

Call for Papers and Workshops: “History up for Debate: Literature, Storytelling and the Imagined Past”

**1-2 July 2026, University of Salzburg, Department of English and American Studies,
Unipark Nonntal**

Conference within the Framework of the Salzburg Conferences on English Literature and Culture (SEC)

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While it has long been a truism that ‘all history is contemporary history’ (Benedetto Croce), i.e., shaped by contemporary concerns and values, recent and present-day politics have moved this insight very much to the forefront. History – in both public and popular forms – is (currently) highly topical, publicly contested and used for partisan aims. In the UK, for instance, the memory of the Second World War, which for decades has been an important aspect of British identity constructions, was used extensively in the Brexit debates with the promise that Britain would stand once more proudly ‘alone’, thus re-experiencing some of its former greatness (see Noakes 2023; Hennebühl 2023). In the US, the current administration is taking active influence on the way history is presented in public museums and institutions, reinterpreting the significance of historic events like the Civil War to serve its own political agenda. Conversely, in British crime fiction series such as *The Sister Boniface Mysteries*, the 1950s and early 1960s have been rediscovered as a period characterised by colourful, stylish clothes, extraordinary wall papers and strangely quirky technology, while omitting the undoubtedly rampant racism and homophobia of these years. Instead, the past is made to look liberal and enlightened, confirming the audience in its current moral values and attitudes – a purpose which popular history formats have served since at least the nineteenth century (see Jordanova 2010: Ch 6).

Given that the past, and the narratives and stories we shape of it, seem thus particularly contested and controversial at the present moment, this conference aims to explore the literary and filmic narratives (in the form of historical novels, costume drama, documentaries, life writing, biofiction, biopics, etc.) in which we shape history for the wider public and the ends to which these are used. Based on the assumption that storytelling is not only a fundamental way in which humans orient themselves in the world but also a potent means of shaping reality, these narratives’ role as a means of creating a desirable present and future will also be examined.

The conference thus aims to examine various aspects of storytelling and the past. We want to look at specific examples of how the past is shaped to fit the present, for instance, to shape and confirm (national) identities, to support liberal or conservative gender roles, or to substantiate political claims and agendas. In addition, we would also like to explore the

specific attractions and advantages that different genres may offer to this end, for instance, by seemingly suggesting greater ‘truth effects’ (cf. Frow 2005: 2) or, as studies on the flourishing genre of biofiction highlight, by offering a more imaginative access by speculating on historic characters’ thoughts and feelings (see e.g. the articles in Boldrini et al. 2025).

As it is organised by the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Salzburg, the conference focuses particularly on English-language novels, drama, performance, films, TV series and various forms of life-writing, but we also welcome examples from other countries, languages and historical cultural traditions with the end of exploring the manifold popular uses of the past. Equally, we are interested in both contemporary and historical examples of politicised uses of the past in popular historical forms.

Part of the conference is dedicated to workshops for teachers focusing on how accounts and narratives of the past shape our understanding of history that examine strategies to help students question representations of the past, reflect on different perspectives, and connect historical themes to contemporary issues.

Topics may include, but are not limited to:

- (national) myths and nation-building in historical literatures
- resurrecting marginalised voices
- present and historical uses of (identity) politics in historical novels, period drama, biography, biofiction, etc.
- re-telling / staging past resistance (literary and theatrical renderings of significant protests, political movements, etc.)
- historical imaginings as a means of resistance and subversion
- historical storytelling and genre
- processes of remembering and forgetting / literary dementia studies and memory
- historical storytelling and memory
- the ethical dimensions of fictionalizing the past: invention vs. accuracy
- documentary theatre and verbatim theatre: staging the ‘true’ past
- intersections of myth, folklore, and historical accounts
- genre boundaries: historical fiction, autofiction, speculative and alternative histories
- the role of desire in shaping representations of the past
- embodied past in performance
- the role of paratext in historical fiction (afterwords, author’s note, inclusion of archival material, ...)
- historical storytelling and the archive

- the use of the past (e.g. documentary, mockumentary, historical fiction, television, and film) in the (language) classroom

References

Boldrini, Laura et al. (2025). *The Routledge Companion to Biofiction*. Routledge.

Frow, John. (2005). *Genre. The New Critical Idiom*. Routledge.

Hennebühl, Dennis. (2023). *Taking Back Control' of the Nation and Its History? Contemporary Fiction's Engagement with Nostalgia in Brexit Britain*. *Inter/Media* 21. Brill.

Jordanova, Ludmilla. (2010). *History in Practice*. 2nd ed. Arnold.

Noakes, Lucy. (2023). *War and the British: Gender, Memory and National Identity 1939-1991*. Revised Edition. Bloomsbury Academic.

Proposals (max. 250 words) for 20-minute papers or 90-minute teacher workshops with a short bio note (max. 150 words) are due **2nd February 2026**. Papers and workshops must be presented in English. Please submit proposals in our online form:

<https://secsrv.sbg.ac.at/sec26/>

Acceptances will go out by late February.

In case of questions, please contact: salzburgenglishconferences@plus.ac.at

<https://www.plus.ac.at/anglistik/news-events-social-media/salzburg-english-conferences/?lang=en>

Workshops for Teachers / PH-Fortbildung

As part of the conference *History up for Debate: Literature, Storytelling and the Imagined Past*, we invite EFL teachers to join a series of workshops that will explore how accounts of the past (e.g. documentary, mockumentary, historical fiction, television, and film) can be a powerful tool in the language classroom – not only to engage students with authentic language, but also to encourage critical thinking about the past and, by extension, about the present and the future.

Participants can choose from a range of workshops focusing on how accounts and narratives of the past shape our understanding of history. Together, we will examine strategies to help students question representations of the past, reflect on different perspectives, and connect historical themes to contemporary issues.

Whether you're new to the topic or looking to deepen your approach, you'll find practical ideas and fresh inspiration in these workshops.

1. **Target Group:** Teachers of English, AHS+BHS Oberstufe
2. The Workshops will take place in English.
3. Date: Thursday, 2nd July, 14-17:30 hours.