
The Structure of the Book, Storytelling, and Literary Techniques in *What is Medieval History*, a Book by John Arnold

In *What is Medieval History*, Arnold develops an understanding of medieval history throughout the book. He uses this understanding to help the reader to see that medieval history is both important and relevant to a wide range of disciplines. Arnold's use of the structure of the book as well as storytelling and other techniques help get his thesis across.

Arnold begins the book by telling a story which seems both familiar and strange to us at the same time. The story is about a priest who is requested to play a part in magic rites repeatedly, including one scheme to murder the pope. While the magic and torture in the story are things most of us associate with the middle ages, there are many elements that go against our expectations. The most obvious surprise is that it is not an old hag that is the magician, but a priest. By beginning with this story Arnold is setting us up to question what we really know about medieval history. It makes us realize how the common stereotypes and ideas many of us have about the middle ages are not necessarily right. The rest of the first chapter goes on to talk about the way people commonly frame the middle ages and the problem with this. For centuries people have thought of the Classical age as a period of great learning and prosperity and the Medieval era as an age of barbarism. The word medieval itself is commonly used in a degrading way, such as the phrase "going medieval". He also brings up the fact that it is hard to frame middle ages exactly because the end and start dates may vary depending on how you define the era.

Arnold also talks about how we study history and the issues that arise. One of the first things he talks about is the problem of conflicting sources. When reading documents such as manuscripts from the middle ages, or any age really, we have to be careful of taking it at face value as we may find several documents dealing with the same topic but with conflicting facts. We have to also be careful at assuming what we are reading accurately represents the time as many documents would not have survived. There is also the problem of bias. For example, if a cleric had written the document then it would most likely have some religious bias. We should also not overlook the little things in favour of the big things. In the section on images, for example, Arnold talks about how the common images that come to mind from the middle ages are the massive stained-glass windows and beautifully illustrated manuscripts. However, equally, if not more, important are the images stamped onto coins or painted onto walls, for it is these that represent the common people and "popular culture" of the day. This chapter was particularly useful in providing me with a better understanding of how to go about studying and

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researching medieval history. In detailing many of the different research materials as well as the various problems one should consider when studying such materials, it provides the reader with helpful tips for future research.

The book also discusses some of the various approaches one can take to medieval history. Not just a strictly historical approach but also an anthropological, statistical, archeological and theoretical approach. This provides the reader with a glimpse at the wide breadth of approaches towards the studying of medieval history. We can therefore see the importance that medieval history may have not just to the historian but to many other disciplines as well.

The very structure of the book itself leads to a clearer understanding of a thesis. By starting off with the previously mentioned story at the beginning of the book he is instantly making us question whether what we thought about the middle ages is really true. This is followed by various ways of studying history and the problems that a researcher may face. He then ends the book with a personal story of comments made by a carpenter towards him. In this story we can see a real life, present day example of how we now view the middle ages. Many people view the study of it to be a waste of time and much less useful than practical skills like carpentry. However, by starting us off doubting the truth of our previously held beliefs towards the period, followed by the wide range of methods and issues of studying history we can see the value that it actually holds. Before reading the book we may have held similar beliefs to the carpenter, but by the end we are able to see the wrongness of this view. We have see how our own preconceptions of the times can be wrong as well as not only the various other ways of studying the period but the ways that we may mislead ourselves. Thus we can see the practicality that the study of medieval history actually has.

I would say that the one big problem this book really has is that the middle really seems to drag on. While it has important information and advice to offer I feel that Arnold could have presented it in a different matter. Although I have argued that the structure of the book is significant towards conveying the thesis I believe that there are changes that could have been made while still keeping the structure intact. I believe that Arnold should have sprinkled some more stories throughout the book rather than mainly at the beginning and end. Stories help to both keep the material interesting as well as enabling the author to highlight what he is trying to say by providing the reader with an example.

This book gave me a better understanding of how to study medieval history. Arnold effectively does this through discussing many of the issues and problems, previously mentioned, that arise with the studying of the era. More helpful, however, is that I can apply these lessons to not only medieval history, but history in general. I cannot make assumptions, or stereotype, a time or place, especially one I have not lived in. A researcher should keep an open mind and keep bias out of their work. As well as applying to history in general, these tips are also helpful for

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researching any subject. This ties into what I believe is Arnold's thesis. Medieval history has relevance to a wide range of disciplines. Similarly, Arnold's advice has relevance to many disciplines. Thus, albeit in an indirect way, one can see how medieval history can be applied to other studies.

This book got me thinking about some of the ways that the study of medieval history has importance. It may not appear as obviously important to society as say, the role of a doctor or electrician. However, it is not without its merits. By studying and understanding the middle ages we are able to get a better understanding of mankind in general. It is important to learn the origins and evolution of different ideas and objects so that we can better understand how they work today. By looking at what people did we can get an idea of why they did it. We can then apply it to ourselves today and think about why we do what we do. There's also the very obvious reasoning that if the old adage "history repeats itself" is true, then understanding history can help us avoid it. We can look at what worked to come up with new and better ideas and concepts and we can look at what went wrong to help us prevent such things from going wrong in our own society.

It was while thinking about these things that I realized what a good job Arnold had really done with the writing of this book. When I first finished it I had thought it boring and wished that there had been more stories similar to the ones that he had started and ended the book with. However, upon further thinking I realized that although it had not been the most interesting book I've ever read, it was nonetheless effective. It got me thinking, which is what I believe a good book should do. It offered me advice as well as changed the way I think about medieval history.

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