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**Genre Narrative Originality of Terry Deary's
*Horrible Histories***

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Abstract. The article examines the genre and narrative originality of the *Horrible Histories* book series; whose key author was educator Terry Deary. His creative work has been poorly studied in Russia and abroad, while in many countries the interest to historical literature for school students is growing. The material for this study comprises books from the series published between 1993 and 2004, as well as works by Russian and foreign critics. For the first time in Russian literary studies, an attempt is made to define the genre of illustrated texts on historical themes aimed at a school audience, which pay considerable attention to the “gory” pages of the past. As a result of the analysis, conducted using systemic, comparative, textual, and linguistic methods, the authors of the article conclude that *Horrible Histories* possesses features of children’s fictional-educational and instructional literature, and is also in many ways close to the comic book genre. A special place in the books is occupied by an omniscient narrator, who strives to be not a boring instructor but a friend to children and teenagers. In simple language, he recounts both well-known historical events and those not covered in school. The narrator allows himself to criticize teachers who “don’t know everything”, suggesting that the readers test their own mentors. Irony, wordplay, and breaking of stereotypes distinguish *Horrible Histories* from other educational books. This unconventional approach to presenting material attracts the young audience and motivates it to study history. Deary has found a new format in fiction that meets the youth expectations.

Key words: genre, British literature, history, text, irony, play

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Жанрово-повествовательное своеобразие «Ужасных историй» Терри Дири

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Аннотация. Рассмотрено жанрово-повествовательное своеобразие книжной серии «Ужасные истории», ключевым автором которой был педагог Терри Дири, чье творчество мало изучено в России и за рубежом, хотя интерес к исторической литературе для детей и подростков во многих странах растет. Материалом для исследования послужили книги серии, вышедшие в 1993–2004 гг., труды российских и зарубежных критиков. Впервые в российском литературоведении предпринята попытка определить жанр адресованных школьной аудитории иллюстрированных текстов на исторические темы, в которых большое внимание уделяется «кровавым» страницам прошлого. В результате системного, сравнительного, текстуального и лингвистического анализа авторы пришли к выводу о том, что «Ужасные истории» имеют черты детской художественно-просветительской и учебной литературы и во многом близки к жанру комиксов. Особое место в книгах занимает всезнающий повествователь, который стремится быть не скучным наставником, а другом для детей и подростков. Простым языком он рассказывает и об известных исторических событиях, и о тех, которые не освещают в школе. Нарратор критикует учителей, которые «не все знают», предлагая читателю протестировать своих наставников. Ирония, игра слов, разрушение стереотипов отличают «Ужасные истории» от других просветительских книг. Нестандартный подход в подаче материала привлекает молодую аудиторию и мотивирует ее изучать историю. Дири сформировал новый жанр в художественной литературе, который востребован у молодежи.

Ключевые слова: жанр, британская литература, история, текст, ирония, игра

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Introduction

The illustrated children's book series *Horrible Histories* originated from school theatrical productions in which its main author, Terry Deary, served as director and scriptwriter. The project is aimed at primary and secondary school students growing up amidst the products of American pop culture. Historical events in the series are accompanied by humorous drawings and presented in a playful form with elements of dark and Rabelaisian humor. This unusual type of storytelling about world historical events has interested not only young people but also an adult audience. Since 1993, more than one hundred books have been published, most of them written by T. Deary. The co-author of the first one, *The Terrible Tudors* (1993), was Neil Tonge, and of the second, *The Awesome Egyptians* (1994) – Peter Hepplewhite. Martin Brown performed most of the illustrations.

From 2000 to 2001, the books became the basis for animated films: a total of 26 episodes were produced, and in 2009 and 2025 adapted for television. *Horrible Histories* also exists in the format of videos and board games. The popularity of the book and media versions can be explained by the successful combination of simplicity in presenting historical facts, boldness in their interpretation free from stereotypes. Laws, rules, and customs of bygone eras are shown and estimated from the perspective of a 20th–21st-century person. Stories are full of sparkling humor.

One can find more publications with analysis of *Horrible Histories* in British mass media than in academic journals. Foreign and Russian critics view the book series and its TV versions as an educational and entertainment project about the history of Britain and the world, noting the unconventional form of material presentation, sharp jokes, and ironic comments (Beck, 2012; De Groot, 2009, p. 39; Nenarokova, 2025; Scanlon, 2011; Scanlon, Buckingham, 2002; Solodyankina, 2015). However, the artistic originality of T. Deary's books is out of researchers' sight. The aim of this study is to examine the genre and narrative specifics of the *Horrible Histories* books.

Materials and Methods

The research material consists of books from the series published between 1993–2004, works by Russian and foreign critics on literary theory, including historical and children's educational literature and comics, as well as articles

devoted to T. Deary's *Horrible Histories*. The work employs systematic, comparative, textual, and linguistic methods of analysis.

Results and Discussion

Reading is part of culture in both the 20th and 21st centuries. In an era when the pace of life accelerates, the tactic of “scanning” replaces the tactic of “deep reading” (Zagidullina, 2016, p. 116), which is why short, illustrated stories are popular with children and teenagers. This is precisely why *Horrible Histories*, texts with pictures and without complex terminology, in which boring facts are presented as frightening, absurd, and hilarious stories, attract the younger generation.

According to the British Scholar J. De Groot, fictional works based on historical events aimed at schoolchildren of different ages have a pedagogical effect. They allow learning about the past in an easy way, provide an opportunity to reflect on specific episodes of history and how they are depicted, and present the author's point of view without literally repeating popular interpretations of what happened (De Groot, 2015, pp. 3–4). Children's and teenagers' interest in national and world history is difficult to foster solely within the framework of school lessons, and critics have suggested acquainting students with past events through fiction, comics, theater, or media projects (Briley, 2011; Kansteiner, 2017; Wright, 2024; Yakimenko, 2024).

The first books in the series *The Terrible Tudors* (1993), *The Awesome Egyptians* (1994), *The Vicious Vikings* (1994), *The Vile Victorians* (1994), *The Rotten Romans* (1994), and others appeared at a time when the British literary process was marked by a “noticeable, persistent turn to the past” (Novikova, 2016, p. 148). Rose Tremain, Robert Harris, Kazuo Ishiguro, Peter Ackroyd, Iain Pears wrote about the world and British history from realist and postmodernist perspectives. Their target audience was adults, though teenagers also read their novels and stories. The goal of *Horrible Histories* was to interest primary, middle, and high school students in the history of Great Britain as well as other countries. T. Deary admitted in one interview that he aimed to present the past, replete with many facts, names, dates, unattractive and often bloody (*gory*) episodes that teachers would not talk about in lessons, in a humorous way, to expose elites who are always villains, and show the “little people”, the real heroes of their time¹. In doing so, he looked for material that “the reader might enjoy” (Beck, 2012, p. 231). Because the authors were not constrained by

¹ Henley, J. (2012, July 14). *Terry Deary: The Man Behind the Horrible Histories*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/jul/14/terry-deary-horrible-histories>

curriculum requirements, they had broad opportunities in choosing and interpreting various topics.

Deary wanted to educate and entertain. Infotainment, informing and entertaining, was not his invention. In the 19th century, illustrated historical magazines aimed at teenagers aged 10–12, were published in many European countries (Popp, 2015). Their creators broadened the young reader's horizons through popular articles and at the same time made money on advertising, subscriptions, and retail sales of print media.

Horrible Histories are books 120–250 pages long, with concise information about events from the past of various countries. The text is printed in a large font and accompanied by black-and-white illustrations that resemble schoolchild's drawings. The books do not correspond to the canon of children's fiction: they lack a plot, a story with a narrative hook, climax and finale, as well as characters with whom the readers could identify and whose fate they could worry about. *Horrible Histories* can be classified as educational literature for children and teenagers. The texts focus on facts about historical events, outstanding and common people who lived in a particular era. The narrator suggests looking at the past from the viewpoint of modern morality and law, evaluating the harsh laws of Ancient Egypt, which involved burying pharaohs with close people and animals (Deary, Hepplewhite, 1994), beheading dissidents as a form of conflict resolution among elites during the Tudor dynasty's reign (Deary, Tonge, 1993), and the cruel treatment of workers by factory and mine owners in Victorian England, which the author himself considers criminal (Deary, 2004, pp. 5–6), but which were the norm for their time.

Although “children's psyches adapt poorly to the idea of a disharmonious world”, and children “expect a happy ending”², they may still like stories describing terrifying pages of history, ribaldry, and low comedy. Schoolchildren reacted positively to Deary's project. The eleven-year-old son of journalist D. Henley admitted he loves *Horrible Histories* because “you learn stuff, and you laugh at the same time” (2014). That presentation of material did not provoke protest from parents or the school community, which can probably be explained by the British sense of humor.

Part of the series, addressed to school students, is written in simple language and facilitates the absorption of key events through vivid examples and unexpected comparisons. When talking about teaching and rules of conduct in 17th-century English educational institutions, the author lists many reasons for which students were flogged, mentioning a headmaster who beat his disciples on

² Arzamastzeva, I.N., & Nikolaeva, S.A. (2005). *Children's Literature: Textbook for Students of Higher Pedagogical Educational Institutions* (3rd ed.). Moscow: Akademiya Publishing House. (In Russ.)

cold mornings to warm up (Deary, Tonge, 1993, p. 30). Young readers can compare how policies have changed since then and understand that life in their schools is not as hard as it sometimes seems to them.

The series also contains texts for those high school students who understand irony, parody, and wordplay. A teacher asks students who or what could get hanging from the walls of a Tudor castle? (Deary, Tonge, 1993, p. 7). The word “hanging” can mean “strolling, loitering”, but it also has a second meaning – “suspended, dangling”. This is exactly how the schoolchildren understood the question, convinced that it referred to people being hanged on the fortress walls. The polysemy of the word and its different interpretations create a comedic effect characteristic of *Horrible Histories*.

Each book is dedicated to a specific theme, era, and territory. The titles of most are built on alliteration, which gives them resonance and memorability: *Terrible Tudors*, *Rotten Romans*, *Vicious Vikings*, *Vile Victorians*, *Blitzed Brits* (1994), *Groovy Greeks* (1995), *Slimy Stuarts* (1996), *Measly Middle Ages* (1996), *Gorgeous Georgians* (1998), *Smashing Saxons* (2000), *Villainous Victorians* (2004), *Barmy British Empire* (2002), and others.

In some respects, T. Deary’s books resemble comics – fictional works where events are presented in a logical sequence through juxtaposed graphic images (Eisner, 1985; Gunning, 2014). Key elements of the genre are colored or black-and-white illustrations, symbols, and the accompanying text, often in the form of characters’ dialogue. However, unlike the full-color Franco-Belgian comics *Asterix, the Gaul* (Astérix le Gaulois, 1959 – present), which describe the adventures of eccentric personages in the context of historical events, *Horrible Histories* pays great attention to the educational part: text in the books prevails over drawings, and there are no recurring characters created by the author’s imagination at the center of the narrative.

Horrible Histories contains elements inherent in school textbooks: tasks for testing prior knowledge (What do you already know about?), retention tests (What’s your final verdict?), guessing games, exercises for developing critical thinking, timelines, and tables with historical dates and rulers’ names. However, within the educational discourse, a parodic mode is noticeable, with an emphasis on bloody, cruel historical episodes and ruthless rulers. At the same time, torture, executions, and wars with numerous victims are presented as terrible yet simultaneously funny events.

The books often use crosswords, puzzles, and questionnaires that require choosing one correct answer from several options. For example, in *The Awesome Egyptians*, the reader is asked how to become a ruler of ancient Egypt. To ascend the throne, one had to marry the ruler’s daughter (referred to as a “princess” in

stories for young Europeans). The reader must decide what to do if the ruling family had several heiresses:

- a) kill all the princesses except your wife;
- b) let the princesses marry men who would compete for the throne;
- c) marry all the princesses, guaranteeing your rise to the throne;
- d) imprison all the princesses except your wife (Deary, Hepplewhite, 1994, p. 14).

Correct, considering the right to polygamy in ancient Egypt, was answer “c”. Schoolchildren are meant to comprehend and understand that in different times and different countries, there existed laws, rules, and traditions significantly different from those in contemporary Britain, but the impartial narrator does not condemn them.

To introduce the monarchs of the Tudor dynasty, the author uses limericks, providing memorable characteristics for each ruler: *Henry Tudor beat Richard the Thirder...* (about Henry VII); *King Henry was fat as a boar / He had six wives and still wanted more...* (about Henry VIII); *A truly great queen was old Lizzie / She went charging around being busy...* (about Elizabeth I) (Deary, Tonge, 1993, pp. 14–15).

M. Scanlon highlights unique features of T. Deary’s *Horrible Histories* which, in her opinion, ensured the books’ popularity since the early 1990s: the author’s informal mode of address to the reader, an “irreverent” sense of humor towards historical figures, and special attention to the gruesome pages of the past (2011, p. 72).

Communication between the narrator and the reader occupies a special place in the book series. The narrator is a friend; he is older and more educated than the young readers, but distances himself from the role of an omniscient mentor and often makes fun of teachers who, in his opinion, don’t know everything, think within familiar stereotypes, and often mislead the students. “Believe it or not, teachers do not know everything!” – the author tells the reader (Deary, 2001, p. 5). From the introduction to *The Stormin’ Normans* (2001), we learn that history can be horrible because people can sometimes be horrible, “like you”, the author addresses the reader, listing the “most horrible” categories of people: “school bullies, school teachers, and school children who pull the wings off flies” (Deary, 2001, p. 5). By equating mentors with their misbehaving disciples, Deary sides with the child, weary of studies and behavioral requirements. Torturing insects in Deary’s universe is no less “horrible” than torturing people: all students’ bad deeds and the criminal acts of world-famous despots are united by the word “horrible”.

In *The Ruthless Romans* (2003), the teacher asks the class which nations in history can be called the most horrible. Students name the Aztecs (tearing out

the still-beating heart from the ripped-open chest in their rituals) and the Spanish (destroying many people in the Inquisition's fires). However, when the students mention the Romans, the teacher disagrees, calling them highly civilized people, roadbuilding being one of their achievements. But the narrator supports the students, recalling that those were the Romans who invented entertainment resulting in death in arenas like the Colosseum – legalized murder (Deary, 2005, pp. 5–6).

Deary aims to cultivate critical thinking in children and teenagers, the ability to see the unusual in familiar things. He also offers readers tests for teachers and parents to check their history knowledge (Deary, 2016, pp. 68–79). Often, seemingly obvious facts, such as the founding of the first postal service in England (Deary, 2003, p. 33), turn out to be a difficult quiz, and students have chances to catch adults in an error. The narrator's speech resembles informal conversations among schoolchildren; it lacks any trace of moralizing or superiority. Complex historical events are explained in simple, sometimes even streetwise, language. The narrator prompts reflection on the reasons for what happened, sometimes shares an opinion, but does not impose it. Questions such as "What do you think?", "Why did that happen?", "Who was the bloodiest?" are frequently directed at the target audience.

Most books in the *Horrible Histories* series are dedicated to the history of Great Britain, with events described from the Standard English point of view. The interpretation of some events might be disputed by residents of Scotland, Wales, Ireland, as well as other countries. Critics find inaccuracies and errors in both the book and television versions³ (Hoodless, 2008, p. 18), so they cannot replace textbooks, but they can spark students' interest in history.

Conclusion

Terry Deary's *Horrible Histories* combines the features of educational and entertaining stories, comics, and parodies of school textbooks. The content and tasks, as if from school history textbooks, are elements of educational literature. Illustrations, sequentially juxtaposed, are part of the narration: they bring the books close to comics genre. Texts, full of jokes, but with confidential manner of storytelling, are close to entertainment piece of art. For a young generation raised on short, illustrated books where pictures often carry more weight than text, this approach to presenting material proved to be engaging and easy for understanding. Narratives about the past, including its "bloody" (*gory*) pages, humor and unexpected comparisons, which interpret the laws and customs of

³ West, E. (2023, September 19). *What Horrible Histories Gets Wrong About History*. Spectator. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/what-horrible-histories-gets-wrong-about-history>

bygone eras from the perspective of a 20th–21st-century person, give young people a chance to look at well-known events and figures in a new light.

The book series sparks an interest in history among readers of various, primarily school, ages. A huge role in the books is played by the narrator, who positions himself as a friend to the young reader, ready to share his knowledge about past events, yet without being a boring mentor. Irony, wordplay, and the subversion of stereotypes attract a young audience and motivate them to study history. However, the dark humor and the dismantling of the teacher's image as an authority and source of knowledge introduce a degree of cynicism into the narrative.

The genre mix pioneered by Terry Deary was adopted by Nick Arnold and Phil Gates in their educational project *Horrible Science* (1996 – present), by Anita Ganeri in the *Horrible Geography* books (1999 – present), and others.

Horrible Histories has been adapted into television versions and video games. The genre format introduced by Terry Deary can be easily adapted into a multimedia format, thus popularizing educational projects and motivating young people to study history.

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