

## WHAT IF, WHO SAYS: REWRITING HISTORY

by Hannah Lowe

My PhD is concerned with one particular historical event – the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* to Tilbury Docks, Essex in 1948, bringing 492 Jamaican men looking for work in the UK. Since 1948, that event has been memorialised as the start of post-war black immigration to Britain, but the truth is there were black people in Britain long before this date. The *Windrush* myth is inaccurate in more than one way – it wasn't the first boat to arrive to Britain from the Caribbean; there were men, women and children on the boat; they came from Trinidad, Havana, Bermuda as well as Jamaica.

Who tells history, and why? And how it can be challenged? Often it's the voices of those with less power – be it ethnic minorities, women, the working classes – that are excluded from dominant narratives of history. I'm interested in how poetry can disrupt and challenge these narratives by inserting other voices and perspectives. Benjamin Zephaniah's "[The Men From the Windrush Are Settling Down](#)" does a great job of countering the myth of the *Windrush*; while women's histories are explored in Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* which tells the stories of the women involved with famous male historical figures, or gives those figures a female embodiment – Mrs Midas, Frau Freud, the Kray Sisters, or Shakespeare's wife Anne Hathaway all feature. Clare Pollard's more recent collection *Ovid's Heroines* does similar work.

Other poets have chosen to insert silenced or unknown voices into national histories. Langston Hughes boldly incorporates himself into the (white) national narrative of America in "[I, too, sing America](#)" while more recently, Martin Espada's "[Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100](#)" concerns the employees of the Windows on the World Restaurant, all of whom lost their lives in the 9/11 attacks, but who we rarely hear about in news and documentary accounts.

Less seriously (perhaps), poetry can also engage with imaginative works of the past. Roald Dahl, for example, has taken well known narratives – nursery rhymes – and given them an alternative perspective. Consider his version of [Little Red Riding Hood](#) which gives the female character back her agency, rather than let the wolf and the woodcutter dictate how things go. Or in the poem "[Not My Best Side](#)", U A Fanthorpe takes Uccello's painting of St. George and the Dragon and gives voice to the dragon and the damsel, as well as St. George.

However you choose to engage with history, try to give an alternative account that somehow harnesses the known detail of the narrative whilst challenging it. Think about the voice of your poems. A monologue might be a good way to allow your reader to hear a historical or mythic character, or you might choose to write in an omniscient third person voice to lend your poem an authoritative tone.

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## TEACHING THE ART OF POETRY

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### FIVE EXERCISES TO TRY:

Take a fairy tale or myth and tell it from another perspective or give an additional piece of information. eg Cinderella told from the point of view of one of the ugly sisters

Propose an alternative history. What if Harold had defeated William the Conqueror? What if Britain had been colonised, rather than doing colonising? Choose any event from history and suggest what might have happened if things had turned out differently.

History is told in many different ways – through books, diaries, letters, paintings, photographs. Try a poem in the form of a letter or diary entry that in some way complicates a known narrative. A good example is Clare Pollard's "The Crimes of Love" from *Bedtime* in which Renee Pelagie De Sade writes a love letter to her husband, the Marquis de Sade.

Use an image (or images) to stimulate a poem about history. Two images might reveal opposing histories, such as these pictures below. The first shows Oloudah Equiano, an abolitionist who lived in Britain in the late 1700s, and suggests the long black presence in Britain, while the other, of passengers disembarking the *Windrush* in 1948, emphasises them as first migrants to Britain. Look for images that will help your poem complicate history.



Think ahead. Can you imagine an "alternative" future? What if Scotland gets its independence? What if the [Dogger Bank](#) rose again from the North Sea? What if Britain began to colonise the moon? Choose a "what if" scenario for the future and depict this in your poem.

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