. And they are not alone. So thanks to the extraordinarily talented people who make the programme – and the creators of the books that spawned it – every single day children actively engage with the past.

It's a very active engagement. Both the books (which have sold more than 30m copies) and the award-winning TV show invite children to laugh with, be frequently repulsed by, but most of all to have opinions about what they are reading and seeing. They invite children to think about history. In the year of its 25th anniversary then, Horrible Histories would appear to be a remarkable success.

The series is not without its critics. Periodically across two and a half decades, the books and its television spin off have been accused of distorting and oversimplifying the serious business of history.

One example of this came in 2015 in a Times Educational Supplement article which was gleefully picked up by the Daily Mail with the predictable headline that Horrible Histories had "dumbed down" history.

Such accusations massively underestimate Horrible Histories – especially the serious argument the series makes about both what we access in the past and how we access it. For there is no doubt that Horrible Histories is a radical project.

It is difficult to imagine a less reverential approach to history, or something further from the traditional “Great Men” versions of the past. Instead Horrible Histories is entirely contemptuous of power and invites children to be the same – by poking fun at the foibles and failings of leaders. As Series author Terry Deary once said in an interview:

I’m not a historian, and I wouldn’t want to be. I want to change the world. Attack the elite. Overturn the hierarchy. Look at my stories and you’ll notice that the villains are always, always, those in power. The heroes are the little people. I hate the establishment. Always have, always will.

The message is clear: authority has to be earned, it is not a right. And who could argue against the idea of educating our children to critically appraise those in positions of power? Surely that would be a lesson worth learning.

Tales of the unexpected

Horrible Histories is not really concerned with the experiences of the powerful. Across the chronological reach of their publications, the real focus of the books is social history and the experience of “ordinary” men, women and – crucially – children.

There is an engagement with how people lived – and indeed how they died – in the past. How they worked, what they did in their leisure time, and what they ate (the TV show episodes which include “Historical Masterchef” are my very favourite).

This focus tells children that their lives, and the lives of people like them are significant. The regular inclusion on the role of excrement and sewage is not simply toilet humour – it teaches children (and some adults) about topics like our relationship with the environment and the role of disease. It is crucial work.

Horrible Histories is interested in the structures of power too. Issues of race and gender are never avoided and it is very much more than an account of the experience of white men. The TV series courted some controversy in 2014 with a sketch that reflected the differences in experience (and crucially, the representation) of Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacoleand the work they did in the Crimean War.

A complaint was upheld for the suggestion of direct racism on the part of

Nightingale. But this rather obscured the wider (and more important) investigation by the programme of why Nightingale's image predominates while Seacole has been forgotten. A vital lesson in the realities of race, both in the past but in our world too.

One of the main and most erroneous criticisms of Horrible Histories is that it consistently filters the past through the present. Not that it doesn't, it does, and it does so openly. But really, how is that a problem?

Crucially, Horrible Histories asks children to situate themselves in relation to the past – to consider themselves as its interpreters by using their own cultural frameworks. In doing so Horrible Histories simply reflects the position of the discipline of history generally which is, all the way down, a complex interaction between past and present. The difference is that unlike some historians, the creators of Horrible Histories are not in a state of denial.

Finally, and in these dark days in which fantasies about the British past have been allowed to shape our future, Horrible Histories seeks to undermine some of the shibboleths of the British national story.

The Barmy British Empire is a searing critique of the Empire project – which shows both the violence in the establishment and policing of Empire and its fatal impacts on many indigenous populations.

There is no shying away from Britain's past here. And nor should there be. Horrible Histories is open about events and characters in a way that sucessfully engages young minds. Long may it continue to offer our children this radical route to the past.

This article was originally published on The Conversation. You can read the original article here.

Contacts

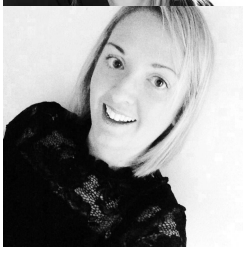
Rik Kendall
Press Contact
PR and Media Manager
Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences
rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk
07923 382339

Andrea Slowey
Press Contact
PR and Media Manager
Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences
andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk
07708 509436

Rachael Barwick
Press Contact
PR and Media Manager
rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk
07377422415

James Fox
Press Contact
Student Communications Manager
james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk

Kelly Elliott
Press Contact
PR and Media Officer
kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk



Gemma Brown
Press Contact
PR and Media Officer
gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk