

A few years back I enjoyed a reunion of sorts at the Nieman Narrative Journalism Conference in Boston with an old boyhood friend, Ken Burns, whom I'd last seen in fourth grade or so when we were both playing baseball for the Indians of the Newark, Delaware, Pony League.

We got to talking about how we had both come to be so interested in history. Ken admitted that he had hated it all through school – his teachers had made history sound like an unconnected catalogue of dates and famous names, usually associated with bloody battles or obscure political maneuvers. Only when he was in film school looking for a feature project did he encounter a professor who suggested he try making a documentary instead.




ABOVE Philip Gerard in his Pony League uniform from the days when he played baseball with Ken Burns

THE Novelist OF History:

Using the Techniques of Fiction
TO ILLUMINATE the Past

BY PHILIP GERARD



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So before long he was chronicling the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge – not as simply an engineering marvel – a giant thing or inanimate phenomenon that just happened – but as a story of visionary men and women, their struggle of ambition and corruption and personal passion, and yes, of remarkable feats of engineering that defined an age of transcendent aspiration. After that, he was hooked on history.

I was luckier, in my way. From the earliest days in Catholic grammar school, we experienced history as a colorful ongoing saga of men and women struggling against all odds to create laws, societies, nations, inventions, justice. Even our fifth-grade English reader was called *Voyages in English*, teaching us grammar and rhetorical expression through stories. And each story in our various history books was an adventure in which vivid characters acted on their desires with passionate intensity and discovered astonishing truths about the world. There were heroes and villains – often both at once – and every kind of person in between.

When John F. Kennedy was elected the first Catholic president, our Irish Franciscan nuns assured us that we were now living squarely in the middle of history, and our parents who had voted for him were actually part of it. I saw President Kennedy in person only a couple of weeks before he was killed – cutting the ribbon on I-95 at the Delaware/Maryland state line – and thus I, too, became a witness to history. From that time forward, I went through life keenly aware that history was happening all around me, alert for the chance to do my part in the great ongoing saga that defines us.

I admit that mine is a somewhat romantic view of history – which from another quarter has been called simply “one damned thing after another.”¹ But I guess the case I want to make is that, absent human striving toward purpose and meaning, history is just a dull record of facts and events – boring to schoolchildren, who therefore will grow up without that essential curiosity that comes from knowing something of where you came from, and why, and wanting to find out more – and to discern where we, collectively, are going from here. And therefore what we value and believe in.

Thus I think history is just as important as mathematics or science or English – and arguably more so. For without a deep and broad understanding of our own history, we cannot be a nation anymore. We would be just a few hundred million strangers fighting among ourselves for personal advantage. Our shared story connects us. It makes us not merely inhabitants of the continent or the nation that is the United States – but *citizens*.