

Beverly Southgate. *What Is History For?* New York: Routledge, 2005. Pp. 228. Paper, \$27.95; ISBN 0-415-35099-9.

This is a good book—a thoughtful, well-written, and even “useful” meditation on the philosophy of history in our time. Beverly Southgate, Reader Emeritus in the History of Ideas at the University of Hertfordshire, not only explores (in the first half of the book) how historians and others justified history’s utility in the past, but also makes a provocative argument (in the second half) about what history should be for today and in the future. Southgate’s case is multi-layered and is grounded in a wide reading of history, philosophy, social theory, and literary criticism. He argues that the “modernist” (i.e., pre-twenty-first century) conception of history—the notion that history is a disinterested search for objective truths and that history should be studied “for its own sake”—has been thoroughly discredited, and a new vision of what “history is for” is needed for the “post-modern” era, which he defines as, essentially, the present. Although history can no longer make a claim to scientific certitude, what history *can do* is play an educationally therapeutic role in helping us “assert an identity [and] a set of values for ourselves,” thereby enabling us to chart a path to a happier and more humane future.

Southgate (rightly) considers history a social construction and examines how historians in the past have justified their enterprise. The claims that history teaches transferable skills, that it is essential for a cultivated life, that history affords a critical evaluation of societal myths, that it is essential for a clear understanding of one’s political and religious obligations in society, etc. will all resonate with instructors who give their introductory pep talk to groups of skeptical students in their survey courses. Southgate does not disavow these justifications for the study of history so much as he argues that new purposes are more appropriate for the twenty-first century. More interesting is the section that examines historians’ “hidden agendas.” Even though historians present themselves as disinterested searchers for truth, Southgate argues, historians have frequently served as cheerleaders for existing social, political, and religious elites and institutions. Compare, for example, the narratives written by historians on opposite sides of the Iron Curtain after World War II.

The second half of the book looks to the future. A new type of history, Southgate argues, is necessary given the collapse of post-Enlightenment scientism. “What has changed everything is the demise of the belief in ‘truth’—or of any truth [about the past].” We now live in the post-modern age, which has seen the disappearance of traditional certainties and fixed points. Without a fixed center and fixed standards from which to render judgments, “the whole concept of ‘direction’ is lost.” A central purpose of a new history, therefore, should be to help society chart a path to future improvement. And, it can do this, says Southgate, by embracing post-modernist uncertainty and emphasize that history is contingent and that in the past there could have been different outcomes. By underscoring episodes that illuminate the importance of human agency, we will be empowered to make the choices that will lead us “where

we want to be.” Accordingly, the emblematic histories of the post-modern age will “aspire to inculcate ... first, self-reflexivity—consciousness of ourselves, and of what we are doing and why; second ... linguistic awareness—an alertness to how language is used and abused ...; and third, an ability to live with ambiguity...” Southgate concludes with a look at some current works that he thinks exemplify the type of post-modern history that our uncertain age requires.

Whatever one’s judgment as to the desirability or do-ability of Southgate’s prescription, readers will find much food for thought in this study. Practicing historians and graduate students will benefit most from the book, since it requires prior immersion in the discipline to appreciate the arguments and examples that Southgate uses—which, by the way, are drawn primarily from British and European history.

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Shelly Kintisch and Wilma Cordero. *Breaking Away from the Textbook: A Creative Approach to Teaching American History*. 3rd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006. Pp. 320. Paper, \$58.95; ISBN 1-57886-293-0.

This book is a compilation of assignments and activities designed to enliven the learning experience in U.S. history classrooms. Aimed primarily at K-12 teachers, Kintisch and Cordero maintain their larger purpose is to teach “independent thinking,” “problem solving,” and “taking a position and justifying it.” The activities and assignments are not broken down into grade level, but arranged chronologically from European exploration in the fifteenth century to the recent past. The authors also include activities on current events, as well as advice related to term papers, debates, using fiction and biographies, and a bibliography for younger readers on each topic addressed. Teachers in need of quick ideas to use in the classroom might find this book helpful. However, it contains some serious weaknesses in terms of coverage and interpretation.

Kintisch and Cordero both have master’s degrees and have been collaborating and teaching for more than thirty years. Since the book is in its third edition, it is no doubt popular. This is mainly because of the ease with which teachers can simply review and select an activity or assignment. There are many options, such as a debate over declaring independence in 1776, writing and acting out an imaginary conversation among different historical individuals over slavery and secession, and using oral history interviews to inform student understanding of more recent events. There is a rich section on immigration. Reading the various options might also spark alternative ideas for active learning in the classroom.

Unfortunately, gaps remain in the coverage of events, and the focus of many topics remains traditional or simplistic. This is no small irony, given the authors’ goal of supplying material to “fill in gaps left by traditional textbooks.” For example, it is