

Who Do You Think You Are?

Emma Palmer, July 2009



(Image credit: BBC - The image for the Who Do You Think You Are television series).

I can't remember the last time a television series held my curiosity as much as the [BBC series](#), 'Who Do You Think You Are?' Each week it follows the ancestry of a contemporary public figure, featuring people from a wide range of backgrounds, professions and cultures. It researches different family lines, explores the truth of passed down family stories, uncovers dimensions of family trees previously unknown to the person and contextualises the family history in relevant social, economic and political history. Not surprisingly it often takes surprise twists and turns, with the participant embarking upon an emotional voyage of personal and cultural discovery.

My personal interest in, 'Who Do You Think You Are?' is multi-faceted. I have always been fascinated by life and how we live; by the lives of others; how people live in diverse cultures and in cultures *within* cultures. I have been fascinated – horrified, too – by the extraordinary love and the extraordinary harm of us humans and how we organise and oppress. This fascination has led me into working as a counsellor and therapist. In doing this work, I am struck repeatedly by how important it is for some clients to know their place in the world through exploring family rumours, making their peace with relatives (dead and alive), with place and land, and understanding better their own their ancestry - beyond the relatives with the remembered names.

I love history and enjoy seeing how specific aspects of history are vividly brought to life when seen through the eyes of an individual looking at the lives of their particular ancestors. For the past few years, I have been researching my own family history and have been taken aback by the strength of feeling in finding family I never knew of, eventually finding the graves of long-

lost relatives and learning more about my roots in Britain and India. I am interested and keen to find out more about the richness of Indian traditions as an ordained Buddhist living in the Global North, practising a faith which has its roots in Northern India, home to some of my maternal ancestors.

As I have reflected upon the popularity of this series, and I have arrived at some suggestions as to why this series is so popular.

Trending

'Who Do You Think You Are?' surfs the wave of renewed, enthusiastic interest in ancestry, genealogy, local history and making sense of both our individual and collective place, and home, in this precious world. The series itself seems to be making a significant contribution to this wave. We have become much more rootless in the Global North over the past few hundred years. As social and geographical mobility have increased, with people moving around much more for work, our links with extended family and local community have often been fragmented, with the resulting loss of a rich web of relationships and interconnections (including the other-than and more-than-human world around us, and her rhythms.)

Despite the rise in leisure time for many, most of us seem to struggle to find the time to be with family and friends. For the younger generations in the current climate, social networking websites (Facebook, Bebo, My Space etc) are likely to continue to provide the 'virtual' communities which would once have been day to day personal relationships, experienced in person, in our local vicinity, in a long-standing network of life. A whole host of social, economic, political, ecological and technological changes have influenced the way we live, work and interact with each other.

Nostalgia

In thinking of the 'olden days' I wonder whether there is a certain romance in bringing to mind our ancestors, imagining them living in a slower-paced, more community-focused age, where we might perceive that there were fewer pressures? Of course, there may be some truth in some aspects of this, for some families, in some time periods. It can also be easy to idealise the past, remembering the bits that sound appealing, a bit like the way we can remember the happier aspects of our own lives and forget and leave in the shadows the sad, hard to look at parts.

It can be shocking when this 'halcyon days,' romantic myth aspect is blown apart, as it has been for some participants on the programme, who discover family tragedies and extreme loss and harm (the transatlantic enslaving of peoples, for example). The celebrities on the show are often surprised at the power of their emotional response regarding something that happened in the dim and distant past, still having a strong effect in the present day.

Empathy

There is also that sense of respect in seeing and acknowledging – feeling in our bodies - the difficulties our ancestors survived. I resonate with this in my own research. I recall feeling sadness for my own family, sitting in the Bristol Record Office here in Bristol, and discovering an ancestor from five generations ago, who lost both her husband and infant son within a week of one another; victims of the Bubonic Plague. This was tragedy on a small-scale, compared to the World Wars or the Holocaust or the transatlantic slave trade, all of which have featured on the programme. But a tragedy for that family, nonetheless.

Motivation

What's the constellation of factors which motivates people, whether well-known public figures and celebrities, or you and I, in beginning the journey of researching our family's history? This is an interesting one, and the balance of factors will inevitably be unique to any one individual at any one time. My sense is that for many people family history researching can be an unknown, unconscious process as we are first drawn into this personal journey. For others, it seems to be the case that their interest is much more acute from mid-life onwards. Perhaps this is a result of stepping back and getting some perspective on our own lives, and as we do that, our attention and interest is drawn to the previous lives of others. For others, it can be motivated by a significant transition, perhaps a bereavement of a close relative, or a new discovery about our family, such as long-lost relative re-appearing or estranged siblings being reunited.

Destinies and legacy

Whatever our initial motivation, whether driven by conscious or unconscious forces, this personal quest seems to end up throwing light upon our related place in the world and why we are here: our purpose, our destiny. Through understanding more fully the place and position of our ancestors in the world, what they did, and our relationship to them, we seem to gain some understanding of our own place in the world, what went before, and where we fit (and perhaps where we don't fit) into the puzzle of our families and networks. In turn, we can also start to review the legacy of actions and events that we might be passing onto future generations of our own, present-day families.

Healing

We have witnessed such moments of 'relatedness' in some of the participants of 'Who Do You Think You Are?' Many cathartic moments have been captured on film, as people are reunited with estranged relatives – healing past rifts, discovering new cousins, understanding more fully a family story or breakdown in communication which has affected their lives. Even more strikingly, participants often come face to face with the difficulties, and in some cases, tragedies, of their ancestors. In this moment of catharsis (and often, high emotion) it is a unique opportunity for some sort of healing to take place as the memories of the ancestors are honoured.

I remember a moment like this myself, literally stumbling upon the grave of my great grandmother and great grandfather, from whom my grandmother, their daughter in law, had become estranged, following the death of her husband (their son) in World War Two. I was taken aback by the emotion I experienced on that rain sodden, windswept Dorset hillside. It felt as though I was somehow 'making amends' for a sad misunderstanding which had resulted in my father never having known his family roots here in the west country – land he loved. In finding their grave (which called for an awful lot of detective work and searching endless graveyards) I was able to pay my respects in person.

Uncovering mysteries

Researching family history brings surprises, and for many of the people featured on 'Who Do You Think You Are?' the sense of stepping into the unknown is a vital part of the mix. What intrigues me is that so many of us have these nagging thoughts, odd comments ("you're just like your granddad") half-remembered family stories and question marks about great aunt so and so, which lead us into this exploration. This has been a re-occurring theme on the programme.

We have heard questions such as, “why do I feel so at home in Ireland?” “Why do I feel such a strong connection with the sea?” “Why do I do the job I do? Is it in my genes?” Many of us have comparable questions, particularly via family stories, which sometimes have a grain of truth in them.

One of our family stories was that my great grandmother was called a ‘Spanish princess,’ because she insisted on wearing a mantilla (a lacy scarf, which covers the head and shoulders). In fact, it transpires that the mantilla-wearing ‘princess’ was my dual heritage grandmother who had never set foot in Spain. Marriages between British men and Indian women were common and encouraged during early colonial times in India. The racism, casteism, classism and snobbery of colonised ‘British India’ meant that my grandmother (and her parents), hailing from what they thought of as a very ‘proper’ British family, elevated the status of my great grandmother - my Nan’s mother-in-law - making her own marriage more socially palatable. Spanish was clearly seen as preferable to being part British, part Indian. The irony is that my Nan’s family – the ones telling of the ‘Spanish princess’ were also of British-Indian heritage. The more I researched, the more Indian grandmothers I was glad to find – and the occasional grandfather - although I was saddened to find that their names were often erased, or just a first name included, making it impossible to find out more about them. Untangling this web of lies and deception was also liberating; a relief to discover the truth and to start to get to know that line of my heritage, to celebrate and educate myself about my Indian ancestors and my own internalised prejudices.

Place

Inextricably linked to this sense of relatedness in the world is the importance of a sense of place and geographical location, which has been a feature of ‘Who Do You Think You Are?’ In the past, people tended to move around less frequently. Sometimes programme participants track significant moves that their ancestors have made for work, marriage, and immigration - forced or voluntary. In understanding our ancestors: their profession, trade, vocations and where they were doing their work and bringing up their families, we can get a stronger sense of the historical traces of our own pathway through life. We also get a greater understanding of the role they played in huge historical events such as the industrial revolution and the World Wars. The programme beautifully weaves in information about a variety of industries in different historical periods, illuminating the living and working conditions of the ancestors of the person being researched and often featuring an ancestor who championed improvements in how work happened.

Resonances

You often hear the programme participants making links and connections between the lives of their ancestors and their own lives, feeling that blood link tangibly. There can be a tendency, perhaps naturally, to want to think the best of our ancestors, to paint a positive picture of them from piecing together snapshots of their lives from whatever historical records can be found. There can be the opposite tendency, too, a desire to find a villain, or someone at least a little bit deviant or memorable to spice up our lives and history. Perhaps this reflects our own tendencies and preferences, whether we are focused on living a happy, healthy life or wish to make our presence felt through being remarkable – or notorious!

So, thanks to all those involved with the making of ‘Who Do You Think You Are?’ including all of the participants to date and all those who are researched in the future. May the series run for a long long time.