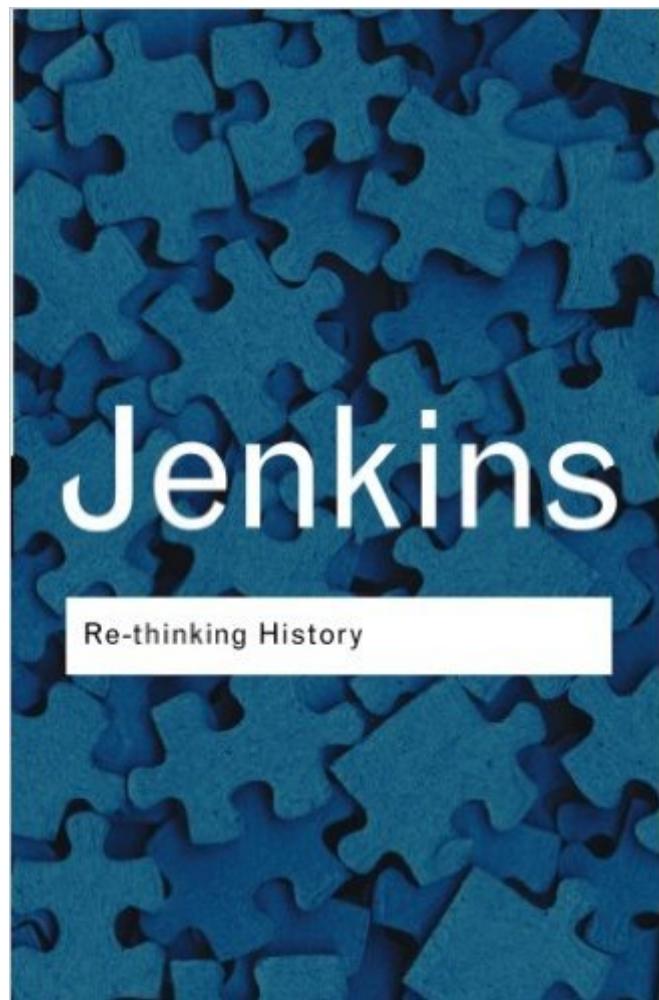


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Rethinking History (Routledge Classics)



Synopsis

History means many things to many people. But finding an answer to the question 'What is history?' is a task few feel equipped to answer. If you want to explore this tantalising subject, where do you start? What are the critical skills you need to begin to make sense of the past? The perfect introduction to this thought-provoking area, Jenkins' clear and concise prose guides readers through the controversies and debates that surround historical thinking at the present time, providing them with the means to make their own discoveries.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In Re-thinking History Keith Jenkins argues that there is no history, only histories constructed by historians' perspectives. To use Alun Munslow's words, "all history is unavoidably situated." (p. xiv) There is neither a proper way to do history nor a hidden truth waiting to be found. The historian employs literary narrative as a professional tool to create a meaning for the past, a framework in which to tell his/her [hi]story. History and the past are not the same things. Though historians use primary and secondary sources in their work, they cannot know if their finished products correspond with the past. The Routledge classic edition of Re-thinking History uses three succinct chapters--plus a preface, a Munslow-Jenkins conversation, and an introduction--to lay out Jenkins's post-modern view of history in relation to previous norms. In chapter one, which concludes with a whopping 97-word definition of history, Jenkins discusses the question of what is history in theory

and in practice. He distinguishes between "the past" and "history". The terms are not synonymous; in fact, they "float free of each other...ages and miles apart." (p. 7) Jenkins suggests use of the terms "past" and "historiography" (the writings of historians), for "the past has gone and history is what historians make of it when they go to work." (p. 8) To illustrate the past-history distinction, he emphasizes the obvious: though millions of women have lived in the past, only a few appear in history. The historian faces three problematic theoretical areas when trying to fit the past into history: epistemology, methodology, and ideology. The limits of historians' epistemology--the way they know what they know--prevents history from presenting objective, accurate accounts of a 'real past'.

The other reviews on give excellent presentations of the arguments contained in this short and well-written book. I will just add a few thoughts. Keith Jenkins wrote this book with the express purpose of introducing "deconstructionist" ideas into a generally conservative discipline. He is concerned with the lack of discussion of theory in history circles and, when discussed, by its limiting scope. Keith Jenkins is convinced that we live in a post-modern world, a world in which everything is ideologically positioned and morally relative; where nothing is fixed and everything is open to revision. This book basically applies these insights to historiography (the theory of how history is practiced and written). Keith Jenkins, who is basically an expositor of the ideas of Hayden White, is seen here attempting a popularization of a lot of Hayden White's work. Needless to say he is incredibly successful in this. Keith Jenkins presents these arguments in very readable and intelligible terms, and shows that history is what historians do when they want to understand the past. History and the past are two completely different things. The past is that which precedes us here in the present, and history is the way historians write about it. But because people are always ideologically motivated and positioned in the present, authoring an objectively true account of the past is impossible because facts must be selected in an infinitely rich and inexhaustible world, making those facts which come to be selected ideologically-laden. Moreover, there is no way to compare the relative merits of competing accounts of the past because the past itself is not an account, but a series of past events.

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