A message from the Director

In the United States, the phrase “civil war” conjures images in grainy black and white from half-remembered school lessons: Abraham Lincoln in stovepipe hat, corpses of Monocacy, Johnny Reb looking defiant.

For much of the world, tragically, the same phrase recalls sharper images, luridly colored: the aftermath of an IRA bombing, the collapsed Mostar bridge in Bosnia, a Tamil rebel looking defiant.

This year’s annual Humanities Institute conference, “Civil Wars: Narrating Horror & Hope,” puts those divergent experiences of historical memory into conversation with one another. Organized by associate professor of history Carole Emberton, the conference is partly inspired by the ongoing sesquicentennial commemoration of the U.S. Civil War. But the conference will also go far beyond that commemoration to examine civil conflict through time, around the globe, and from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. As the conference subtitle indicates, narratives hold the key to understanding civil conflict. Embedded in the stories we tell about civil wars are complex political negotiations over remembering and forgetting, truth and reconciliation.

As detailed in this brochure, distinguished experts from around the country – historians, literary scholars, anthropologists, political scientists, and a world-renowned novelist – will gather at UB on Friday March 28 and Saturday March 29 for the conference, which is free and open to the public. Through storytelling and analysis the scholars will conjure images drawn from the past that point toward the future – of both civil conflict and the humanities.

-Erik R. Seeman