
My first introduction to punk history came in February this year via my mother’s car radio. This was tuned, as always, to Radio National. Late Night Live presenter, Phillip Adams, had as his guest an unconventional academic from Sydney University, Jonathan Walker. Adams began the program with a discussion of Walker’s punk history manifesto. This manifesto opened with conviction: ‘We mean it man’, and closed with reckless abandon: ‘No future, write as if your career is already over’. Naturally, as an aspiring historian cautiously entering the insecure world of academia, this last statement caught my attention.

Walker appeared on Late Night Live to discuss his first book, Pistols! Treason! Murder!, a biographical work of sorts about the life of a seventeenth century Venetian spy called Gerolamo Vano. Pistols! Treason! Murder! has been described as a work of punk history and during the interview Walker drew a comparison between his hero (or anti-hero), Vano, and the Sex Pistols’ Johnny Rotten. However, punk history in this context should not be understood as a history of punk. Rather, it is a style or sub-genre of history writing based on what Walker described in the interview as a philosophy of maximum speed and maximum aggression.

So how does Walker achieve this philosophy? Well, for a start, his book includes an imaginary bar crawl through Venice. Here, Walker provides historical background by recounting alcohol-fuelled scholarly conversations between three suitably intellectual looking, spectacle-wearing, sensibly named Brits: Jim, Phil and Jon (the author). Other parts of the book resemble a detective story. Walker weaves details about Vano’s career as a Venetian ‘general of spies’ from 1620 to 1622 throughout the work. However, the disjointed, inconclusive nature of the available sources obfuscates the narrative. Walker navigates the spy reports left by Vano by drawing connections where possible and devising alternate realities in the absence of hard evidence. He also employs literary references to illuminate the action and punctuates the drama with interpretive comic strips, drawn by illustrator Dan Hallet. The collage is completed with contemplative discussions about nature of modernity, the relationship between the individual and the state, and the process of history writing.

The results of this endeavour are mixed. The form of the book constantly challenges the reader to engage with the material, but I was sometimes left feeling lost and confused. Walker’s obsession with his subject is certainly compelling. He describes reading Vano’s reports thus: ‘His words taste like red wine—or, to be

more precise, bad red wine: acidic, furring the tongue, lips and teeth; intoxicating, yet also prone to induce sore eyes and jabbing headaches’ (p. 20). Powerful stuff, but as a reader I could not always match Walker’s zeal. The central tension in the work appears to be the desire to make the story as coherent and accessible as possible, while remaining true to sources that defy a simple reading and the greater project of punk history writing.

Perhaps, however, this tension could be interpreted as a strength. In an age when information is served to us on a platter, Walker’s disorderly collage is often quite refreshing. After the initial cover-to-cover reading, I enjoyed dipping back into the work at random to gain greater insight. Walker does not shy away from what he describes as ‘death by a thousand qualifications [however, moreover, conversely, paradoxically, possibly, probably, confusingly, implausibly, surprisingly, incredibly], the occupational hazard of the historian’ (p. 180). Pistols! Treason! Murder! dares you to take responsibility as a reader. As Walker states, ‘if you want a neat plot resolution, go and read a novel’.

Earlier in February this year, on another Radio National program, Perspectives, Walker suggested that the structures of academic history writing were rigid and staid, with creative arguments being constrained by ‘impenetrable, jargon-laden prose’. According to Walker, an academic would have ‘no problem publishing an article arguing that a comic-strip account of the Holocaust like Art Spiegelmen’s Maus is a great work of art … [but] try presenting your thoughts in comic strip form and see how fast you get slapped down’. Now, I have to admit that, apart from a childhood love of Tintin and a brief (and bizarre) teenage flirtation with Judge Dredd, comics have never really been my ‘thing’. I am not convinced that the masculine, speed-driven, aggressive style of Pistols! Treason! Murder! makes me the target audience. However, Walker’s approach to history writing appealed to me. I felt that the focus on form occasionally obscured the content, but overall it was an exciting, challenging work of history, with a fabulous title.

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7 Ibid.