



Philosophy
Circles

Horrible Histories

In our opinion, the Horrible Histories television programmes contain some of the best comic writing out there and Terry Deary's original books are masterful. They injected bounce into many a lesson, regardless of the class' age. They also raise questions on the relationship between comedy and historical tragedy.



For an energetic and playful start, pair up pupils and ask them to debate which of two historical periods was more 'horrible'. If you have the books to hold up as you call out, even better! e.g. *Vicious Vikings* or *Stormin' Normans?* or *Angry Aztecs* or *Terrible Tudors?*



Using some volunteers, perform the stimulus as a piece of Readers' Theatre (script in hand). Once read, recap on what each character is saying, and let them discuss the different views in small groups:

Janey - We wouldn't want people joking about today's tragedies, so it's not fair to joke about the past,

Chris – Maybe some things can be joked about, others not

Andy – if enough time passes, anything can become fair game,

Morgan – Books like Horrible Histories are there to entertain, and we should leave it at that.

To let pupils show their initial thinking on each perspective, summarise the views on a pieces of A3 paper and place one in the middle of the room. Tell pupils that to agree with it, they stand closer, and to disagree, they stand further away. You can briefly hear reasons, but try to move to the next one fairly swiftly, and so on.

Do they have any other thoughts on this issue? I've deliberately excluded mention of black comedy and gallows humour, in the hope pupils will raise these concepts themselves.

You can pick one of these questions to kick off a whole-class discussion. As they are all inter-related, it's likely several will feature as the session progresses.

- Is it more acceptable to joke about the past than the present?
- Can we make jokes about sad things if it increases people's interest in them?
- Should acceptability of jokes be determined by time, or content? Or both?
- When should jokes be taken seriously? When should they be not be taken seriously?



If the class have come to a consensus, put their principle put the test with some real life events. For example, if they have said 200 years must pass before jokes can be made, does this give their Great Grandchildren licence to joke about the Holocaust?

NEXT STEPS

They could progress to a meeting of Horrible Histories writers/actors from 2250, who are writing their new book "*The Tricky Twenty First Century*". Add the twist of several representatives – from now, the future, and those being written about.

Pupils could use their opinions to construct a guide to writing a Horrible Histories book. They should consider what can and cannot be joked about, and what kind of jokes are acceptable.

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Enter **JANEY, CHRIS, MORGAN AND ANDY**

- JANEY** Be an actor for Horrible Histories, they said. You'll be on TV, they said. I thought I'd love it. But I'm starting to wonder if it's not so funny.
- CHRIS** What's not so funny?
- JANEY** People having their heads cut off. Or being killed in war. Or dying of plague.
- CHRIS** Well. They're not naturally funny things. But it's the way they write the scripts.
- JANEY** Oh, the scripts are excellent. But I sometimes imagine what it was really like for people at the time. They can't have found it that funny.
- CHRIS** I guess not. But they're just jokes. You're not meant to take them seriously.
- MORGAN** Exactly. History was so boring when I was at school. We're making history fun for kids! The jokes bring history to life!
- ANDY** It's just a job. Beats being Iggle-Piggle at Alton Towers. Anyway, it all happened so long ago so, everyone's dead. They're not going to complain, are they?
- JANEY** World War II isn't so long ago. I've got a scene about making fart noises with a gas mask coming up. When is the line between stuff we can joke about, and stuff we can't?
- ANDY** Maybe once everyone who knows anyone from the time is gone. Perhaps World War II is a bit soon.
- JANEY** But do you think it's OK if people in the future make jokes about people now dying in terrorist attacks?
- ANDY** I won't be there. So who cares?
- CHRIS** I think some things in history are alright to joke about, just not everything.
- MORGAN** We'll be history if we don't get changed for the next scene. Where's my wig?

Exit all