

Adina Langer (ed), *Storytelling in Museums*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, American Alliance of Museums, 2022, eBook £36.00, pp. xvii + 293

The concept of narrative expresses that a representation is not a mere reproduction of facts, but an interpretation of a happening. Within the museum field, this concept has become very popular because two perceptions intersect within the discourse. The first one emphasizes that interpretations are shaped by the perspective of the narrator, which implies the exclusion of other perspectives. The second one sees stories as an effective means of communicating content to an audience. Both ideas are suitable for breaking the exclusivity of museums and giving a voice to marginalized social groups. This close interweaving of political and pedagogical ambitions also characterizes *Storytelling in Museums*, edited by Adina Langer, which excellently reflects the discourse around the concept of narrative. The eighteen chapters present a broad range of museum and public history projects.

An all-encompassing definition of 'storytelling' is not the aim of the volume, as Langer states in her preface, nor of the first chapter, written by the public historian and curator Benjamin Filene. However, Filene's paper successfully fulfils its purpose to introduce the topic by illustrating the complexity of stories and highlighting aspects that not only encourage an understanding of storytelling methodology but also a critical reflection on it. The contribution by the Chinese medicine specialist Donna M. Mah also does this, albeit in a different way. As a non-curatorial professional involved in the creation of an exhibition at the Museum of the Chinese in America, she considers different aspects of stories in a refreshingly unbiased way. Her paper analyses peculiar ways in which stories can be used as inspiration for exhibition making, for example when she describes how tension can be created by introducing conflict into the exhibition narrative.

The strength of the book lies in the detailed description of museum and public history projects. These provide readers with a rich treasure trove of instances that may serve as models for their own storytelling practice. A particularly successful example is the essay by Sarah Litvin, director of the Reher Center for Immigrant Culture and History in Kingston, New York. She thoroughly describes how the centre uses the story of the family who operated a small bakery in the building to connect with a broad and diverse audience. The storytelling technique applied there was used to extract four universal themes from one single story: immigration, community, work, and bread – themes that resonate with contemporary experiences and family histories.

It is particularly informative to understand which concepts borrowed from other fields have been used by individual contributors for their personal storytelling approaches. For instance, the independent designer Margaret Middleton adopted children's literature researcher Rudine Sims Bishop's idea of 'windows and mirrors' for an exhibition that she had designed for the Boston Children's Museum. The exhibition – together with Middleton's enlightening essay – counteracts the homo- and transphobic narrative asserting that queer themes are not appropriate for children. On the contrary, queer stories in museums can serve not only as 'mirrors' for children with queer friends and family members, and for those who are discovering their own queer identity, but also as 'windows' for children still unaware of queer people. Thus, as Middleton rightly argues, storytelling simultaneously strengthens identity and promotes empathy.

This last idea points to a function of storytelling that emerges as one of the book's central themes: interconnection. What the book properly illustrates is that the strength of storytelling is to connect individuals to people from both present and past. The learning designer Miriam Bader puts this concept at the centre of her essay: 'interconnection', she

writes, 'can be visualized as the space inside a Venn diagram – where the two exterior circles are labelled "their story" and "my story" and the overlapping interior circle is "our story"' (72). Bader describes how two very different projects that she has realized 'broke down' the physical walls of museums. *Your Story, Our Story* was an initiative by the Tenement Museum that invited users to submit a picture of an object important to their cultural identity, along with the object's story, via a website. Meanwhile, the *Do-It-Yourself* toolkits that Bader developed for the Jewish organization *Entwine* allowed users to explore their Jewish identity with others at home. Her examples illustrate that stories have the potential to extend the museum space beyond the walls of the museum building and far into everyday lives.

The issue of ethical responsibility that comes with telling personal stories is not addressed in the book as prominently as might be expected from the editor's foreword. However, the issue forms the background of all project descriptions because they are all committed to progressive museum work and inclusive storytelling. This understanding is characterized by the desire to treat all the individuals involved with respect. Remarkable examples of the very concrete problems that one is confronted with in practice are given in the paper by educators Marcy Breffle and Mary Margaret Fernandez on interpretive programs at the Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta, Georgia. There, they describe conflicts with descendants who fear that the behaviour of their ancestors buried there would be put in a negative light, for example if they had been slave traders. If discussions with descendants remain unsuccessful, the team would focus on the story of one of the 70,000 other 'residents'. In this way, they respect stakeholders' feelings while remaining true to their own ethical standards, which includes naming social injustice.

The last essay forms a strong and coherent conclusion. It addresses the exhibition about slavery *The Mere Distinction of Colour* at James Madison's Montpelier and the self-evaluation tool *Rubric for Engaging Descendant Communities*. The essay is built around three different perspectives. Christian J. Cotz – the director of both projects – and Iris Carter Ford and Patrice Preston-Grimes – members of the Montpelier Descendant Community – describe their experiences of collaboratively addressing the sensitive issue of slavery. Much of what was said in the volume flows together in one of Cotz's sentences: 'Though museums are still considered a trustworthy authority by most Americans, the air of dispassionate neutrality that many museums adopt is easy for visitors to blow off simply because it lacks the magnetism that passion demands' (248-9).

As noted at the beginning of this review, the volume reflects effectively the discourse initiated by the narrative turn. However, in doing so, the book also adopts the approach, common within the museum field, of not distinguishing between concrete storytelling techniques and narratives that reflect certain value concepts. This suggests that specific methods, such as the inclusion of personal stories, automatically counteract authoritarian narratives or narratives that devalue certain groups and ways of life. It would be useful to clearly define storytelling techniques to use them to support progressive ideas more successfully. Nevertheless, *Storytelling in Museums* makes an inspiring contribution to the analysis of methods for telling history in a more relevant way for a broad and diverse audience, and to foster social change.

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