



Hampton Court Palace, located in Greater London, was the home of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, chief minister to Henry VIII. After Wolsey's fall, it became one of the king's favorite residences.

The Lure of History and Historical Fiction

Southwestern faculty and students study history through the lens of pop culture.

By Meilee D. Bridges

March 26, 2020

The value of historical fiction in the university classroom

I have some confessions to make. Showtime's *The Tudors* has been off the air for a decade, but I've watched the entire bodice-ripping series twice—and I mean on my couch, glued to the screen, not just while I was washing dishes or doing chores around the house. I still side-eye that final season of *Game of Thrones* (and don't get me started on the serious lack of direwolf screen time), but the historical Wars of the Roses, on which the fantasy series is based, are still being waged in the podcasts I'm listening to during my commute. I only started researching the Jacobite revolution and the Affair of the Poisons because I watch(ed) *Outlander* and *Versailles*, respectively. And I am eagerly awaiting series four of both *Victoria* and *The Crown* because I'm apparently a monarchist, if only in my viewing habits.

So when I learned last year that Associate Professor of History Jessica Hower had just published an article in the scholarly journal *Rethinking History* titled “‘All Good Stories’: Historical Fiction in Pedagogy, Theory, and Scholarship,” I pounced right away. Was it possible that my guilty pleasure of watching historical dramas and biopics could finally be redeemed in the eyes of a scholar?

In the essay, Hower describes how as an academic historian, she once looked with disdain at pop-culture representations of historical figures and events—an attitude still shared by a number of scholars. However, she soon realized that one reason her classes on medieval and Renaissance history were filling up and even being waitlisted was that many students were as entranced as I am by TV shows such as *The White Queen* and *The White Princess*, films like *Mary, Queen of Scots*, and books (or their movie adaptations) such as Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall*. The Southwestern professor eventually began to incorporate such nontraditional texts in her syllabi, and her article details how she eventually arrived at valuing such films and novels. She ultimately argues that pop culture deserves a place in the university history classroom because it provides one way “to reveal something deeper about the meaning, purpose, and practice of history more generally” (Hower 27).



History professor Jess Hower leads discussion in her seminar on the Tudors.

A genuine passion for history

Of course, to have the good fortune of attending one of Hower’s seminars is to understand the other reasons her classes are so popular. It’s not just that her students get to critically analyze pop culture’s depictions of history or that the topics of her courses are fascinating to begin with—*The Real Game of Thrones*, *The Tudors*, *A Pirate’s Life for Me*, and *Witches, Nuns, Prostitutes, Wives, and Queens* are just a sampling of what she teaches at Southwestern. It’s that Hower brings a contagious energy and passion for history that students can’t help but admire and echo. “All of our history

professors are animated, but she’s the most animated I’ve ever seen!” says Ben Garcia ’20, a history and Spanish double major who grew up loving Ken Burns documentaries and has enrolled in Hower’s classes every semester but one. “She’s very, very excited to hear our opinions, and because of that, it feels like a very supportive and encouraging environment.”

Senior Morgan Mosby ’20 couldn’t agree more. “She’s always so energized. She gets here super early, around 7:30 or 8:00, and she’ll respond to email at 2:00 in the morning. She’s fueled by Diet Coke, I’m sure,” she laughs. She recalls with a grimace how Hower’s *Empires and Empires of the Mind* in World History seminar met early, at 8:30 in the morning. “But then you go, and you’re just like, ‘Yes, I’m excited! I’m ready to learn!’” she says.

The English and history double major remarks that she also appreciates how Hower provides thorough context as well as the potential merits and weaknesses of the copious readings she assigns. Being encouraged as an undergraduate to share her own responses to the published arguments of leading historians was “unnerving at first,” Mosby says, but Hower “cares so much about what students think . . . Her classes build your confidence because it’s a safe space to share your opinions honestly, think critically, and then have that dialogue. The most valuable thing is listening to other students and how they interpret the same readings.”

A glimpse of the history seminar experience

On the day I observed one of Hower's classes this past December, that dynamic interaction of interpretation and opinion was at play—even though it was the last class of the seminar, which I've seen flag at other universities because students and professors alike are slumping toward finals after the grueling work of another semester. In the Tudors course, by contrast, there was no such end-of-year stupor. Instead, the conversation never hesitated. It went something like this:

Hower flips through myriad images of pop culture: Hans Holbein's famous portrait of Henry VIII; Jonathan Rhys Meyers as a much trimmer version of the same monarch; Natalie Dormer as Henry's ill-fated second wife, Anne Boleyn; Cate Blanchett and Margot Robbie as Elizabeth I. Hower fires off a number of big questions, one after the other: "Should we study the Tudors in pop culture? What should it look like if we as historians study that pop culture? How is this stuff treated by nonacademic versus academic audiences?"

The students are polite, but their energy is kinetic, their ideas bouncing off one another like incandescent sparks from a flame. Their contributions, in no particular order, include insights like these:

- *"We should analyze pop culture because it tells us about the time it was being made in."*
- *"Films and television shows are not held to the same standards that you hold a historical monograph. You can't expect The Tudors to be historically accurate, but they are presenting a historical interpretation, and that in itself is important. There's a broader understanding there."*
- *"I don't know anyone who would watch The Tudors and go, 'That's a great historical reenactment!' While the historical inaccuracy might drive us up the wall, it gets people interested in history."*
- *"We can ask whether we want to play accuracy police, but we've kind of been playing accuracy police with even historical monographs. We weren't there, so how do we know it's accurate?"*



Undergraduates in Hower's Tudors seminar debate the place of historical fiction in scholarly history.

Hower interrupts to read from slides featuring quotes from scholarly historians. A student laughs; "she has a slide for everything!" she says admiringly. Hower asks enthusiastically, "Why are two historians coming to such different takes on history on film? What is the job of the historian versus the job of the filmmaker? How do we even study this stuff? Why is all this so fraught?"

The students continue to trade sophisticated thoughts and questions:

- "On the point of if text is any better than film, I completely agree with Rosenstone: I'd argue that there is no truth in history. History is just interpretation; there is no truth."
- "Why are we so much more critical of films about past history than films about recent history?"
- "Part of the reason I think that the Tudors are so popular in pop culture is that they were so theatrical in how they portrayed themselves and the monarchy, so maybe their inherent theatricality translates better to film than other kings and queens."
- "What's really interesting about that is it gets at the paradox that makes me enjoy history so much: as historians, our duty is not to the past but to the future."

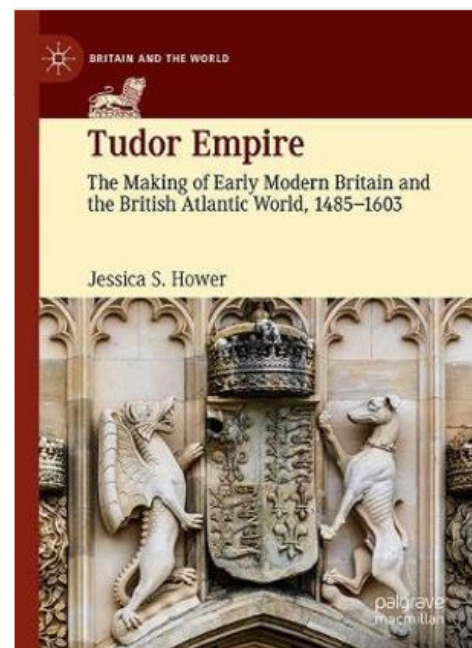
I've often grumbled at how college courses are portrayed in TV programs and in films because the professors often ask one or two vapid questions before dismissing an auditorium of unengaged pupils. Hower's class, by contrast, exemplifies the truly spirited atmosphere of the best small liberal-arts seminars.

History classes: High school versus college

In addition to not resembling television's depiction of higher education, SU students will tell you that their college history courses look nothing like their history classes in high school, especially those in which teachers were forced to teach to the test. Political science and history double major Emily Tesmer '20 recalls that those earlier classes entailed "memorizing dates and numbers and facts," whereas her history courses at Southwestern "are much more about interpretation and trying to understand the past in a way that's tangible for the present as well"—an approach she says she's "fascinated by."

Another difference between high-school and university classes, of course, is the sheer amount of reading, which many humanities majors can attest to. Garcia says the most significant challenge of Hower's and other SU history professors' seminars is "being able to synthesize it all quickly and come up with something to say about the readings once you get to class." However, as a seasoned history major who also works as a peer writing consultant in SU's Debby Ellis Writing Center, he advises younger students that the secret to reading multiple articles and book chapters for each class meeting is, very simply, "you don't. You learn how to skim and get what [the article] is about, and it becomes second nature. Once you learn how to do that, the rest of it is just fun."

Perhaps most surprising to students who have taken history courses at Southwestern is, as Garcia says, "the focus on theory." All history majors at SU are required to take a course that Hower often teaches, Historiography, in which students learn the history of historical writing (yes, it's very meta!) and the major methods historians use to study the past. Political science and history double major Olivia Stankus '20 recalls, "I didn't expect there to be different ways people approach the study and writing and sharing of history. I didn't expect there to be that much dissent, consideration, and thought behind how we're interpreting the past." Mosby agrees. She, too, was surprised by "how intense historiographical debates were—among scholars but also among my peers." But, she adds, getting to debate



Hower's scholarly book *Tudor Empire* was published by Palgrave MacMillan in 2020.



The last Tudor monarch was Elizabeth I, who reigned from 1558 to 1603.

whether source materials such as those from pop culture are “any less valuable because they’re not king’s speeches or legal documents” is part of the attraction of her history coursework. “I like the nuance and open-to-interpretation-ness of it,” she reflects.

The “truth” about history and historical fiction

Among Hower’s students, one of their favorite assignments is one she issues in each of her classes. It’s a critical review of a movie, book, TV episode, or other piece of pop culture that represents the historical period that is the focus of that particular seminar. The students are tasked with assessing not just the accuracy of the historical fiction but also what the piece reveals about the time period in which it was created.

Garcia, for example, has written about *The Lion in Winter*, the 1968 film featuring Peter O’Toole as Henry II and Katharine Hepburn as Eleanor of Aquitaine. He says that historical fiction is “not only equally as important as but also as valid as academic history because ... they both tell us where we’ve been and where we’re going”—even if he still finds watching popular history somewhat frustrating because, like his classmates, he can see where the inaccuracies lie.

Tesmer has written about the portrayals of medieval femininity in an episode of *The White Queen* and the representation of Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots, in the 2018 film starring Saoirse Ronan, which was based on a 2005 biography written by John Guy. “A trend I’ve noticed a lot through these pop-culture assignments is that there are historical inaccuracies to make them resonate with modern audiences,” she reflects. So, for instance, Ronan’s Mary might not be “true” to the monarch’s life in the 16th century because she is more a symbol of today’s conceptions of female agency and power—as a way of earning modern audiences’ interest. “Their primary purpose is to entertain; their secondary purpose is to educate,” Tesmer adds. In a sense, then, period dramas are important because they emphasize the *story* element of *history*, which serve to get students and other audiences to dig deeper and learn more.

For some history students, Hower’s inclusion of historical fiction in her courses has had an impact on the topics they’ve chosen to pursue in their honors theses and capstone projects. Stankus’s first critical review for Hower focused on the depiction of Thomas More in the play-turned-film *A Man for All Seasons* (1960, 1966); another focused on Richard Burton’s turn as the titular *Becket* (1964). The inspiration drawn from those assignments clearly informs her honors thesis, “Thomas’s Divided Consciousness: Thomas Becket, Thomas Wolsey, and Thomas More in Church, State, and Memory,” which she recently presented at a Paideia Connections lecture and will discuss at the inaugural Richard Macksey National Undergraduate Humanities Research Symposium at Johns Hopkins University later this spring. Stankus’s research focuses on the portrayals of the three statesmen in T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *A Man for All Seasons*, and Mantel’s *Wolf Hall*. The senior says that she believes in the importance of historical accuracy in any sort of representation of the past, but what her coursework with Hower and her independent research have shown is that “the lines [between history and historical fiction] are so much more blurred than we think they are. They’re all cyclical and in conversation with one another, and they all point out the pros and cons of each” way of approaching history.

Mosby is writing her honors thesis on the evolution of historical fiction and specifically the role women play as characters in, writers of, and readers of the genre, from Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814), arguably the first historical romance, and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* (1886) to the currently running TV adaptation of Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* novels (1991-). She says that beyond her academic studies, her bookshelf at home has always been populated by historical novels of World War II. "I like historical fiction because it . . . gives space for considering alternative views," she opines. "You can find places of subversion, and that's why historical fiction is a great site of resistance to conventional narratives and resists the complacency of traditional history."

The future of history (majors)



Mary, Queen of Scots, has been the subject of a recent motion picture starring Saoirse Ronan and Margot Robbie.

For those who question the value of earning a humanities degree, the idea of students critically reviewing sources in popular culture for a history class might seem to support their narrow view. But Southwestern's history majors have demonstrated that their course of study and the content of their courses have been crucial in setting them up for postgraduate success.

Garcia, who is currently writing his honors thesis on women's suffrage in the U.S. and U.K. and will be graduating with Paideia with Distinction, says that he's grateful his major has prepared him for a number of possible careers. "One of the big things I hear really often whenever I tell people I'm a history major is, 'Are you going to teach?' That doesn't bother me as much as it bothers other people, but it makes me sad that that's the only application people see history having," he shares. Because SU's history majors are required to synthesize so much reading and develop their own arguments, Garcia sees obvious career tracks in such fields as government and law. He's interning with the Southeast Georgetown Community Council, helping to establish a branch of Catholic charities that will provide affordable legal assistance to undocumented immigrants who are living below the poverty line.

He's considering either law school or else a master's and doctorate in public policy. "The thing I love about the history major is they really promote and support thinking for yourself," he reflects. "As long as you can support what you're saying, there's no wrong answer. From day one, you get to bring your own voice into this."

Tesmer echoes Garcia: her friends and family also assumed that she'd pursue a Ph.D. and become a professor. But, she says, "history teaches you fundamental skills that you can take into any job: critical thinking, reading, writing, [and] learning to craft your own authorial voice, which is a challenge but is an attractive quality to have. That's a really important skill I've developed over four years: learning to look at a source and creating my own interpretation of it." She adds that a common misconception about history is that "because it's the study of the past, it's irrelevant to what you're doing now"

"History teaches you fundamental skills that you can take into any job: critical thinking, reading, writing, [and] learning to craft your own authorial voice, which is a challenge but is an attractive quality to have."

[But] it's not just studying dead places or people. These things we see in the past have resonances in the present, and reinterpreting the past brings clarity to contemporary issues and impacts how we shape the future." Tesmer has interned with the Georgetown attorney general's office and was recently accepted to law school.

Stankus, who recently won the Florence Gould Award in political science at SU's Honors Convocation, is eagerly awaiting word from master's programs in the U.K. specializing in intellectual history, a perfect melding of her interests in history and political theory. She says that the power of studying history is that it genuinely develops one's critical thinking and that analyzing historical texts—whether it's a primary source, a scholarly article, or a piece of pop culture—can be applied to so many other disciplines, contexts, and careers. But echoing other students who have enjoyed studying history and historical fiction at Southwestern, she says, "It cannot be overstated what a fantastic teacher Dr. Hower is and the care she puts into her classes. She is so crucial to Southwestern and to the world." Mosby, who plans to eventually work in academic libraries and special collections, couldn't agree more. "She really invests in her students," she says. "She has that genuine desire to facilitate the growth of her students as scholars She's the model when you think of what the relationship between professor and student should be at a small liberal-arts college like Southwestern."

I know I am certainly grateful to our resident expert on pop culture's place in academic history, because now I can feel a little less embarrassed when I catch up on *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom* this weekend.