

The History Boys

by Alan Bennett · Language: EN

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Overview

Alan Bennett's play "The History Boys" is set in a fictional boys' grammar school in Sheffield in the 1980s. It follows a group of eight bright, history-obsessed sixth-formers who are being coached for the Oxbridge entrance examinations. The play centers on the clash between two teaching styles: the charismatic, unconventional Hector, who values knowledge for its own sake and encourages intellectual curiosity, and the pragmatic, results-driven Irwin, who teaches the boys how to pass exams by being cynical and argumentative. The headmaster, Felix, is obsessed with the school's league table position and pressures the boys to succeed, while the history teacher, Mrs. Lintott, offers a more traditional, factual approach.

The play's narrative arc moves from the boys' preparation for their exams to the eventual outcomes of their applications, and then jumps forward several years to reveal the fates of the main characters. The central tension is between education as a means of personal enrichment and education as a means to an end—getting into a top university. Bennett uses the boys' witty banter and intellectual debates to explore themes of history, truth, and the purpose of education. The play matters because it raises timeless questions about what we value in teaching and learning, and it critiques the instrumentalization of education in the pursuit of social mobility. It also touches on darker themes, including the sexual abuse of the boys by Hector, which complicates any simple celebration of his teaching methods.

Key Takeaways

- The play contrasts education as personal enrichment (Hector) with education as exam-passing (Irwin), questioning which is more valuable.
- History is not a fixed set of facts but a narrative shaped by the historian's perspective and the demands of the audience.
- The pursuit of academic success can lead to cynicism, as seen in Irwin's advice to be provocative and dismissive in essays.
- The play warns against reducing education to a means of social mobility, as the boys' Oxbridge success comes at a cost.
- Hector's inappropriate touching of the boys is a serious moral flaw that complicates his role as a beloved teacher.
- The ending reveals that the boys' lives are not defined solely by their exam results; their futures are varied and uncertain.

- The play critiques the headmaster's obsession with league tables and the pressure it puts on both teachers and students.
- The boys' own intelligence and wit are central to the play; they are not passive recipients but active participants in their education.

Chapter Summaries

Act One

The play opens in a classroom where Hector teaches the boys general studies, often using unconventional methods like acting out scenes and reciting poetry. The headmaster, Felix, introduces Irwin, a young history teacher hired to coach the boys for the Oxbridge entrance exams. The boys are a mix of personalities, including the ambitious Dakin, the clever Posner, and the cynical Scripps. Hector and Irwin clash over teaching styles: Hector values knowledge for its own sake, while Irwin teaches the boys to be argumentative and to stand out in exams. The boys also prepare for their A-levels, and Mrs. Lintott provides a more traditional history education. The act ends with the boys preparing for their Oxbridge interviews, and Hector's inappropriate behavior toward the boys is hinted at but not fully explored.

Act Two

The boys travel to Cambridge for their interviews, where they perform unevenly. Dakin impresses with his charm, while others struggle. Back at school, the pressure mounts as the boys await their results. Hector continues his lessons, but his behavior becomes more concerning. The headmaster discovers Hector's inappropriate touching and forces him into early retirement, but the boys rally to support him, even lying to protect him. The boys receive their exam results: most get into Oxford or Cambridge, but not all. The act ends with a time jump, showing the boys a few years later: Dakin is in the civil service, Posner is struggling with his sexuality, and Scripps has become a journalist. Hector has died in a motorcycle accident, and Irwin has become a successful television historian.

Themes

- Purpose of education
- History and truth
- Sexuality and identity
- Class and social mobility
- Teacher-student relationships
- Cynicism vs. idealism

Notable Quotes

- "The best moments in reading are when you come across something – a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things – which you had thought special and particular to you. Now here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours." — Hector says this to the boys during a lesson, expressing his belief in the personal and emotional value of literature and knowledge.
- "History is a commentary on the various and continuing incapacities of men. What is history? History is women following behind with the bucket." — Mrs. Lintott says this to the boys, offering a cynical and gendered view of history, contrasting with the heroic narratives often taught.
- "Pass the parcel. That's sometimes all you can do. Take it. Feel it. And pass it on. Not for me. Not for you. But for someone, somewhere, one day." — Hector says this to the boys, explaining his philosophy of education as passing on knowledge and culture without expecting personal gain.
- "The truth is, I'm not a teacher. I'm a performer. I'm not paid to educate, I'm paid to entertain." — Irwin says this to the boys, revealing his cynical view of his role as a teacher, focused on making lessons engaging for exam success.
- "It's not a matter of right or wrong. It's a matter of what's expected." — Irwin tells the boys this when advising them on how to write essays for Oxbridge, emphasizing the importance of meeting examiners' expectations over truth.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is The History Boys about?

The History Boys is a play by Alan Bennett about a group of bright sixth-form boys in 1980s Sheffield preparing for Oxbridge entrance exams. It explores the clash between two teaching styles: Hector's knowledge-for-its-own-sake approach and Irwin's exam-focused cynicism. The play also deals with themes of history, truth, sexuality, and the purpose of education, and includes a subplot about Hector's inappropriate behavior toward the boys.

Is The History Boys worth reading?

Yes, The History Boys is widely considered a modern classic. It offers sharp wit, memorable characters, and thought-provoking debates about education and history. The play's humor and depth make it engaging for both students and general readers. It also raises uncomfortable questions about teacher-student relationships, making it a rich text for discussion. If you enjoy intelligent, character-driven drama, it is definitely worth reading.

How does The History Boys end?

Spoiler: The play ends with a time jump several years later. Most of the boys have gone to Oxford or Cambridge, but their lives are varied: Dakin is in the civil service, Posner is struggling, and

Scripps is a journalist. Hector has died in a motorcycle accident, and Irwin has become a successful television historian. The final scene shows the boys at Hector's memorial, reflecting on his impact, and suggests that his teaching, despite its flaws, left a lasting impression.

Who should read *The History Boys*?

The History Boys is ideal for students of English literature, drama, and education, as well as teachers and anyone interested in debates about pedagogy. It also appeals to fans of Alan Bennett's wit and social commentary. The play's themes of ambition, sexuality, and the ethics of teaching make it relevant to a broad adult audience. If you enjoy plays that combine humor with serious questions, this is for you.

How long does it take to read *The History Boys*?

The History Boys is a play, so it is relatively short, typically around 100-120 pages. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it would take about 2-3 hours to read. However, because it is a play, you might want to read it slowly to appreciate the dialogue and subtext. Many readers finish it in one sitting.