

Boo-Boo's Big Day Out: A Boy's Bear as a Fictional Future Artifact

Dominic DeBrincat¹

¹ Department of History, Missouri Western State University, Saint Joseph, United States

Email: ddebrincat@missouriwestern.edu

Boo-Boo and I were inseparable. Apparently, when Auntie gave me the crocheted bear, I didn't like him, so I ripped off his mouth and his stylish collar and tie. Soon after, though, 1-year-old Dom and Boo-Boo became the best of friends. We went everywhere together—to the store, to church, to school, and to bed. Because he had no mouth, he had to talk through his nose, and only my mother knew how to do his voice properly. As we got older, Boo-Boo and I played together less and less. But our friendship endured. In fact, as adults, we still live with each other, and even share the same bedroom.



Occasionally, Boo-Boo comes to work with me. He visits my historical methods course to help with a lesson on examining artifacts when context is missing, incomplete, or silent. The in-class exercise hypothetically places the students 200 years in the future. They have found a dwelling that an unexpected volcanic disaster had preserved intact. The first thing historians uncovered was this stuffed artifact. Very simply, the exercise asks what this item can tell us about the past, this home, and its former inhabitants.

I throw Boo-Boo to the students. The first to catch him must declare something observable, treating him like a historical artifact. The student tosses him to another, who must offer a new observation. Boo-Boo joyously soars through the classroom, his limp arms and legs flopping freely, traveling airborne until the students exhaust their analytical contributions.

My students have raised many observations of Boo-Boo as an artifact. Most offered basic descriptive information, such as his soft flexibility, his brown yarn fur, and his orange paws, ears, and nose. Some recognized that he has been stuffed with panty hose. Others probed more deeply, pointing out his stuffing-less neck, suggesting he had been a victim of some trauma, or more accurately, that his person affectionately carried him by the throat. Astute examiners noted that his eyes and mouth are missing, suggesting that his person wore them off with affection, or more accurately, he was a victim of some trauma.

Several go beyond the superficial and analyze what Boo-Boo tells them about the unseen. Many reasonably deduced that children lived in this home, identifying the bear as a treasured toy. Others fixated on his homemade origins, that he was an expression of an adult's loving hard work, or that the residents might have had little money for store-bought, prefabricated toys. One student speculated that an elderly woman made it, because crocheting was not a hobby typically associated with the young or with men.

As a passive facilitator, I entertain all well-grounded observations as valuable contributions to historical research. Students' compiled comments are like the notes they might take on sources in class, the library, or in the archives. Then I tell them the known "truth," introducing Boo-Boo's story—my boyhood companion who has endured my evolving affections. I follow his tale with a reminder that research is a continuing process. I ask them to consider "what's next?" Here students urged researchers to "dig deeper" at the site to uncover what else could be found. Where in the home did they find the bear, and how could his location relate to those who might have lived there? Did pictures or social media records survive to explain its history? How might genealogies or residential records, if any, flesh out missing details? These speculative questions revealed my students' creative efforts in filling the gaps in Boo-Boo's world. It also showed how well they anticipated the ways in which their own time's technologies and environments might shape future histories.

Of course, Boo-Boo is not available for guest appearances. This exercise, however, works well with most household items. I have used clothing, cookbooks, smoking pipes, and college notebooks. But the best discussions have come from surviving "woobies" like Boo-Boo. The levity effectively disarms the students, letting them interact with an artifact that isn't ancient, foreign, foreboding, or intellectually intimidating. Instead, it is accessible and relatable, perhaps emotionally connecting them to a "lovey" of their own.

Although I introduce this lesson to my college-level classes, it plays to students at all education levels because it incorporates the fundamental questions of research: What do you see? What does it make you feel or think? What does it make you wonder? These are the building blocks of social science primary source analysis. They emphasize the key skills of description, deduction, and speculation.⁴

The lesson also conveniently juxtaposes analyses and common-sense deductions with the possibly disparate truth. Such a comparison provides a warning about what we do as social science researchers and narrative storytellers. It reminds them to be open-minded and temperate in their analyses, that much of what we do is built on incomplete or unsatisfying evidence. It also underscores the power we have as social scientists, that we often fill gaps with sober and reasonable speculation, especially when our understanding of the past is fractured or limited.

⁴ J. Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction of Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* Vol. 17, no. 1 (1982): 7-10.