

How Do We Know What Happened in the Past?

SARAH SUTHERLAND muses on our reverence for the written word and the growing recognition of oral traditions.

THE WRITTEN WORD is a great aid to human memory—a tool that enables us to hear in our heads the words of those long dead. Writing is the most enduring way humans have devised to record words, and those of us who think of such things still hope someone will find some lost scrap of Sappho’s poetry or a lost book by one of the Apostles. (A quick search online leads me to believe that finding lost books of the Bible is the most popular target for this desire.) This hope is so real that some writers, such as Zachary Mason, invent lost books by Homer to fill the gaps left in the literature of the classical world when it turned to dust in medieval libraries.¹

The possibility of receiving first-hand reports of history is limited by the human lifespan. The greatest breadth of personally experienced history I’ve been exposed to extended to the late 19th century: my great-grandmother, who was alive during my lifetime, was born before 1900. This is likely the greatest depth of personal history I will now ever have access to, given that almost every person who was born before 1900 is deceased. In contrast, books allow us to know the thoughts of those who lived thousands of years ago.

That the written word diminishes the need for people to develop their own memories is an old criticism. Now, those of us with smartphones walk around with the ability to access the largest encyclopedia in the history of the world at virtually any moment, in addition to endless other written material, to find any number of facts or lies, to settle a dispute or start new ones. Nevertheless, I recently read an eloquent argument for using the 1929 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.² Perhaps the world doesn’t change as much as we think it does.

The written word is an interesting kind of evidence. Many cultures give it a special reverence and ascribe to it an atavistic power

to convey truth. Even in these days of “fake news” and other lies, many see the fact that something is written down as giving it a special status and enhanced reliability. A book, of course, is even better because surely no one would publish a book that wasn’t true.

This is increasingly being challenged, not only because so many people use writing to mislead, either purposely or not, but also because oral traditions are becoming more recognized as evidence. This is especially true on the west coast of Canada, where oral traditions are finding acceptance in court in land claims decisions.³ Aboriginal oral traditions tell what it was like here at the end of the last ice age.⁴ This is a revelation: a chain of personal experience reported by one person speaking to another, telling us what happened more than 14,000 years ago.

The oral traditions of African-American culture are also influential, with rap and hip-hop shaping popular music, bringing a vibrancy and relevance to oral poetry that it hasn’t had for centuries. This momentum will continue in tandem with the increased vitality of popular written culture, and may contribute greatly to expression. This doesn’t stop us, as Virginia Woolf did in the 1920s, from lamenting the loss of the elegance of Jane Austen’s sentences.⁵

We fetishize books and lament the prospect of their passing, but all around us the written word is blossoming. People spend more time communicating in writing and reading than ever before in history. It’s traditional to worry about a lack of reading and writing skills among young people (and let’s not get into spelling), but the constant playing with words and written communication media will surely enrich our culture. After all, after 50 years even the Beatniks have achieved a kind of respectability.

In *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury told of a

world where books were suppressed and people memorized them to keep them safe. In so doing, people came to identify as those books, taking responsibility to teach someone else their books before they died. I think in a way we become the stories we read, hear and tell, and I hope that oral traditions will continue to receive more of the reverence in our culture that books have had.

1. See Mason's *Lost Books of the Odyssey: A Novel* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007).
2. Anthony Wells, "Aunt Freda Opens a Door," *Slightly Foxed*, no. 44 (2014): 20–25.

3. *Tsilhqot'in Nation v. British Columbia*, 2007 BCSC 1700, <http://canlii.ca/t/1whct>.
4. Roshini Nair, "Archeological Find Affirms Heiltsuk Nation's Oral History," *CBC News*, March 30, 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/archeological-find-affirms-heiltsuk-nation-s-oral-history-1.4046088>.
5. Virginia Woolf, "A Room of One's Own," in *A Room of One's Own and Other Essays* (London: Folio Society, 2000), 80.

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