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Like his *The Embarrassment of Riches* and the bestselling *Citizens*, Simon Schama's latest book is both history and literature of immense stylishness and ambition. But *Dead Certainties* goes beyond these more conventional histories to address the deeper enigmas that confront a student of the past. In order to do so, Schama reconstructs -- and at times reinvents -- two ambiguous deaths: the first, that of General James Wolfe at the battle of Quebec in 1759; the second, in 1849, that of George Parkman, an eccentric Boston brahmin whose murder by an impecunious Harvard professor in 1849 was a grisly reproach to the moral sanctity of his society. Out of these stories -- with all of their bizarre coincidences and contradictions -- Schama creates a dazzling and supremely vital work of historical imagination.

Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations Details

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From Reader Review Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations for online ebook

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in October 2001.

A death forms the centre point of each of the two parts of this book. The first is a famous death, that of General Wolfe on the Heights of Abraham as his army was victorious. Schama looks at the way the event has been mythologised, including the completely unhistorical painting by Benjamin West and the more accurate account by American historian Francis Parkman. The second death is that of this historian's uncle, which prompted a famous murder trial in Boston in the 1850s.

The section on Wolfe is more conventional history than the other, and is rather like some of the essays on the reinterpretation of historical events in M.I. Finley's *The Use and Abuse of History*. It is, as one would expect from Schama, extremely well written, but it doesn't catch the interest as much as the Parkman murder.

The murder case is described as though it is a crime novel, complete with courtroom confrontation. It is a fascinating story, with circumstantial evidence the main prop of the prosecution case, the identification of the body right at the limits of the forensic science of the time, incompetent advocates, and an antagonistic judge.

In the afterword, Schama tries to show a connection between the two stories which means more than the relationship between historian and murder victim. It strikes me that he could probably be as convincing about any pair of tales of this length, and that the real connection between them is that they appealed to the historian.

The "Unwarranted Speculations" part of the title refers to the novelistic way in which the stories are told, with feelings and internal narratives attributed to the characters involved in a way that departs quite significantly from normal historiographical practice. It seems to me that this helps the stories come alive and, unlike the way in which historical novels work, it is quite easy to separate what Schama has added from the information which comes from the source documents - at least, it seemed to me to be simple.

Vasile says

Using facts and fabricating the possible truth. Schama tries to narrate a possible truth

Toby says

A very odd book, this, and one that I struggled to enjoy. Two stories, connected only by the most tenuous of links: the death of General Woolfe in 1759 and the murder, a century later, of a Bostonian eccentric in the most gruesome fashion by an academic. The first story, which I thought would be the more interesting, takes up only 80 pages and reads like an article out of *History Today* (with a few fictional additions). The latter takes up the remaining pages and is certainly interesting but not in the league, say, of *The Suspicions of Mister Whicher*, with which it could easily be compared (the latter book admittedly written 20 years later).

Simon Schama is a daring historian and I've greatly enjoyed the other books of his that I have read, but he doesn't have the novelist's touch and perhaps being spoilt by the likes of Hilary Mantel, I am too ready to criticise him on this point. The Boston story definitely has the makings of a great historical story, but this isn't it. The General Wolfe story feels like padding.

Shelley says

It doesn't quite work (and I'm a Schama fan girl). It's essentially a short bit of the death of General Wolfe (and how memory of it was shaped by West's painting and other sources) and then the remainder of the book is about one of 19th century America's Murders of the Century (businessman/doctor murdered by Harvard professor). I knew a fair amount about both topics already. I kept expecting it to break into a Connections sort of thing (if you remember that show) but...no.

There really is no connection there, aside from the point that history is what it's made to be, not necessarily as it actually happened. (This message is slightly tedious to a lawyer, since I'm constantly having to respond to "How could the jury have possibly found So-and-So innocent?!" with "The law is not what is TRUE, it's about whether the prosecution proved its case to the jury.")

It's Schama, so it's entertaining, and I finished it, even though it was a net "What the heck was he smoking?" and/or "Oh, so this is why I'd never heard of this book."

His imaginings of events (and writing them as fictitious interludes) is intriguing, since no two people view anything exactly alike, and nowhere is that more apparent than in the workings of the courts--and while it seemed to have gotten to other reviewers, that isn't what bothered me. I trust that the historian in him was thorough in his sources and it could have happened that way.

What bothered me was that it was badly organized, rambled at times (and it's not a long book), and while I like pithy zingers aimed at Congregationalists and Unitarians as much as the next Congregationalist minister's daughter, that can only carry a book so far.

Probably worth it purely for the picture of the young Simon Schama in the bio, though. He had hair!

Nicola says

A book classified as fiction by the author but classified as non-fiction by cataloguers, seemingly based on the author's credentials as a historian.

Interesting read though...

Robert says

I was hooked by the General Wolfe aspect and then the story of how the famous painting of his death came to be, and the story of how Francis Parkman's history of the contest between France and Britain in North America came into being - but as I struggled through the saga of the murder and subsequent trial of the murderer of the uncle, George Parkman - I wondered why. Frankly, if Schama was trying to tell me

something about history, I missed it.

Lauren Albert says

This is an odd mishmash. Schama is a good historian and this work is a puzzlement. Part fiction part history. It doesn't seem to know what it is. I also found it surprisingly dull.

Stephen says

I don't think the author achieved quite what he set out to do in this one. It seems he tried to compare and contrast two public deaths: James Wolfe, a British General who died at the battle of Quebec in 1759 and whose death was immortalized by painter Benjamin West and historian Francis Parkman, and George Parkman (nephew of the historian) a Boston Brahmin and Harvard professor who was murdered by fellow professor John Webster over a debt in 1849. What the author does incredibly well is take historical accounts and turn them into first person narratives. His talent for this makes the book thoroughly readable without crossing the line into speculation like historical fiction does. What he doesn't is establish a relationship between the deaths until the very end of the book. Plus, the two deaths do not get equal time. Parkman's murder gets roughly 3/4 of the book which leaves you wondering why Wolfe was included at all. Also, you can easily make the case that Wolfe's death was not what it seemed. That Wolfe, in fact, was not what he appeared to be. The Parkman case though seems pretty cut and dried. I don't see any controversy in it other than perhaps the trial itself. This is still an interesting book though, just not quite what it could have been.

Kelly says

What a lovely, strange little idea. I don't even care if it works or not. I bet the painting of it will make me smile.

Jacqueline says

Sort of history. Some of it is imagined, all of it based on documentary evidence. This is the best sort of history, that brings you an interesting and complicated story which requires filling in some blanks. Counterpoising the stories of Francis and George Parkman, the first who constructed our understanding of General James Wolfe with the second who was murdered, adds to our understanding of how history comes about from the facts that are available.

Kate says

An experimental work of history-writing, imaginative yet rooted in archival sources. Highly recommended!!

The first part, about the death of General Wolfe in 1759, functions as a proof-of-concept and an introduction to the historical methods we are about to experience. We enter the minds of people who see Wolfe from

different points of view: a common soldier, a historian in the late nineteenth century, and so on. Schama also describes a painting by Benjamin West, a depiction of Wolfe's demise that is not precisely "true" but that elevates the moment into the realm of powerful myth. Like Schama authoring this book, West had to "be strictly faithful to the details of narrative *and* to render them poetically noble by the exercise of the imagination."

Next, the bulk of the book -- an examination of an 1849 murder case, wherein a Harvard professor shocked the city of Boston by apparently murdering one of his creditors and attempting to dispose of the body in a gruesome manner. Here, we see how difficult it is to piece together a convincing version of past events, even when they happened only a few days or months previously. The lawyers, judges, family members, and public in a sense become historians of the recent past, weighing evidence and creating competing narratives as they try to make sense of a horrible event.

Schama executes this work with great literary skill and novelistic attention to the texture of life. You get a sense of what it is like to actually *be* a person, to inhabit certain spaces -- all those small details of personality and experience that sparse archival records tend to leave out. I was reminded of Werner Herzog's phrase, "ecstatic truth": a kind of truth that is "mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization."

This book immediately became one of my all-time favorites!

Daniel Polansky says

In retrospect I'm surprised I'd never heard of this odd pseudo history, or historical criticism, or what have you, by renowned historian Simon Schama, having been a long time fan and also enjoying these sort of exercises. The peculiar narrative structure revolves around (I am simplifying the matter significantly) short pieces of fiction recounting 1) the death of Wolfe at the gates of Quebec, as well as the veneration which followed and 2) the murder of a relative of a renowned historian of the French and Indian War, and the trial which followed that relative's death. The meta-joke is that Schama, whose books *Citizens*, about the French Revolution, and *The Embarrassment of Riches*, a cultural history of the Dutch Golden age, are broadly regarded as masterpieces, is calling into question the reliability of any historical narrative as being dependent upon the perspective of the individuals involved. I confess that, with all the respect that I have towards the man, this does not strike me as an altogether devastatingly clever commentary, though it deserves being said that apparently it went over the head of many of its initial critics, who reviewed the works as non fiction though it is obviously not so. What this leaves is, basically, some very well written bits of historical fiction by one of the great historians of the age (am I overselling that? I'm not sure I feel qualified to say either way). I enjoyed it, though if you put a gun to my head and said, tell me what Simon Schama book I should read, I wouldn't say this one. Also, quit holding a gun to people, what the heck is wrong with you. Gosh.

Cat says

He seems to be railing against positivism, which was in vogue 150 years ago. Women's history, black history, and other "alternative" histories have been challenging the concept that there is a single truth for a while.

Charlotte says

This is an exceptional, though controversial, book which discusses history in terms of imagination, using circumstantial evidence to piece together stories of the past. It highlights the difficulties faced by historians, as they attempt to move beyond written records to explain why certain events took place, the motivations behind the actors, and in a sense, what really happened. Schama most eloquently compares the role of the historian with the role of lawyers in a murder trial, who are challenged with proving or disproving the events of a serious crime. It is a worthwhile book to read, as it reminds us that history at all times is both objective and subjective.

Eric_W says

Simon Schama, author of *Citizens* (a history of the French revolution) and *Embarrassment of Riches* (a cultural history of the Dutch), has authored a strange little book entitled *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations*. I say strange, because while I've enjoyed it, I can't figure it out. Basically, he describes two historical events from several perspectives, and the link between the two is tenuous indeed. We begin with a fictional account of the death of Wolfe on the heights of Abraham in Quebec seen through the eyes of a soldier participating in the battle. Schama then proceeds to describe the accuracy of Benjamin West's famous painting of the event. This is followed by an essay on Francis Parkman, who, of course, is best known for his authoritative work on the French in North America and *The Oregon Trail*. Parkman insisted on authenticity for his works and, despite ill health, wandered over all the geography he wrote about; falling into swamps, scaling cliffs, and suffering attacks from hordes of black flies.

The second part of the book is about the murder of George Parkman, Francis' uncle, (this is the gossamer link) by John Webster. George disappeared one afternoon in 1849 while out walking. He was a respected member of the Harvard faculty, as was Webster, who had become well known for his research into more humane methods of institutionalizing the mentally ill. Webster, professor of Chemistry at Harvard, was up to his eyeballs in debt, and it was discovered that he had borrowed money from Parkman and Robert Gould Shaw (uncle to the hero of the movie *Glory*) using his quite valuable and geologically significant collection of rocks as collateral for both. It was also learned that Parkman was very perturbed by this double use of the collateral and was demanding his money back. Schama then provides a detailed account of the investigation and trial, which became a Boston media event. Ultimately, I suppose, the book is a meditation on distinction between truth and reality. Does art constitute reality? Does literature/fiction recreate history? Does Francis Parkman have a lock on the truth?
