

Social Sciences

Passage 7

"History: Whose story?" by Ellen Goodman

Certain members of my family—who shall remain nameless—have suggested a bumper sticker for my car: "I Brake for Antiques." This, of course, is something of an exaggeration. I prefer to think of the afternoons I've spent stopping along the back roads of New England as adventures in social history.

As I have patiently explained to this same family, what we call antiques are a record of the real lives that real people led. They are a kind of down-home proof of the fact that people beat eggs, drank out of cups, used cupboards,

But what I tend to bring home from my much-maligned jaunts are words. The words of other Americans, captured in magazines and books. And, occasionally, if I make a hit—not of the automobile variety—I even get some perspective on history.

This time, in the musty corner of a store on the old Route 1, I found an even mustier, hundred-year-old *Pictorial History of the United States*. The author of this popular book, one James D. McCabe, wrote when historians were unencumbered by what are now called the "storm troopers of political correctness."

So his text brought back a time when even a colorless and relatively straightforward writer would describe the Amer-

ican past unselfconsciously as “a grand history—a record of the highest achievements of humanity—the noblest, most thrilling and glorious story ever penned on earth.” In such star-spangled prose, McCabe called this not only “a Christian nation” but one which was happily “secured for the language and free influences of the all-conquering Anglo-Saxon race.”

To read this now, when Christopher Columbus—the man and the day—are being debated, is to see how attitudes and ideas become antique. Speaking in the 1890s, my treasured McCabe did refer to some wrongs the white man inflicted on the natives, but this is not, to put it mildly, *Dances with Wolves*. He tended to regard the “savages” as, uh, fairly uncooperative.

Women show up in this text rarely and African-Americans make cameo appearances as victims of slavery or subjects of policy. And though this author tipped his hat more than once to religious tolerance—coming out squarely against the Salem witch trials—he rather casually referred to Joseph Smith, the leader of the Mormons, as a “cunning imposter.”

But what was most striking is what was most typical of my yellowed history. A century ago, the story of America was cast as an onward and upward tale of great men and their institutions and their battles. Our history was one of glory and progress, a parade of Presidents, each of whom came with a fine résumé and nearly all of whom did the right thing.

The text is vastly out-of-date with our sensibilities. We are more contentious now, even about our past. In the schools and colleges, dusty and dry discussions about curricula have turned into heated and highly political debates that were unheard of a hundred years ago. What should be taught and learned about our country? Who has been excluded? What should be included?

They are questions that get to the soul of who we are as a people and what we will think about our country. The debate is often framed now as an attack on the excesses of multiculturalism and increasingly there is an angry edge to it.

The attempt to open up the worldview contained in the writing of men like McCabe is now seen as fragmenting, trivializing, even distorting. Blacks, women, Native Americans, who once criticized history as “his story”—a record of “dead white men”—are now being criticized in turn.

I feel no nostalgia in my antique-reading for the comfort and coherence that came from this limited view of the Great Men’s March of Time. But what is typical of our present is the difficulty in agreeing on our past, writing an American history. What is typical of our era is the cacophony of voices, once left out, now scrapping for a piece of the historic pie to call their own.

If a historic sense is important, if we define ourselves by our past, then the task now is to find a way to hear the voices of the frontier women, and the Indians at the Little Bighorn, and the people who did not make laws. To include more voices without losing a connecting thread of shared values and ideals that makes us part of something recognizably American.

It’s a task that resonates in politics as well as education, in contemporary life as well as history. Can we have diversity and unity in these united states? What antique arguments will cause our descendants to smile smugly when they find them in a country store on a future afternoon?

Questions

Question 1: When the author goes antique hunting, she says she is looking for

- A. cups and dishes
- B. old furniture

- C. attitudes and ideas
- D. the contents of cupboards

Question 2: The phrase "star-spangled prose" means

- A. stories of American history
- B. colorless and straightforward writing
- C. unselfconscious writing
- D. overly patriotic words

Question 3: All of the following, according to the author, were basically left out of McCabe's *Pictorial History of the United States* except:

- A. the Salem witches
- B. Native Americans
- C. women
- D. non-Christians

Question 4: Many people are critical of what they consider a narrow view of history, the so-called record of "dead white men." These people think more diverse viewpoints should be included but others disagree. Those who disagree argue that

- A. true Americans are Anglo-Saxon
- B. slavery happened a long time ago
- C. our presidents mostly did the right thing
- D. multiculturalism has gone too far

Question 5: In the last paragraph the author writes "united states" without capital letters. She does so because

- A. it was a typographical mistake
- B. she wants to emphasize the separate history and identity of each state

- C. she thinks diversity is more important than unity
- D. she is thinking of the country as an antique

Question 6: The author challenges our current notion of political correctness by

- A. complimenting our humanitarian achievements
- B. reminding us that savages can be fairly uncooperative
- C. describing the glory and progress of history
- D. asking how future generations will view our prejudices

Question 7: The author's reference to *Dances with Wolves* is

- A. a satirical swipe at McCabe's lack of political correctness
- B. used in juxtaposition to the victims of slavery
- C. an allusion to our thrilling and glorious past
- D. a tribute to Kevin Costner's film

Question 8: The author's attitude toward history could be described as

- A. smug
- B. contentious
- C. nostalgic
- D. none of the above

Question 9: Traveling the back roads of New England can best be characterized as

- A. braking for antiques
- B. tipping your hat to tolerance
- C. an adventure in social history
- D. slicing up the historic pie

Question 10: The author attributes her perspective on history to

- A. words
- B. tolerance
- C. impostors
- D. antiques

Answers

1. C 2. D 3. A 4. D 5. B 6. D 7. A 8. D 9. C 10. A

Commentary

Question 1 requires you to compare what the author's family thinks she is looking for when she goes antique shopping and what the author says she is really looking for. Question 2 requires an inference. "Star-spangled" is often associated with patriotism and in this case, the author suggests that writers of a hundred years ago painted a picture of American history without any blemishes. Read carefully for Question 3 and note that although women were rarely mentioned and African-Americans appear only in a few instances, the history writer apparently had quite a bit to say about the Salem witch trials. Question 4 refers to what the author describes as a backlash against political correctness. Answers A, B, and C may fit some of those critics, but D represents the broadest, most inclusive answer.

In Question 5, you can disregard answer A (this text has been proofread several times, believe me) and D (the writer is concerned about current attitudes about who we are as a people). Answer C looks plausible but the author makes it clear in the previous paragraph that while she values hearing many voices, she doesn't want to lose a "connecting thread" (unity). Thus, answer B is the best choice.

Question 6 asks the reader to summarize the author's argument in the essay. A good strategy is to reread the last paragraph to find that summary. If you do, you will find that D is the correct answer. Questions 7, 9, and 10 require nothing more than a close reading of

the text. Question 8 is trickier. You can assume that no author would want to be smug or contentious. And although there is some nostalgia in the essay, you would not describe the author's attitude as merely nostalgic. Therefore, the correct answer must be choice D.