

Book Review

Rose, J. 2016. *Interpreting difficult history at museums and historic sites*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, Boulder, New York and London, paperback, £23.95, pp215

The challenges of interpreting difficult history and heritage is seen as a largely modern phenomenon. Kidd (2014) suggests the new museology movement of the 1970s led to heritage becoming 'a contested site, seen as subjective and subjectifying, incoherent, multiple and (of course) "difficult" (3).) The recent growth of 'dark tourism' has led to interest in why people visit sites of death, disaster and atrocity in living memory (Lennon and Foley 2000) as well as historical sites (Sharpley 2009). What most of the research shares is a need to understand why sites connected with difficult or dark histories have proliferated over the last 30-40 years and how these sites can be interpreted, considering the dilemmas in presenting these histories and the motivation for visiting such sites. History can be 'difficult' in a number of ways; it can present something unexpected or new about the past, or ask 'uncomfortable questions about our humanity and inhumanity, legacy, apology, ownership, voice, repatriation, classification, memorialisation, memory and forgetting' (Kidd 2014: 1). Macdonald defines 'difficult heritage' as the past which is 'meaningful in the present but that is also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity' (2009: 1). These definitions suit the approach of Rose's *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites* (2016), which focuses on how to encourage visitors to museums and sites of difficult history to learn about something which might conflict with their sense of self, community identity and wider understanding of the world.

Rose's book raises a series of pertinent questions. If difficult history is challenging to learn and process, how can museums and historic sites, through their interpretation, support visitors to come to terms with the difficult history they are presented with? How can history workers be supported to interpret difficult history for their visitors, particularly if they are struggling to come to terms with the implications of the history for themselves? What kind of experiences do we want visitors to have at sites of difficult history – what do we want them to 'take away' from the experience?

Rose roots the answers to these questions in Commemorative Museum Pedagogy (CMP), a model the author has developed from first-hand research with history workers, and which has its origins in educational and psychoanalytical theory. The model suggests that encountering difficult histories - histories which challenge what we know (and want to know) about the past – leads to a sense of loss. This sense of loss can mean many things, but in particular creates a feeling of anxiety 'that comes with difference and change describes the feelings of loss and of losing things, of melancholic longings' (72-73). The CMP model, which relies heavily on Freud's ideas, asks history workers to think about the impact of encountering difficult history from this perspective of 'loss', which, according to the model, creates barriers to reconciling the difficult history with existing worldviews. As Rose explains, the 'learner's ego is constantly protecting the learner from disruptive knowledge' and difficult history can therefore be seen as something that 'can disrupt how the learner relates to the world' (73).

The model outlines the five (non-linear) stages that learners will potentially work through when encountering difficult histories; reception, resistance, repetition, reflection and reconsideration. Case studies dotted throughout the book use visitor responses to difficult histories at sites in the US and Europe to illustrate these five stages. Once these five stages have been grasped, the museum or site can reframe its interpretation through the three building

blocks for ethical interpretation that Rose suggests will support historical sites to develop interpretation that strikes a fine balance between 'respecting the fragility of learners' emotional responses to history and responsibly teaching the histories of human suffering' (99). These building blocks are in turn based on a set of values which emphasize that learning from, and understanding, the past can help to create a better world, by helping visitors to work through issues around social justice, equality, empathy and acceptance of difference.

The building blocks will be familiar to those who have already tackled challenging histories in a sensitive and ethical way; for example, 'Face' places an emphasis on providing authentic human stories from multiple perspectives; the 'Real' looks at how artefacts, images, documents and other historical materials can be used together to construct the 'Face' and ultimately build 'Narratives' that tell the story within a wider context, recognize the often partial and biased evidence we have from the past, show why the history matters and provide opportunities for learners to discuss, reflect on and contemplate the history they have encountered (see, for example, Dodd et al 2010 which explores challenging visitor perceptions of disability in museums and galleries in the UK). Each building block, as are the five stages, are lavishly illustrated with detail on how to achieve each stage, and grounded in theory as well as approaches to their practical development.

The book presents a very interesting take on difficult history, coming from the learner's perspective, a term which permits a wide focus to include history workers as well as visitors. However, I have some reservations about the theoretical underpinnings of CMP and how the book is structured, which makes it quite a dense, repetitive and challenging read in places. The focus on learning as 'loss' is only one potential response to difficult history and I would like to see more from Rose on how interpretation can be developed to suit a range of responses to difficult history – there is no substantial critique for example of Freud's approach to psychoanalysis, for example, and I think it is challenging to ask history workers to try and observe visitors' behaviour and language for clues as to their emotional state and acceptance of the difficult history. By focusing on one journey that visitors might undertake, how do history workers deal with visitors who do not exhibit any of the five stages?

The structure and layout of the book also make it difficult to easily identify the practical steps that museums and historic sites can undertake to reframe their interpretation. Whilst the detail is admirable, at times I found myself getting lost in it. It would have been helpful to have a summary at the beginning and end of chapters to identify the key points that the author is making. Visitor voices are also included to illustrate a point rather than get to the bottom of how visitors engage with, and respond to, difficult histories. Nor does the author stress the importance of understanding visitor responses before and after implementing a new form of interpretation, which could open up new ways of thinking about how visitors engage with a site and how a memorable, but challenging and ethical, visitor experience could be created (see for example MacLeod et al 2014). Also missing is a detailed perspective on working in partnership with external groups, specialists or communities who can support development around difficult histories.

Chapter 5 sheds more light on the original research that led to the development of CMP. Rose worked with history workers having to confront changes to their historical tours at Magnolia Mound Plantation, a sugar and cotton plantation outside Baton Rouge in Louisiana, by incorporating a more detailed history of the slaves who worked on the site. CMP evolved from their experiences of coming to terms with new narratives that disrupted their 'personal understandings of what the historical plantation site represented' (138) – as Rose explains, many staff were invested in a particular narrative about the planter family, which was challenged by the slavery-related narratives uncovered through research. Here the idea of loss comes out strongly, particularly for staff members who have 'bought into' a history through their familiarity with, and loyalty to, the site in which they work. The resistance to new narratives of the past, in this particular instance slavery, is then extended out into a more general approach for visitors and history workers at all sites of difficult history. Once this is realized, the model begins to make more sense, and it would have been helpful perhaps to have this chapter towards the front of the book.

I think this book is a good start to the topic of interpreting difficult history but I have reservations that it assumes visitors (and history workers) will give a particular response.

History is difficult, not just because it disrupts our identities and ideas about the world but also because it expects us to understand the actions of others living in a different context, society and culture to our own. Although we are encouraged by some forms of history to think people in the past are 'just like us' in many ways they are utterly different. Perhaps a more complex view of history, as one of constant change, would prepare us for difficult histories?

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