

Truth in Nonfiction: Essays. David Lazar (Ed.) (2008)

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Reviewed by Caren Schnur Neile

What is the standard of truth to which we may reasonably hold a work of nonfiction? This is a question that few thoughtful readers or writers have left unasked in our post-James Frey universe of World Wide Wrestling and reality television. In his own quest for answers, David Lazar, who directs the nonfiction writing program at Columbia College Chicago, has assembled a variety of distinguished contributors to weigh in on the topic, including Kathryn Harrison, Wayne Koestenbaum, Oliver Sacks, and Vivian Gornick.

The result is *Truth in Nonfiction*, an anthology comprised of twenty-two essays that are, for the most part, beautifully written and a pleasure to navigate. They take the form of traditional essays, diary entries, and more playfully executed prose, and cover the topic as it pertains to personal and lyric essay, nonfiction film, and poetry.

The most notable subject is the fraught genre of memoir, which has been much maligned in recent years – and earlier; think Lillian Hellman and Mary McCarthy – for what comedian Stephen Colbert might refer to as *truthiness*. Although the original meaning of the word was *truthfulness* or *faithfulness*, truthiness has evolved, in Colbert's parlance, to describe that which a person claims to know intuitively without regard to evidence, logic, or facts. I summon the term here to reflect the sentiment of many of the contributors that there is a time and place to demand verifiable facts, such as, say, when determining to

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legitimize the invasion of a sovereign nation or the execution of a Death Row inmate. However, when the question is whether a memoirist's mother was or was not a monster, or how hard she beat him on either a Saturday or a Sunday, the reader of these essays can almost feel the writers throw up their hands and beg their critics to get a grip. Or, as Paul Lisicky, one of the authors in the collection, so elegantly puts it:

Once we hold memoirists to the standards of journalism and privilege agreed-upon truths to emotional interpretation, the whole genre falls apart – it loses its reason for being. I'm not at all speaking for best-selling memoirists who pass off wholly invented episodes as experience. That's an entirely different matter. But let's save our righteous indignation for the conscious manipulators of facts in our times. (Did you hear that, Oprah?) And we know exactly who they are. (p. 6)

This abiding theme is both the strength and the weakness of *Truth in Nonfiction*. The book's generally eloquent contributors find themselves grappling with the same few ideas again and again, mentioning many of the same names (Emily Dickinson, Vivian Gornick, Benjamin Wilkomirski) and the same insights. We see Kathryn Harrison noting, "If biology, chemistry and psychiatry can agree on anything, it is that memories are not received, but created" (p. 19), while Mark Doty comments, "Memory's an active, dynamic force, not just a recording one; over the course of a life, as perspective shifts, we keep moving into different relationships to the past, reconsidering, so that *what happened* turns out to be nothing stable, but a scribbled-over field of revisions, rife with questions, half its contents hidden" (p. 11). Alphonso Lingis remarks that "...everything we experience we experience *as* – we interpret" (p. 139), while Phyllis Rose's savvy "It's just a question in memoirs, which truth you tell. There are so many" (p. 33) is echoed by Barbara Hammer's adage "Editing is fictionalizing" (p. 148).

To be fair, Lazar acknowledges these redundancies to some extent, listing the book's main themes as "a defense of the nonfiction writer's tools of the trade, the unreliability of memory, [and] larger meditations on the nature of truth." At the same time, he quotes David Hume in his Acknowledgements, saying, "Truth springs from argument amongst friends" (p. vii). Perhaps some degree of argument among contributors would have made the book more compelling. In addition, more specific demands for the writers to stick to their own stories, replete with disgruntled fans, informants, and, most terrible of all, family members, might have made the book more engaging than a collection of so many similar, albeit interesting conclusions. The more autobiographical essays, particularly those of Harrison ("The Forest of Memory"), Doty ("Bride in Beige") and Gornick ("Truth in Personal Narrative") are most successful

here precisely because they root the thorny abstractions in concrete experience. Who would imagine that one could stir up the hornet's nest that Rose did ("Whose Truth?") when writing about a year she spent reading Proust? And what unfeeling reader would not wish to stop Rose's hand as she describes in exquisite detail the trouble she had after writing about people in her life who will, more than likely, read the current essay as well?

Lazar adds some useful insights of his own in his contextualizing introduction, titled "An Introduction to Truth," and his essay, "Occasional Desire: On the Essay and the Memoir." His list of inexcusable "falsehoods" in nonfiction includes: "marks of self-deception in writers of nonfiction, forms of psychological manipulation, the drawing of conclusions, and epiphanies that seem labored, unworthy, unbelievable, false" (p. x). An excellent point, this, but then inexplicably, he situates such valuable pronouncements in writing that too often resorts to a fey tone that distracts from his arguments while adding nothing in exchange.

A case in point: "An Introduction to Truth" opens with the words, "My title, of course, is in jest" (p. ix) and closes with "I think these are wonderful essays, and this, an anthological field day for me. And no, you in the back row, I'm not just saying that. What are you, nobody's son-in-law? A jest" (p. xiii). Why? Why does Lazar feel the need to make a perfectly sound essay appear so sophomoric? In the same essay, he writes:

How do we verify? Do we care to? (Do we dare to eat the apple of knowledge and say it's true? Or is it a peach?) Do we choose to? Is truth a subcategory of faith? How do you respond when someone says, "This is really true"? Why did they choose to say it then? It maketh me nervous. (p. x)

It maketh *me* wonder why the writer feels the need to be quite so cute.

In the same vein, Lazar writes:

But my real question, in case you doubted I had one.... (p. 101);

Let me cut to the chase (a phrase I remember fondly from my days in Brooklyn schoolyards – Marie, hold on?) (p. 101);

[Hellman's work was] the only essay I can think of to be turned into a film, though I think Chaplin was contemplating "Death of the Moth," by Virginia Woolf, until he decided that it wasn't written yet. Seriously, though, the essay is about serious stuff... (p. 109)

On the one hand, *Truth in Nonfiction* is clearly not your father's examination of truth. Indeed, the opening line of Koestenbaum's "The Rape of Rusty" (p. 114) refers to the author's sexual activity while reading scenes from Gore Vidal's

Myra Breckenridge (p. 114). On the other hand, the book is, after all, “about serious stuff.”

The most important consideration about *Truth in Nonfiction* is whether the question of what constitutes truth in nonfiction, no matter how nicely framed, is of sufficient weight to warrant an anthology. Perhaps the problem is best presented as just one of many. Better, or at any rate, follow-up questions might be: What is so thrilling about the words “based on a true story” that causes audiences to flock to a book or film? How many of us run to the Internet to look up the subject matter while the credits are still rolling on the DVD to determine how far the work of art strays from the truth? And why do griping authors bother calling their work memoir and not novel if they do not want people to hold them to some standard of faithfulness to the facts as most independent observers understand them? Why wade into the quagmire at all?

Not surprisingly, the question of truth is easier to answer the farther we are from reportage and the closer to art. High school teachers showing Oliver Stone’s film *JFK*, for example, would do well to remind their students that this is one filmmaker’s interpretation of history. The same does not necessarily hold true for, say, poetry. As Judith Ortiz Cofer writes:

Poems are always true. You can feel their truth; it resonates within you like the sound of pure crystal. And when you hear good poems, the question, *did this really happen?*, which we often hear from inexperienced readers, is of no consequence, because it does not matter. The truth of poetry is like quantum physics. One should accept it even if one does not quite grasp it. *Es la pura verdad*. (p. 27)

Perhaps the *truest* response to the question of truth in nonfiction is that of Nancy Mairs, who states: “Only one injunction has ever struck me as qualified to be absolute: take care of each other” (p. 92). What this means with respect to the relationship between writer and reader is still, as they say, very much open to interpretation.

About the Author

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