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Review Essay
Stories in History:
Cultural Narratives in Recent Works in European History

SARAH MAZA

STORYTELLING, or in academic parlance “narrative,” has returned to the historical discipline with a vengeance. The current “revival of narrative” was prophesied some seventeen years ago in an article of that title by Lawrence Stone, who accurately predicted the end of the hegemony of structural, material-determinist, and quantitative approaches to history.¹ Stone’s famous piece was somewhat confusing as to what form this revival was going to take, and understandably so, given the many different guises “narrative” in history has indeed adopted since the late 1970s. The return of narrative has influenced, for instance, metahistorical reflections on historical writing by the likes of Hayden White.² The rise of “microhistory” has given social historians license to recount the lives of the humble and obscure, in a form attractive to undergraduates and lay readers, at the same time as biographies of monarchs and military leaders have fallen out of fashion.³ Stories are currently being used to illuminate intimate, even unconscious, levels of past lives under the

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¹ Lawrence Stone, “The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History,” *Past and Present* 85 (1979): 3–24. Subsequent contributions to the debate about the place of narrative in historical writing have included James West Davidson, “The New Narrative History: How New? How Narrative?” *Reviews in American History* 12 (September 1984): 322–34; and William J. Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History and Narrative,” *Journal of American History* 78 (March 1992): 1347–76.

² Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, Md., 1973); and White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978). More recent examples include Lionel Gossman, *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); and Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, Hassan Melehy, trans. (Minneapolis, 1994).

³ Some of the most notable microhistories, a genre first practiced by historians of Italy in both Italy and the United States, include, in European history Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, John and Anne Tedeschi, trans. (Baltimore, Md., 1980); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983); Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York, 1986); Gene Brucker, *Giovanni and Lusanna: Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence* (Berkeley, Calif., 1986). For an overview and a sampling of works by Italian scholars, see Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, eds., *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe* (Baltimore, 1991). Some examples in U.S. history are Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard* (New York, 1990); Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *The Kingdom of Matthias* (New York, 1994); and Michael Grossberg, *A Judgment for Solomon: The d’Hauteville Case and Legal Experience in Antebellum America* (New York, 1996). In Chinese history, see

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