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Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge

Alison Landsberg

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Reading films, television dramas, reality shows, and virtual exhibits, among other popular texts, *Engaging the Pas*t examines the making and meaning of history for everyday viewers. Contemporary media can encourage complex interactions with the past that have far-reaching consequences for history and politics. Viewers experience these representations personally, cognitively, and bodily, but, as this book reveals, not just by identifying with the characters portrayed.

Some of the works considered in this volume include the films *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), *Good Night and Good Luck* (2005), and *Milk* (2008); the television dramas *Deadwood*, *Mad Men*, and *Rome*; the reality shows *Frontier House*, *Colonial House*, and *Texas Ranch House*; and The Secret Annex Online, accessed through the Anne Frank House website, and the Kristallnacht exhibit, accessed through the Unites States Holocaust Museum website. These mass cultural texts cultivate what Alison Landsberg calls an "affective engagement" with the past, tying the viewer to an event or person and fostering a sense of intimacy that does more than transport the viewer back in time. Affect, she suggests, can also work to disorient the viewer, forcibly pushing him or her out of the narrative and back into his or her own body. By analyzing these specific popular history formats, Landsberg shows the unique way they provoke historical thinking and produce historical knowledge, prompting a reconsideration of what constitutes history and an understanding of how history works in the contemporary mediated public sphere.

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