Grethlein, J.

*Experience and Teleology in Ancient Historiography*, the fifth monograph Grethlein has produced at an astonishingly young age, has some claim to be his most ambitious. Following the arguments he outlined in the final part of *The Greeks and their Past* (2010) and in a number of earlier articles, G. sets out to analyse the tension between experience and teleology in historical writing—that is, the tension between the way historians attempt to restore the presentness of the past as it was experienced by contemporaries and the way they exploit retrospect in making sense of the past. As in his earlier writings, G.’s analysis draws on a range of theoretical approaches, in particular phenomenology. The greater ambition of this new book lies in its range, with chapters devoted to eight historical or (auto)biographical writers: Thucydides, Xenophon (*Anabasis*), Plutarch (*Alexander*), and Tacitus (*Annals*) are covered in Part I, “Experience”; while Herodotus, Polybius, and Sallust (*Bellum Catilinae*) are treated in Part II, “Teleology”; Part III, “Beyond Experience and Teleology”, then turns to Augustine (*Confessions*) and to some narrative experiments in modern historiography. As one would expect from G.’s previous scholarship, the book includes many nuanced readings of passages from his chosen authors. But it falters on ambiguities in his use of his two key terms, ‘experience’ and ‘teleology’, on problems in the criteria for detecting these two tendencies, and on the selectivity of his readings of his chosen authors.

G. is throughout driven by a desire to demonstrate the power of narrative to represent experience. He sets out a theoretical justification of this power in his ‘Introduction’: “the goals pursued by humans . . . embed in the world of experience a structure that is homologous to the teleologies of historical narratives” (4). Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck, G. notes that a two-way relationship between expectation and experience structures both human life and historical narrative: expectations are confronted by experiences, and experiences give rise to new expectations. At the same time, G. is aware of the differences between lives and narratives: “the experiences of the recipients [of narrative] take place in the mode of “as-if” . . . Only the senses of sight and hearing, but not the other senses including the most “pathic” sense of touch, are involved” (16). G.’s formulation here ignores the materiality of texts (including the fact that, when we read a book, we know how many pages are left until the end) and other culturally determined conditions that shape the ‘as-if’-ness of recipients’ experiences. More problematic, however, is the way G. tends to ignore the ‘as-if’-ness of readers’ experiences in the rest of the book: he continually drives
home the message that historians can “restore the presentness of the past” (a phrase repeated countless times throughout the book), without regard for the textual mediation of the past through narrative. And an even bigger problem is that G. also neglects the two-way relationship of expectation and experience that is the basis of the homology between human life and historical narrative. Experience turns out to be more traditional than one would expect from the theoretical cast of the introduction: for the most part it is experientiality—the readers’ sense of being present at narrated events or at least somehow sharing in the contingency of events as played out in historical time. And experience is opposed not to expectation but to teleology—which is made to cover historians’ use of hindsight as well as their creation of a sense of an ending (however provisional) in their works as a whole (G. pays much less attention to the endings of distinct narrative sections within their works).

G. claims that his chosen texts sit one side of the experiential/teleological divide: hence the division between Parts I and II of his book. But he is forced in each chapter to acknowledge such serious counter-examples that he undercuts the case that his chosen texts are marked by the predominance of one mode over the other. Thus after choosing to include Plutarch’s *Alexander* in the ‘Experience’ section, owing to Plutarch’s alleged “striving for a vivid and engaging narrative” (108), he offers constant modifications: “its mimesis is seriously qualified by a strong narratorial voice…and frequent foreshadowing” (108); “the reader is jolted out of the narrated past” (109); “the mimetic spell of the narrative” is “disturbed” (110); its “mimesis is challenged” (181); while the visibility of the narrator “undermine[s] the mimetic appeal of the account” (240). Rather than reading the *Alexander* as a failed attempt at experientiality, why not accept that Plutarch is an ethically engaged biographer who illuminates character through anecdotes, some of which he casts in a pleasingly vivid manner? In any case, the supposed tension between experiential and teleological approaches is highly questionable: skilled readers know that when historians tell stories vividly they are doing so for a purpose, and that purpose is always the product of hindsight.

G. suggests that the vividness through which ancient historians restored presentness was created by a range of techniques, including variations in tenses, speeches, internal focalization (including meta-historiographical scenes of viewing), linear chronology, and narratorial reticence. All of these categories are powerful narrative tools, but there are problems when it comes to using them to pin down texts as experiential. In treating tense, G. has it both ways by claiming that two different tenses can be experiential: he follows Egbert Bakker’s somewhat impressionistic analysis of the mimetic effect of the use of the imperfect tense in Thucydides, while also relying on Rutger Allan’s