

Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites

Reviewed by Liz Ševčenko

It's a tough time for truth. We're a dozen years into the "post-truth era,"¹ recovering from an election dominated by "post-truth politics."

Distinct from a public discourse containing many lies, post-truth talk does not create a new, false reality, but makes reality beside the point, and focuses on reinforcing the views of the world that people already have.² In this context, it's tempting for museums to double down on defending history as fact, to hail historic sites as unassailable evidence—especially ones that speak to massive injustices like slavery, whose stories shape both our moral imagination and our observable reality. So in this context, it's hard at first to heed Julia Rose's advice in *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites*—that when visitors brazenly deny the brutal realities of the past, we should *not* insist that "'That is how the history happened' and 'These are the facts'" since that "will most likely not address learners' discomfort."

But Rose's masterful book dives deep into discomfort. She is taking seriously what is

required to create an environment where history workers and visitors can all finally "go there," and truly confront the most disturbing and emotional implications of American history.

Rose's book is the latest in the American Association of State and Local History's "Interpreting History" series, intended to provide tools and guidance to history professionals to help them "be more inclusive of the range of American history." *Interpreting Difficult History* departs significantly from the others—essay collections on, for example, the challenges of interpreting Native American or African American history and culture—by offering a single-authored but widely applicable framework with an extremely focused gaze. For Rose, who is director of the West Baton Rouge Museum in Louisiana, "difficult history" is not only defined as a history of "pain, suffering, oppression, and grief" that helps us understand how power works historically and today. It is also, more importantly, a history that presents significant opportunities for collective

1 Ralph Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press), 2004.

2 "Art of the Lie," *The Economist*, September 10, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21706525-politicians-have-always-lied-does-it-matter-if-they-leave-truth-behind-entirely-art>.

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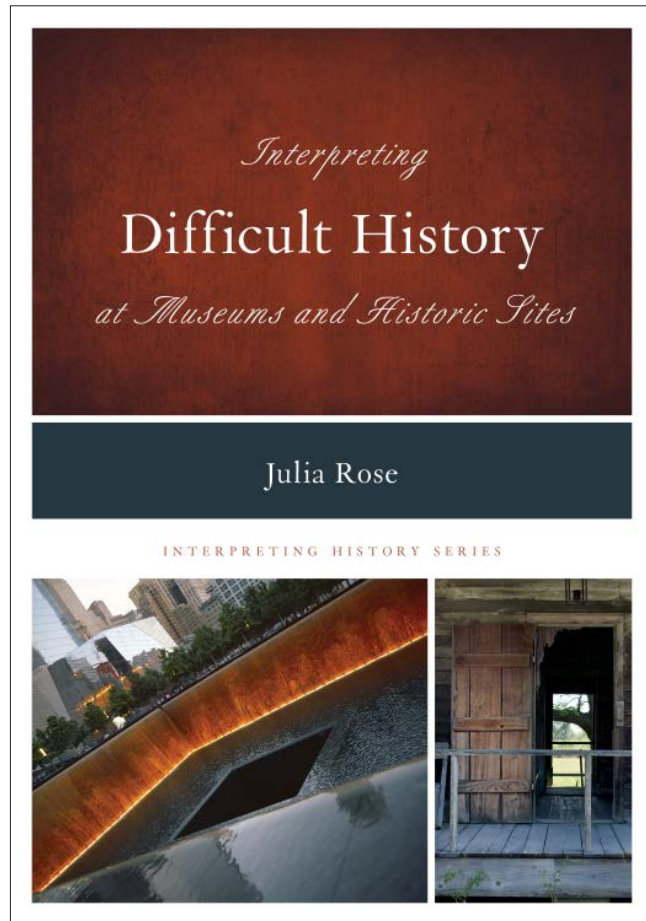
Julia Rose

Published by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers/AASLH, hardback, paperback, and eBook, 2016.
232 pages

experiences (“tools that are necessary for living and make us more self aware”) as well as significant challenges (“inciting anxiety, resistance, and stress”). At its core, Rose’s analysis encompasses any history that challenges the narratives around which people have organized their identities: the bedrock of the post-truth era. The book is set primarily in the intimate space between tour guides (history workers) and visitors. Lest this seem like a limited object lesson, consider that together, the people in these conversations number in the hundreds of millions each year;³ these interactions are therefore an incredibly significant space for shaping American public memory.

Rose makes quick work of establishing that “difficult history” is not a new trend or new challenge for interpreters. She opens with an admirable scan of the field, which confirms

³ In 2015, the National Park Service alone counted over 115 million recreation visits to its historic sites and parks, monuments, and battlefields. See “Annual Visitation by Park Type or Region for: 2015 By Park Type” at [https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/SSRSReports/National%20Reports/Annual%20Visitation%20by%20Park%20Type%20or%20Region%20\(1979%20-%20Last%20Calendar%20Year\)](https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/SSRSReports/National%20Reports/Annual%20Visitation%20by%20Park%20Type%20or%20Region%20(1979%20-%20Last%20Calendar%20Year)), accessed January 12, 2017.



that for some time now, museums have been widely both mandated and motivated to take on histories of marginalized people, and to explicitly raise ethical questions. But if the need to confront difficult histories is now firmly established within the museum field rhetorically, the practice lags far behind. It is not a core component of most public history or museum studies programs. This is, perhaps, because it’s been imagined as a problem to be avoided or managed, not a methodology or a skill akin to research or label writing.

The skills needed to address difficult history should not be understood as relevant only to some subset of sites and museums that are related to some specific historical topics deemed “difficult.” In truth, every



historic site or museum is embedded in, and represents, structures of power and experiences of people. All places represent ethical issues in one way or another. Not talking about them can make a “difficult history” experience for someone whose perspective is being silenced.

Julia Rose’s book makes three vital contributions to the field. First, she introduces an educational psychoanalytic framework to explore what is happening inside visitors’ mind and hearts. In this way, she invites us to take those moments we dread most on a tour, like when a visitor interrupts to challenge the tour guide’s interpretation—moments most sites define as aberrations to be avoided or suppressed—and embrace them as a natural and productive experience for everyone in the group. Rose suggests that there is an inevitable “loss in learning.” When confronted with a history that is new to them, learners may cling to, and need time to grieve, the loss of their old understanding. “The learner is working through the mental loss the difficult history has imposed” Rose explains. “The learner’s ego is constantly protecting the learner from disruptive knowledge, knowledge that the learner unconsciously perceives as interference and as destabilizing.”

Rose argues that learners come to terms with difficult history in stages, not unlike stages of grief, which she names the 5 Rs: reception, resistance, repetition, reflection, and reconsideration. Rather than pushing learners to “accept the facts” too quickly, Rose urges historic sites and museums to give people time and space to “work through”

the five stages. She emphasizes that people do not pass through these stages linearly. It should also be noted that they are not going through all of these in the hour or so they’re in the museum. But if history workers can learn to better understand the different things that are happening with the visitors they interact with, those interactions can be much more empathetic and productive.

Rose’s second major contribution is to break down the distinction between interpreter/history worker and visitor. In Rose’s formulation, *all* of these individuals are learners. With that, Rose explodes the myth of authoritative historic site interpretation that visitors and history workers alike still cling to, even through the revolution of inquiry-based learning. Rose urges us to accept the reality that tours are messy exchanges between history workers and audiences who are all grappling with issues and stories that challenge and trouble them.

She then applies psychoanalytic theory and the 5 Rs equally to history workers’ experience *learning* tours and visitors’ experience *taking* tours. Rose analyzes tours as an exchange among people grappling with the same challenges—looking, for instance, both at what kinds of comments visitors make and at what kinds of responses history workers have (defensiveness, humor, diversion) and exploring the implications of the dynamic for all involved. She also includes a wonderfully revealing case study of history workers’ journey through the 5 Rs, based on research she did on interpreters at the Magnolia Mound Plantation (in Baton Rouge, Louisiana) who reworked their tour



to integrate stories of the enslaved. The study reminds us that we are all perfectly and imperfectly human.

Some historic site and museum administrators who bend over backwards to understand visitors' idiosyncrasies might still view their front line staff as automatons, or people who have already concluded their emotional journeys. In Rose's formulation, difficult history is continually difficult for all involved, but sites can create a shared space for working through that difficulty together. History workers are responsible for being more self-aware than visitors, and for finding new ways to support them. This reframes the basis of history workers' authority and skill, from being entertaining purveyors of facts to facilitators who help visitors work through challenging issues. But Rose's acknowledgment that it's okay (and in fact in some cases helpful) for history workers to struggle makes the expectations more realistic.

Rose's final contribution is to use the frameworks described above—psychoanalysis and the understanding of history workers and visitors as learning together—to build a concrete methodology for history interpreters. What she dubs "Comprehensive Museum Pedagogy" can be expressed in an acronym (CMP), remembered through alliteration (the 5 Rs), and constructed with "Building Blocks" (she divides interpretation into "Face," "Real," and "Narrative"). Some readers might feel that CMP diminishes important issues to something that sounds like a medication or a workout; or that it repackages old ideas and claims them as new. I feel that naming and describing a method in

extremely manageable and concrete terms is critical for actually putting these important insights into action in every museum around the country. Without clear and simple guidelines, the field will never get past the "resistance" stage. In addition to providing an overall framework, the methodology offers tools for a wider range of specific challenges, from deciding how to deal with shocking images, to creating physical spaces for reflection, to crafting generative questions.

There's a danger that *Interpreting Difficult Histories* will read as asking too much of volunteer history workers and under-resourced sites. An overwhelming number of sentences do start with "history workers should..." But by exploring the roots of resistance, the book forces any of us who start thinking "I can't do this, this is too hard" to examine where that's really coming from. And by bringing administrators, workers, and visitors together into a single category of learners, the book creates a sense of mutual enterprise, responsibility, and opportunity. I hope we'll all rise to the challenge. ■

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