

Nonfiction Brouhaha

What concerns me in the recent fraud of yet another author pretending that something took place that didn't take place isn't the misrepresentation itself. Frauds have occurred before and will occur again. The impulse that drove Margaret Seltzer to describe herself as a player in the gangland of Los Angeles seems a confused amalgam of idealism, self-interest, voyeurism and naiveté. The sad story that is her own longing to represent and shroud herself in such a dire light is probably more interesting than the fabrication, which reads as predictably tough-girl stuff. Perhaps she will write about her own background but, in any case, parceling out blame in terms of who should have done what doesn't much interest me here. Lying is lying, though what might be called "the culture of misrepresentation" is very pervasive. Wars are promoted under that aegis; what's a book in proportion to that?

A not insubstantial degree of gullibility and cupidity goes with the eagerness of publishers to get their hands on the violent turf of mean streets. Housewives pondering meatloaf recipes or middle management guys revising a corporate manual don't rate that kind of interest no matter how authentic their experiences are. That gullibility and cupidity (the two go hand in hand) on the part of publishers aren't going to go away tomorrow. What, after all, do they know about that turf beyond that it promises to sell books? The author went with that eagerness—unwise on her part but understandable.

What disturbs me is that putting the manuscript out there and then publishing it as a novel seems inherently less attractive than publishing it as a memoir. It is as if a memoir is categorically better than a novel because a memoir, particularly about a sensationalistic

topic is better than what someone makes up about that topic, regardless of how much that making up is based on hard reality. In the current climate, *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair would be pooh-poohed because it was a novel and not a memoir. Because it is made up it is not unassailable. And the best work is the most unassailable, the work that says, “I lived this and every word is true because this I lived this.” No claim is stronger. “True that,” as the phrase goes.

I’m not sure what the factors are at work here but I’m trying to parse them out. It may be that people are losing interest in fiction because they are assaulted by the “stories” and “news” on television, radio, the Internet, brief as these may be. I listen to National Public Radio and in one day how many bits do I get about various people doing various things—all of them actual? What is the point of preferring what is made up when what is real is so compelling and available already? The equation is simple: what is made up is, in all cases, inferior to what is real. What is made up is an arbitrary shadow. (Plato never dies.) This relegation of imagination to the back of the bus puts a huge burden on what is putatively real. For when memory enters any equation, as is likely to happen when something is being recounted that occurred in the past, all bets as to absolute veracity are off. What you remember and I remember about a conversation that occurred two years ago might not be the same thing. They are likely not to be. The human head is not the strongest vessel. In the rush to assert unimpeachable authority this fly in the veracious ointment gets brushed aside.

Then there is the thought that that the standards of novel writing are higher than the standards of nonfiction writing. This sounds egregious but the tang of reality can forgive styles that wouldn’t get into the waiting room of serious fiction. Nonfiction is often

accompanied by the conviction that the main thing is just to get the thing into print. Reality will suffice and reality must be honored. The raw story—the exploits and adventures—is what matters. And that it did happen is utterly crucial, for the truth of events is a kind of weird balm at this juncture in this society. Art means artifice; the apparently inexhaustible hunger for actuality doesn't want artifice. Artifice—plots, characters, metaphors—is falseness; we just want the facts, ma'am, just the facts (even if they are a tad embroidered). We particularly want facts that people testify to. The Church of American Experience is open 24/7. New members are always welcome to offer testimony, particularly those who have strayed but have come to see the light. Consider the likes of Whittaker Chambers, for instance.

I don't think of Americans as skeptical people. I think of them, on the contrary, as credulous people. After all, they clearly don't ask much of their political leaders in terms of actual accomplishments. Rather, they seem to want the assurance that the person in front of them is somehow a certifiably good person. The credibility of nonfiction follows this line of thinking. Even if the writer is not such a good person (former gang member or drug addict, though it must be "former"), what matters is that the person was there and went through the experiences. Although we seem to be on the verge of handing out scarlet letters again in this society, the impulse to punish runs second to the impulse to revel in what really happened. And who is to say? Did the Tonkin Gulf incident that precipitated a war in all but name ever happen? Was it staged or, better, stage-managed? Then there are the various circumstances behind those assassinations in the 60s that don't go away. Surely nonfiction is a haven, a harbor for the weary.

It may be that as people are more and more saturated with what the media calls “news” in all its many formats and phases, the imagination pales. This view has been put forward by many people in recent decades. It may be that there is a dislike of imagination as nothing better than artful lying. It may be that what is actual can be believed, what is not actual cannot be believed. It is literally incredible—beyond belief and we must have belief at any cost. It may be that one story of one person proves the validity of my story; one life equals another. This is validating and comforting, even if the person is a quondam gang member in Los Angeles. We both have lives and you are telling me about yours and I could tell you about mine sometime. It may be that the self has simply eaten up the imagination.

I don’t know but it makes me uneasy. For when a society prefers “news” to art, it may forget that the wellsprings of understanding do not lie in the hubbub of miscellaneous facts that are here today and gone tomorrow. They lie in reasoned discourse and they lie in the imaginative apprehension of what it is to experience some aspect of life. The confusion that many white people feel about the Reverend Wright’s remarks might be answered by spending some time with the likes of Richard Wright or James Baldwin or Toni Morrison or how many other African-American writers. If *Native Son* or *Go Tell It on the Mountain* or *Song of Solomon* is relegated to mere fiction in more and more minds, a lamentable, second-rate contrivance, then Americans are in a kind of trouble that is much vaster than an account of a drug dealer that is fiction rather than fact.