



**Lou Trahan** Iota, Louisiana

# Listening for Lives

The Past Is Always with Us  
in the People around Us

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# About Me

- Researched and taught **narrative studies** for 25+ years.
- Given over 100 **talks**, including to the U.S. Army, the Library of Congress, the Chinese Academy of Social Science.
- **Books:** *The Amazing Crawfish Boat* (2016), *A Pirate in a Tree* (2024).
- Jacob K. Javits Fellow, a MacArthur Scholar, and a senior researcher at UCLA's Institute for Pure and Applied Mathematics among others...

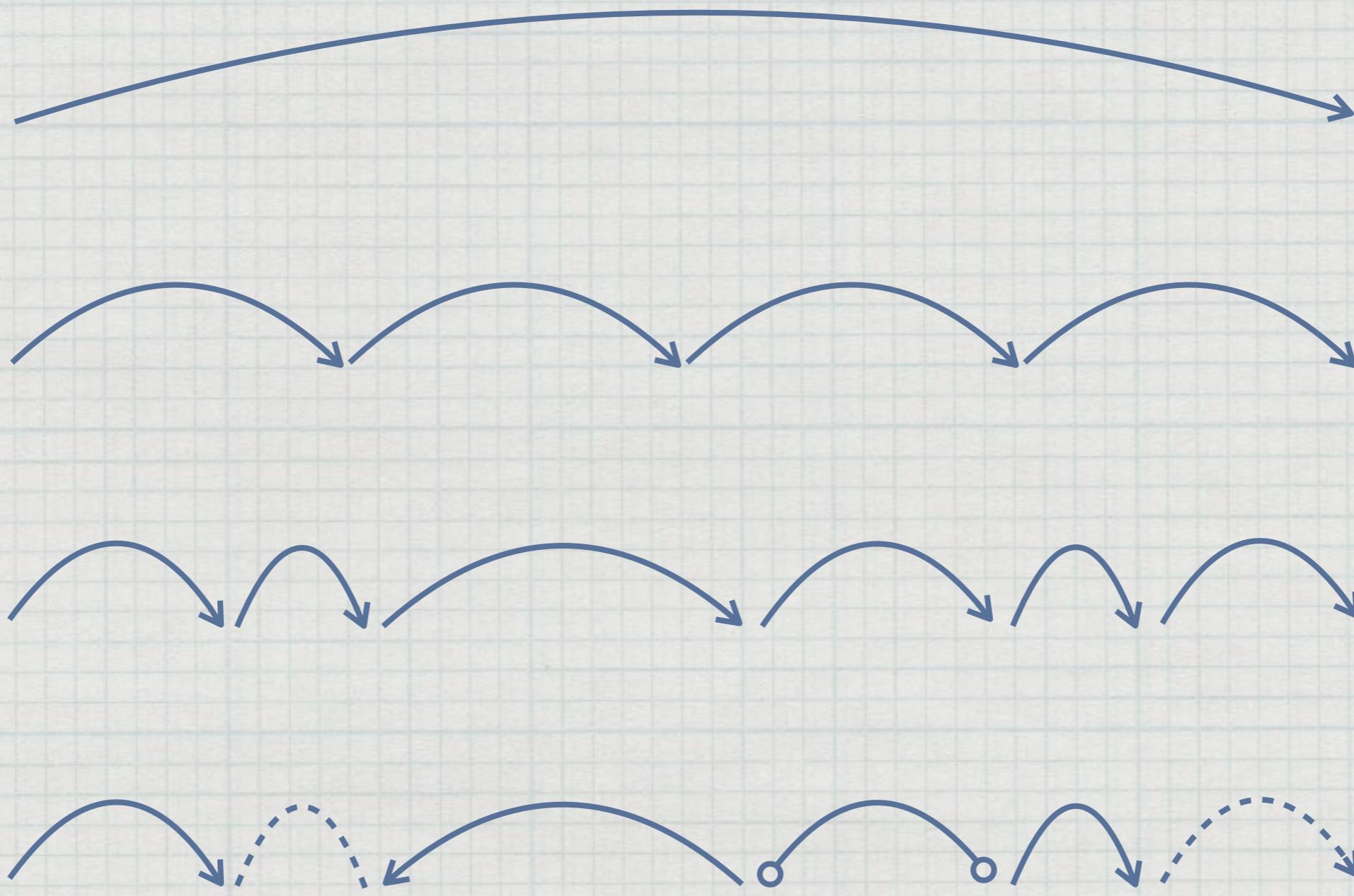
# Agenda

1. The Past Is Always Told in the Present
2. The Past Isn't Always a Sequence of Events
3. The Past Is Bigger than We Think



Interview Scene from **The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman**

# Life Stories





**Elizabeth Bridgwaters** Bloomington, Indiana

It's interesting you know

When I was a little girl

Most black people lived on the east side of town

But some black people lived over here

But they didn't want us over there

So they built a school over here

It's interesting **you** know

When **I** was a little girl

Most black people lived on the east side of town  
**they**

But some black people lived over *here*

But **they** didn't want **us** over *there*

So **they** built a school over *here*

# Takeaway 1

**Context matters.** People don't speak ahistorically about the past: they always speak about the past from a historical moment in the present.

**Actionable:** *create moments.*



**Jack Morris**  
Bloomington, Indiana

And you didn't hardly ever go downtown,  
except on Saturday or maybe Friday night.

And that was basically to do some dry goods  
shopping, but primarily it was for visitation  
purposes.

People would gather round the old square  
and sit on the fenders of the old cars and  
they'd chit-chat for an hour.

And, uh, there was another little guy down the street that had his own family pastry shop.

And it was, uh, BJ's bakery or EJ's bakery, never will forget it.

Just a little bitty place, bout half the size of this right here (indicates the kitchen where we are sitting).

And he had a couple of deep fryers back there.

He never impressed me as being real clean, but he had *goo-od* donuts.

# Takeaway 2

**History is not always a story.** People access the past in different ways at different times.

**Actionable:** *Let people talk.* (Be open to how people talk as well as what they say.)



Oscar Babineaux Rayne, Louisiana

One day me and my daddy. My daddy was sick. His stomach kept hurting him, hurting him. Every night he would lay in the bed cramped up so bad. Said there was a big old knot in his stomach. He said he just couldn't take it. We had to sit on his legs to stretch him out, stretch his arms out so that cramp would leave his stomach. So mama said one day ... We had an old seventy-one Ford pickup truck. With a purple hood.

So one day mama said — my daddy's name was Taise — she said Taise we going to bring you to the treater. I was kind of small, so they brought me with them. And the only thing I can remember, man, is my daddy going in the house with this old lady. And I was still in the truck, because they wouldn't let me go in the house. So when he come outside, he throwed up snakes. Out of his stomach. Out of his mouth. I mean six seven eight nine ten. Throwed them up. And when we left from there, Daddy was fine. Never caught a cramp again.

# A Pirate in a Tree 1

One day we went, and I was at work, so I can see, we at a country spot, like our property. So I can see a lot of people dressed in white. So I'm curious me. I said, well shit what the hell is everybody doing out there dressed in white? I wanna see. So I goes out there. They tell me you're working right now, just go home come back. You know, come back after work.

So I goes back, man, after work. They all in the house. We all praying man, everyone's on their knees praying. They got an excavator in the back yard, digging. Find this money, I guess. We're on our knees, man, we're praying. It's like in the pit of the summer like here. No wind nothing. They had a wind come through the house. That wind was so strong my aunt was holding onto the door like that and both her legs was in the air. That's how strong the wind was. In the house.

# A Pirate in a Tree 2

So they said... they picked me, my nephew — the one I was telling you that talk all that shit, and my little niece to go bring some water to the workers in back, the one that was doing the work. So we got to walking. We passed on the side of the house to bring them.

So my nephew said, say man you see that guy in the tree? I said man fuck I don't see nobody in no tree. He said yeah man he be right there sitting on that limb. I said I don't see nobody man. I'm getting scared now. Man I don't see nobody. But he's seeing this, you know. So he said— I said how he look?

It's a guy, he said, it's a guy dressed in a pirate suit, man. He said he got a pirate hat on. He got a pirate jacket — and he started talking to him. The guy in the tree started talking to him while he's telling me this. But the guy in the tree is tell him shut up don't tell me that.

# A Pirate in a Tree 3

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# A Pirate in a Tree 4

So he telling me man look he right there. You can't see him? Look he right there on that branch. He say he want something more to drink. You know, because what they had did: they'd put a bowl in the back yard, under this tree, with some alcohol in it. You understand? And I don't know if it was the sun that would dissolve it, but it would be gone. Okay, so he say he say man he want another drink.

So I said fuck man don't tell me that I wanna get back in the house. I said I don't see nobody up there. So we kept on walking. We went out there. We brung them some water. So on our way back. Look at him. He say, see you, you son of a bitch. He say you don't wanna give me another drink, huh? He say you gonna be just like me. He say you see this here peg leg? He say you going to be just like me. He say for this out here y'all are going to have to lose something.

So, man, it got kind of scared. We started walking fast. By the time we got to the house, I broke out a run. A shovel, man, come from the back of the house. I mean full force. That shovel stuck in that tree so deep we had to dig it out with an axe. It stuck... you know with a shovel, it's hard to stick a shovel into anything. That shovel went inside the tree halfway.

# Deeper History

By 1817 the privateers of Jean Lafitte and his predecessor, Luis de Aury, were capturing numerous Spanish slavers off the coast of Cuba. The pirate's barracoons, or slave pens, on Galveston Island were often swelled beyond capacity, containing a thousand or more African chattels. Many buyers came to the island to buy slaves at \$1.00 per pound, and three brothers, John, Rezin, and James Bowie, were among the pirate's best customers. In 1853 John Bowie recorded in "DeBow's Magazine" that the brothers, who channeled their illicit slave trade via Black Bayou on Lake Sabine or via the Calcasieu to Lake Charles, realized a net profit of \$65,000 in two years time from the sale of 1,500 Africans in Louisiana.

# Takeaway 3

**Deeper histories lurk beneath sometimes strange surfaces.** Different genres give us access to different truths.

**Actionable:** *Capture everything; sort later.*  
(Never think you know what history is supposed sound/look like.)

# Looking Backwards

## **The Past Is Always Told in the Present**

Context matters. *Create moments.*

## **The Past Isn't Always a Sequence of Events**

History is not always a story. *Let people talk.*

## **The Past Is Bigger than We Think**

Deeper histories lurk beneath strange surfaces.  
*Capture everything; sort later.*



**Enola Matthews** Jennings, Louisiana

Thank  
You

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