

# THE VALUE OF PUBLIC HISTORY TO WOMEN'S HISTORY

## WOMENS HISTORY IN FILMS AND TV Suffragette (2015)

The 2015 historical drama film *Suffragette* tells the story of a character Maud Watts in the Suffrage movement in Britain. The main character is played by Carey Mulligan, other characters are played by Helena Bonham-Carter, Brendan Gleeson, Anne-Marie Duff and Meryl Streep, who played Emmaline Pankhurst. It was directed by Sarah Gavron and Written by Abi Morgan. The film presents the Suffrage movement from both a working class and middle-class perspective, which is a different narrative than many perceive the movement to be. Although the main character is fictional, she was based on the stories of several working-class Suffragettes who put their marriages, jobs and children in danger. As Filmmaker Morgan said, they created a 'composite characters who we felt would carry the voices of these women who hadn't been heard and allow them to segue and intersect with these extraordinary moments of history," (Speidel, 2013 ) The film, however, has been said to leave out some difficult situations and questions revolving the Suffragette movement.



Poster for the 2015 film *Suffragette*

History on film can be essential to public history because it can bring new audiences knowledge that they had no previous interest in. For women's history this teaches a more accurate representation of history, rather than a history narrative from a patriarchal perspective. Films can also be easier to relate to and can open conversations about history up. Critics of history on film or television, those who Rosenstone labels as 'gatekeepers of the profession' (Rosenstone, 2017, p7), may argue that history on film has to be simplified or altered for entertainment purposes. This can create false narratives. Conversely, as Rosenstone argues, in the same way academic, written history refers to actual events of the past, they both partake in the 'unreal and fictional' because 'both are made out of sets of conventions we have developed for talking about where we human beings have come from' (Rosenstone, 2017, p2)

## EXHIBITIONS AND MUSEUMS Women's History Museum, Norway

Founded in the late 1980s and opened in 1995, The Women's History Museum in Norway had the goal of increasing women's visibility and status. At the time there were very clear discrepancies between men's and women's history that was represented in existing museums. Although the museum could not completely compensate for this, it gave visitors the opportunity to see an alternative version of history – serving as a 'source of inspiration and as a valuable resource for society as a whole' (Holm and Aarbakke, 2017, page 95). The museum became a National Museum of Norway two years after opening, joining 12 National museums. They found that it was necessary to consider gender questions scientifically. Mona Holm, the museum academic director found that despite women and gender studies being present in historical studies, 'men were still presented as the naturalised representatives of the human being, and women were given much less value and space' (Holm, 2020, p95).



Logo for the International Association of Women's museums

Historically, museums had focused on history from a man's perspective, there are now nearly 100 women's museum worldwide (some opting to call themselves gender museums), for example the National Women's History.

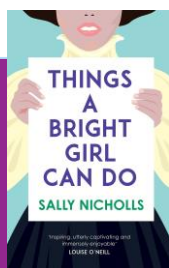
Museum in the USA, The Vietnamese Women's Museum, and the Pankhurst centre. There are also a further 46 initiatives to open new ones. All of them recognise a need to engage with women's history and culture that may have been previously absent in history museums and historical narratives.

Museums can be an excellent way of giving out historically correct information, with evidence and exhibitions to prove their points and to make more interactive.

However, museums can have downfalls, they are not accessible to all, and 100 museums worldwide is actually not many in comparison to other history museums. An interest has to be shown in women's history to visit a museum on it, especially as travel may be necessary and can be expensive. Many in the public may perceive museums as boring therefore not seek out to visit them.

## HISTORICAL BOOKS Things a Bright Girl Can Do. Sally Nicholls

*Things a Bright Girl can do* is a Young Adult novel written by Sally Nicholls of young teenagers during the suffragette movement. Published in 2017, but set in 1914 it shows what society was like at the start of the First World War, as well as during the fight for women's rights. It shows this landscape through the eyes of teenagers at working class, middle class and upper class families. It also takes a critical angle on the First World War on the home front, arguably from a more accurate but certainly less patriotic point of view. It was put onto the Observer, the Telegraph and the News Statesman lists for best books of 2017 and was shortlisted for the National Book Awards.



Front cover page for novel, *Things a Bright Girl Can Do* (2017) by Sally Nicholls

Historical fiction books are incredibly important to public history because, similarly to films, they are more accessible to the wider public than exhibitions and museums. They are also allow the public to explore the past and history in a way that is most likely more interesting to them than reading Historian books and articles. Historical fiction presents opportunities to reinforce and redefine the publics view of historical events, while also being relatable. Especially for a young adult novel such as the example I have used, they offer a different perspective of events than maybe will be taught at schools and allow a conversation to be opened up. As Rycik and Rosier argue historical fiction 'provides students with a vicarious experience for places and people they could otherwise never know' (Ryckik and Rosier, 2009, p163). On the other hand, historical fiction may be too simplified and inaccurate for many academics, who worry that the public may take it as absolute fact. Litt describes it as 'deeply bogus' and to be written 'in bad faith' (Litt, 2008, p111).



# Bibliography

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