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Ego, Trip: On Self-Construction—and Destruction— in Creative Nonfiction

“The first person is the most terrifying view of all.”

—James Baldwin

A couple years ago, I headed downtown to a used bookstore and asked for a copy of James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*. Rob, the owner, looked me over, brows down and frowning. “I thought I would *never* sell this,” he said.

“That and *Three Cups of Tea*,” said the saleswoman standing beside him. “Every time we get news a book is made up, we get three or four dropped off a week. For weeks.” She looked me over too. “Nobody *buys* them,” she said.

I had held onto my gift copy of *Three Cups of Tea*, had even defended Greg Mortenson to a couple friends more inclined to pull the book from their shelves. More to the point, I had tried to imagine Greg Mortenson. Had tried to understand just what the hell he’d been thinking, allegedly fabricating those stories and calling them true. I tried to imagine Jon Krakauer, too. He wrote a whole book, *Three Cups of Deceit: How Greg Mortenson, Humanitarian Hero, Lost His Way*, about Greg Mortenson’s book. It’s hard to write a book, even a really bad one. I had read George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* not long before—a very good book—as well as an essay he’d written about writing books. “Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle,” he observed, “like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand.”

From behind the counter, Rob laughed. He handed me *A Million Little Pieces*, Oprah’s Book Club sticker intact on its like-new cover. “I thought this one would be buried with me,” he said.

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I skimmed *A Million Little Pieces* and was mostly annoyed. Even before learning the manuscript had been rejected as a novel seventeen times before Frey sold it as a memoir, I hadn't planned to read it. I was taking a break from the confessional genre, a label that had always struck me as problematic, as if critics didn't have enough damning evidence already. Also, I was writing "creative nonfiction," not memoir. But I had recently received the suggestion that I conflate two characters in a manuscript I hoped would someday be a book that, like *Homage to Catalonia*, combined field reporting and memoir—a "hybrid." I was curious: What would it mean, for me, to stray from the facts? Trained as a journalist, I was alarmed by how blithely some of the creative nonfiction writers in my MFA program approached the grave matters of truth and fact. For their part, they responded to my puritanical practices with what looked to me like pity. Conflating your characters—two children, in this case—would create a single and more compelling protagonist, I was told. Reflexively, I etched in quotes. "*My*" characters? But I also felt a different urge: They were right. Writing one kid from two would make it easier for me to write a book. I wanted that.

But how did what *I* want matter?

At the time, Robin Hemley was my faculty advisor. I wrote him a note. Hemley is professor emeritus at the University of Iowa, writer-in-residence and director at Yale-NUS (National University of Singapore) College's writing program, and author of numerous award-winning works of nonfiction, including *A Field Guide for Immersion Writing*. I have just finished *A Million Little Pieces*, I wrote to Hemley, more or less, because I am considering the connection between ego and authorial integrity. On that front, at least, *A Million Little Pieces* is a very good book indeed.

Hemley wrote back right away. "I'm imagining a scale on which writers' relative ego is contrasted with their relationship with 'fact.' It would be a wonderful but obviously subjective scale."

I played around in Excel for a couple hours, just for fun. I watched my judgment add up to nothing, the impossibility of knowing another person completely, especially a person you've never ever

met, taking chart form before me. As Hemley had written in his note, “Who knows why writers lie or misrepresent other people or events?”

But still I was curious. Who knows? Well, Dan Ariely might.

Professor of Psychology and Behavioral Economics at Duke University, Dan Ariely has spent more than a decade studying why humans don’t tell the truth. I’d read his book, *The (Honest) Truth about Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone, Especially Ourselves*. I’d read the blurb by A. J. Jacobs, author of the immersion memoir *The Year of Living Biblically*, on the back of his book: “[T]hose who claim not to tell lies are liars.” I come in part from lying stock—thieves, abusers, adulterers, at least one murderer, as far as I know, maybe two. Could I be a liar, too?

According to Ariely, we all are liars. Humans possess “a deeply ingrained propensity to lie to ourselves and to others,” he writes. Like all species, humans are evolved and socialized to cheat, to find advantage over others at the lowest possible cost. In other words, we humans are dishonest to serve the self—the ego, Latin and Greek for “I,” distinct from the world and others. We are dishonest to serve our desires—for meaning, for art, for expression, for love, power, fame, a single compelling protagonist, a book deal. We are dishonest to serve our fears—of inadequacy, of rejection, of difference, obscurity, going broke, oblivion, death. Often, we’re dishonest so we can think of ourselves as good and honest people. As Proust once also observed, “It is not only by dint of lying to others, but also of lying to ourselves, that we cease to notice that we are lying.” To further complicate matters, says Ariely, “The more creative we are, the more we are able to come up with good stories that help us justify our selfish interests.” This, it seemed to me, was both the good news and the bad.

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George Orwell believed that “all writers are vain, selfish, and lazy.” He himself was a blow-hard, a cheat, and also a coward, at least as far as we know. And what about Proust? Was Proust any less an egotist than, say, Frey?

“I doubt it,” Hemley said, “but he’s definitely the better artist.”

I have heard it suggested that egotists and narcissists probably don’t write very good nonfiction books, memoirs in particular. Yet there’s quite a lot of evidence to the contrary. Is it possible egotists and narcissists create tremendously good work when they make ‘good’ art of ego?¹ The most compelling characters, on the page and in real life, are often the most difficult, the most exposed, complicated, and self-obsessed. I *liked* hanging around Wolfe in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. It was a thrill, and, sure, a little bit reckless, carrying on with someone who “reports” LSD-informed events without the hassle and constriction of notes or recordings. Wolfe is the road trip to Dave Eggers’ settling down. To write his literary *New York Times* bestseller *What Is the What?*, Eggers spent four years immersed in the daily life of Valentino Achak Deng, a refugee from the second Sudanese Civil War. He then spent another year writing. Then Eggers showed what he’d written, he says, to “ten or twelve friends, having them all edit it as brutally as possible to make sure that *nothing*, not even one adjective choice, sounded like me.” Then Eggers sold his book as a novel— a sort of tactical 180 from Frey.

So, no, this is not to suggest the relatable or righteous shall inherit anything, least of all literature. There’s room for all, from the reliable narrator who is seen and understood because the writer exposes, or even abandons, the self explicitly, to the unreliable narrator who is seen and understood because the artifice of the text is impossible to miss. Gonzo, so to speak.

But while every writer is unique— from scrubbed and sincere to winking scoundrel—the role of his or her persona as medium is not. And this is why it is worth considering how the needs of first-person

¹ As Sascha Frere-Jones wrote in a review of Kanye West’s album, “Yeezus”: West’s “most satisfyingly narcissistic record. ... [T]he new album is all id, and that makes it easier to trust.”

writers—whether memoirist, essayist, participatory journalist, identity immersion journalist, or other hybridist—meet, ignore, or collide with the needs of others. Every writer meets reader through narrating ego, and it deserves exploration from an egoic stance, to borrow from Oxford, of “conscious thinking subject...responsible for reality testing.” Because, right now, the reality is there’s still an awful lot of talk about who is telling the “truth” and who is not.

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One might begin with Michel de Montaigne, where teachers and students of the first-person genres so often do. In “Of Giving the Lie,” he wrote, “*Me peignant pour autrui, je me suis peint en moi de couleurs plus nettes que n'étaient les miennes premières.*” “Painting myself for others, I have painted my inward self with colors clearer than the original ones.” Or perhaps Carl H. Klaus, founding director of University of Iowa’s Nonfiction Writing Program. He’s written two books about crafting nonfiction personae: *The Made-Up Self: Impersonation in the Personal Essay* and *A Self Made of Words: Crafting a Distinctive Persona in Nonfiction Writing*. In both books, he acknowledges that nonfiction writers have long said much the same as Montaigne: The personae—also sometimes called the narrating ego, voice, the narrator, the speaker, rhetorical identity, or the protagonist—in texts are not the same as the people who created them, even if writers claim that they and their personae are one and the same. You might even say that the most successful personae don’t appear visibly constructed at all; if we could see they were, we probably wouldn’t believe them. In the best cases, the writer’s self rises from the page to meet the reader as if by magic, or grace, or poetic madness, or “sacramental imagination,” or Aristotelian “possession,” as in a dream. James Baldwin, Annie Dillard, and even W.G. Sebald are a few who come to my mind. But even then the text is still a simulacrum, the author’s persona a construct—a representation built directly from the elusive, multitudinous, foundational stuff of self.

Depending on what's popularly called "size"—its depth and force of curiosity and empathy—a first-person writer's narrating ego has the power to elevate or contaminate the story at hand. Artfully, empathically, fearlessly constructed, narrating egos create intimacy and human connection. Solipsistically or surreptitiously constructed, narrating ego can undermine the text at hand, cut off any hope of human connection.

Indeed Ariely argues that the human inclination toward deception, highly evolved and driven by dread or desire, has a slow corrosive effect on society.² Think subprime mortgage crisis. There are those who argue dishonesty has a slow, corrosive effect on creative nonfiction. Think Jim Fingal, the *Harper's* fact-checker who took John D'Agata and his fictionalized essay "About a Mountain" to task. Or, rather, think Jim Fingal, the narrating ego. Jim Fingal, the person, we discovered in post-publication coverage, in fact reinvented his correspondence with D'Agata to co-author with him *The Lifespan of a Fact*, a nonfiction book about fact and truth in nonfiction.

In interviews after the book was published, D'Agata called the book a satire. And that may be true. But lots of readers took the book at face value, or something close to it. "Contrary to the impression created by the promotional material, and the way it has subsequently been characterized in reviews," wrote Craig Silverman on Poynter.org, "...*The Lifespan of a Fact* isn't, you know, factual. D'Agata never called Fingal a dickhead, to cite but one example."

Naomi Kimball, in an essay for the anthology *Blurring the Boundaries*, argues, "[T]he first and most important gesture a writer can make to the reader is letting him or her in on the joke." Narcissists, new studies suggest, don't have to be a drain on our human community if practiced in the art of recognizing other. To do this, both Fingal the persona and Ariely recommend approaches designed to address the conflict of interest between self and other—a signed legal contract, if you're a trader at J.P. Morgan Chase

² If not science; reads the American Psychological Association's *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct*. "Psychologists do not conduct a study involving deception unless they have determined that the use of deceptive techniques is justified by the study's significant prospective scientific, educational or applied value and that effective non-deceptive alternatives are not feasible."

& Company, for instance; if you're a first-person writer, an Author's Note, afterword, or use of the conditional tense, caveat, or limitless other artful and crafty techniques. And these policies and structures appear to work. They build accountability, honesty, and trust. And yet, unlike regulatory checks in finance (such as they are), in the words of author Lee Gutkind, founder of *Creative Nonfiction* magazine, there are no creative nonfiction police on patrol, nor should there be.

Near the end of *The Lifespan of a Fact*, the personae of Fingal and D'Agata come to verbal fisticuffs. Fingal writes, exasperated, "I mean, the whole point of all these shit storms over the last ten years...isn't that the reading public doesn't understand that writers sometimes 'use their imaginations.' It's about people searching for some sort of 'Truth...'and then being devastated when they find out that the thing they were inspired by turned out to be deliberately falsified...for seemingly self-aggrandizing purposes."

"Devastated" may be an overstatement bordering on self-aggrandizement. Considering the many irreconcilable ills of the world, discovering a nonfiction book like *The Lifespan of a Fact* is fabricated probably merits closer to what one friend, an award-winning author of four books of literary nonfiction, called "annoyance" (As in "I'm totally annoyed by those guys, and I don't buy their excuses"). But what to make of the fact that so many react with more than annoyance? In journalism, where truth is an explicit part of the deal between writer and reader, shit storms are understandable and necessary, as real harm is often a consequence, as witnessed in the brutal fall-out in early 2015 after *Rolling Stone* reporters and editors failed to fact check and verify the details of an alleged rape at the University of Virginia. This is why journalists like Brian Williams, under contractual "morality clauses," get suspended. Yet in first-person genres whose rules are less clearly defined, the consequences of unreliability are also often felt at greater intensity than annoyance. Even in memoir, recently described by Daphne Merkin as perhaps the most "elasticized form for truths and untruths," pain seems to register when a writer is perceived to betray the

trust. This fall, in reaction to Lena Dunham's memoir, readers reported, variously, rage, outrage, and disgust, going so far as to propose boycotts of Dunham's entire creative enterprise.

It is curious to note the research that suggests the emotional experience of social pain, and betrayal specifically, lights up the same regions of the brain as physical pain. Humans remember social pain more acutely and for longer duration than physical pain. Neurologically, the experience of being cast away appears to mirror that of being burned. Like, with fire. How did Oprah say she felt when she discovered Frey had lied when he appeared as a guest to talk about his "memoir"? Duped. How did she say she imagined readers felt? Betrayed.

"It is difficult for me to talk to you because I feel duped," she said after the revelation. "But more importantly, I feel that you betrayed millions of readers." I imagine I felt the same as Oprah when I learned the cat in Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* didn't exist. It was a metaphorical cat. Jesus Christ, *Annie Dillard*. I thought she was perfect.

The truth is, many of us want to *believe* we know who the author is. We have for millennia. In *Tiger Writing: Art, Culture, and the Interdependent Self*, novelist Gish Jen reminds us that the independent self—"the self unhitched from the collective"—has been "making things up [since] even before the words 'fiction' and 'poetry' were coined." In ancient Rome and Greece, writers who fabricated were eyed with suspicion, "not only because they could make the untrue seem true, but because they tended to be highly individualistic, with interests that might or might not be yours."³ This has not changed. Many readers still eye with suspicion writers who fabricate. Which, if we're really being honest with ourselves, which, as Ariely notes, is harder than it might first appear, is quite a lot of writers. As a result, as Robin observes in *A Field Guide for Immersion Writing*, "Whether you're putting yourself in harm's way emotionally,

³ In fiction, too, shit storms kick up when a reader perceives the narrator has not done his homework to paint fully, roundly, *humanly* another person. In a 2012 review of *Back to Blood*, James Wood took Tom Wolfe to task. "[S]ince no one actually thinks in this loudly obvious way," Wood wrote, "since the words on the page fail to disclose an actual human being, they point back, uneasily, to the failed ventriloquist: Who *thinks* like this?" "WELL!" I imagine Wolfe, in his white suit and homberg hat, pishing, "I do!"

psychologically, or physically, it's almost a guarantee that you're going to get pummeled in one way or another."

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So why do this high-exposure, hazardous work—work disparaged variously as exploitive, opportunistic, voyeuristic, touristic, solipsistic, navel-gazing, indulgent, narcissist, trivial, clickbait?

Sure, there's a market for it. But cynicism aside, there's evidence that first-person nonfiction stories create meaningful and important human connections, help people feel less alone in a duplicitous world. Robin describes a writer's decision to step into his or her story as "an act of generosity." Here, the writer says, "This is who I am and why this story is important to me, and these are the people I met along the way." In "Becoming a Writerly Self," Juanita Rodgers Comfort writes, "[S]elf-disclosures foreground ...the self...selective, insightful sharing can build connections between writer and readers." Leslie Jamison calls connection like this "The Holy Grail." "It's actually a deeply affirming thing to say, 'Your story is just like everybody else's,'" she said in a recent interview. "We are so hardwired to not want to be alone in what we feel, but also have a deep hunger to be exceptional and different." Writes poet Caroline Forché in her essay "The 'New' Literature," "When one undertakes such a work, one agrees to be forever changed, and henceforth to become a walker of bridges between worlds, a translator of realities..."

Walkers of bridges. Translators of realities. Holders of The Holy Grail. How *very* important. "There is, I admit, a certain egoism in what I write," Forché tells us the Polish author Ryszard Kapuściński once said. "[T]he author is always present." Kapuściński liked to sometimes call his work "literature by foot."

His foot.

This is where the trouble starts. If a writer cannot be understood or recognized on the page, he, or she, is, in literary terms, “unreliable.” But what if readers perceive the writer himself to be unreliable? What if we don’t like walking in his shoes? What if we don’t like him and his shoes at all, because, as Fingal suggested, readers perceive the writer to be conjuring “truth” for self-serving, self-protecting, or self-aggrandizing purposes?

These are questions I found myself asking after discovering Kapuściński was reportedly a liar too. I’d picked up Kapuściński’s work on the glowing recommendation of a fellow writer because Kapuściński was a reporter who’d written “literature,” and I wanted to do that, too. “One Kapuściński is worth more than a thousand whimpering and fantasizing scribblers,” Salman Rushdie once said. Said John Updike, Kapuściński wrote “with a magical elegance that...achieves poetry and aphorism.”

Kapuściński’s 2006 death makes speculation both more fraught, because he is not alive to defend himself, and less, for the same reason. Kapuściński, who was born in 1932 and spent four decades reporting in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, was “complicated”— alternately heroic and insecure, charming and choleric. Writing in *Ryszard Kapuściński: A Life*, Artur Domoslawski, Kapuściński’s friend, says, “[Kapusciński] reacted to all critical comments with fits of rage, distress, or grief...” Yet, in his books, Kapuściński, the persona, was “*always* the hero,” at least according to Domoslawski. Kapuściński “wanted to be loved and admired,” yet toward his subjects he has been accused of disregard, disrespect, and dishonesty. When PEN America invited him to New York City in 2005, author Binyavanga Wainaina called for a boycott. Kapuscinski “is a fraud. A liar. And a profound and dangerous racist,” he wrote in a controversial open letter to the organization. In *Imperium*, a personal account of communist Russia—the camps, the purges— Kapuściński says nothing of his onetime collaboration with the communist party in his homeland Poland. When the director of Iranian Studies at Stanford met with Domoslawski, he said,

“You can open *Shah of Shahs* at any page, point to a passage, and I will tell you what’s wrong or inaccurate.” And then he proceeded to do so. It wasn’t pretty.

Despite the praise of Rushdie, Updike, and García Márquez, despite comparisons with Conrad, Orwell, and Camus, Kapuściński had little faith in his abilities. Judging himself against a poet friend, he once said, “You are a poet in the Polish Writer’s Union...but I’m just a journalist.” Did Kapuściński’s lies and omissions stem from insecurity? Or, perhaps, from what Domoslawski described as a troubled childhood? James Baldwin believed, “[I]t is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.” How much did it matter that, as Domoslawski put it, “no one in Poland ever touched his writing with a single critical word”? Who can say? In the end, Domoslawski wrote of his friend: “something always remains...incomprehensible.”

Once Kapuściński yelled at a friend asking about his books’ omissions and fabrications. “You don’t understand a thing!” he shouted. “I’m not writing so the details add up—the point is the essence of the matter!” On this point, he was right. In literature, the essence of the matter rather than the adding up of details is the point. But if in the end readers perceive that “essence” comes at the expense of the supposed empathy a first-person writer trades for objectivity in disregard of the worlds of possibility found between writer and reader, between self and other—and if readers dump books in a cardboard box at the used bookstore as a result—what’s the point at all?

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Of the struggle to put self to the page, Orwell wrote, “It is humbug to pretend [sheer egoism] is not a motive, and a strong one.” But, “It is [the writer’s] job, no doubt, to discipline his temperament and avoid getting stuck at some immature stage.” Sheer egoism is a strong motive, but that doesn’t mean a writer need be stuck there, in a childlike stance, all self and no other. Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, for one,

almost completely suppressed her self in her book, *Random Family*, it seems to me, and she wrote a nonfiction book considered one of the most moving and beautifully literary works of immersion of all time. In more than 400 pages, covering more than a decade of deep reporting, LeBlanc allowed herself (by my count) some half-dozen overtly authorial appearances. When asked how she positioned her self in the narrative, LeBlanc said in an interview, “You recognize a moment that’s largely about the ...writer’s own need to believe in something that might not in fact exist.” It took a long time to “learn how to get myself out of the way,” she said. It was very hard work. As for Orwell, he did the hard work of “disciplining his temperament” to quite different ends, his “I” all over the page from the start.

“I saw an Italian militiaman,” he writes in *Homage to Catalonia*’s opening scene. “Something in his face deeply moved me. It was the face of a man who would commit murder and throw away his life for a friend—the kind of face you would expect in an Anarchist, though as likely as not he was a Communist. There were both candor and ferocity in it; also the pathetic reverence that illiterate people have for their supposed superiors...”

All this in a face! Illiteracy, homicide, anarchy. In the first fifteen lines.

Essayist and writing teacher Phillip Lopate, reading another of Orwell’s works, once wrote, “How much more complicated and alive is George Orwell’s younger self, the ‘I’ in ‘Such, Such Were the Joys,’ for having admitted he snitched on his classmates?” Orwell’s done much the same here. In his first three sentences of his *Homage*, Orwell’s persona, while outsize and entitled, admits insecurity—“I hoped he liked me as well as I liked him”—and curiosity—“Queer, the affection you can feel for a stranger!” He is self-amused and hangdog, confessing, “I hate mountains, even from a spectacular view.” In another passage, he’s a coward: “A little while later, ...a bullet shot past my ear with a vicious crack.... Alas! I ducked.” Slowly and in pieces, Orwell’s bravado comes undone, his narrating ego running headlong into vulnerability, a flawed and exposed humanity. No longer judgmental and eager for heroics, he describes his view as “depressing.” He no longer feels “disgusted” or “furious” for lack of action. “No one I met at this

time,” he writes, “...failed to assure me that a man who is hit through the neck and survives it is the luckiest creature alive. I could not help thinking that it would be luckier not to be hit at all.”

Orwell’s closing paragraphs read in sharp contrast to the cocksure first few: “...beware of my partisanship,” he warns, “my mistakes of fact and the distortion inevitably caused by my having seen only one corner of events.”

Rather than heroic, Orwell’s narrating ego is human—good and bad, hero and fraud and everything in between. As Lopate wrote “On the Necessity of Turning Oneself Into a Character,” Orwell created a believable persona using “a pattern of habit and actions.” And, so, yes, there I was, despite myself, having crossed a bridge with George Orwell, or, rather, his narrating ego. Building one’s character, writes Lopate, “is not just a question of sensibility: There are hard choices to be made when a person is put under pressure. And it’s in having made the wrong choice, curiously enough, that we are made all the more aware of our freedom and potential for humanity.”

If Kapuściński had copped like Orwell, rather than writing himself, in Domoslawski’s words, as “always the hero,” or if he had been, as British author Michela Wrong speculated, “more...modest,” like LeBlanc, could he have skirted trouble? What if he had, in Baldwin’s words, stepped toward the “great pain and terror” found when “one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is, and formed one’s point of view,” when “one enters into battle with that historical creation, oneself...” What if he’d yelled less?

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Of course we can’t prescribe a formula for art. But still we try. It’s only human. On the matter of ego, Orwell recommends “discipline.” Lopate instructs that “building a character is a pedagogic model, because you are teaching the reader what to expect.” This process, he writes, “is not self-absorbed navel

gazing, but rather a potential release from narcissism. It means you have achieved sufficient distance to begin to see yourself in the round: a necessary precondition to transcending the ego.” If Kapuściński were alive today, he might read that Gutkind, identified on his website with a quote from *Vanity Fair* as “the Godfather behind creative nonfiction,” advises creative nonfiction writers to rely upon conscience. Yes, fact-checking is critical, Gutkind writes in *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up*, but so too “following the old-fashioned golden rule by treating your characters and their stories with as much respect as you would want them to treat you.” “*Conscience*,” he writes, “a reminder and an invisible artbiter over us all.”

And, yet, as Ariely’s research and the nonfiction world’s regular shit storms reveal, relying on conscience is slippery business. Some say more slippery than ever. In a recent essay for *Poets & Writers*, author and candy freak Steve Almond declared a “Problem of Entitlement” within the creative writing community. “[A] significant number of the students I’ve encountered in creative writing programs display a curious arrogance,” he wrote. In light of these facts and reportings, what is a writer to do? How, exactly, might a writer attempt a conscientious view — in Gutkind’s words, “treating your characters and their stories with as much respect as you would want them to treat you”—while remaining artistically true?

In a 2014 essay called “The 12 Fundamentals of Writing Self (and Other),” author Daniel José Older explores the question. “We are always writing the other,” he begins, “we are always writing the self. We bump into this basic, impossible riddle every time we tell stories.” Older believes that failing to deeply engage in the questions of other is a failure of craft, a failure of imagination, whether you’re a novelist, essayist, or memoirist. “We talk about these issues like they are a moral/political issue alone,” he writes, “but stereotypes are clichés.... It’s boring and you can do better.”

During a phone conversation, Older elaborated. “We talk a lot about conflict in plot,” he said. “But the conversation seems to always stop there. What we need to talk about is power.” Journalist Janet Malcolm—who famously wrote in *The Journalist and the Murderer*, “Every journalist who is not too stupid or full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of

confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse.”—came to mind. (But, then, she is just a journalist.) We talked about Lena Dunham. Did writer take advantage of subject? Was it her persona or her real-live self talking? Does it matter that the subject approved the content? If someone else had written the book, someone who wasn't white, would so many readers have defended her? Can we know the truth?

In her essay “Speaking in Tongues,” adapted from a lecture she gave at the New York Public Library, essayist and novelist Zadie Smith describes her experience of finding narrating self, her voice, particularly in relation to others. “My little theory sketches four developmental phases,” she writes. But there's nothing small about it.

- 1: “The first stage in the evolution is contingent and cannot be contrived. In this first stage, the voice, through no fault of its own, finds itself trapped between two poles, two competing belief systems.”
- 2: Necessitated by the first stage, “the voice learns to be flexible between these two fixed points, even to the point of equivocation.”
- 3: “This native flexibility leads to a sense of being able to “see a thing from both sides.”
- 4: This stage, “I think of as the mark of a certain kind of genius: the voice relinquishes ownership of itself, develops a creative sense of disassociation in which the claims that are particular to it seem no stronger than anyone else's.” This voice, Smith says, is free to speak simultaneous truths, a quality “we cherish in our artists [and] condemn in our politicians.”

In an illuminating passage in his craft book, *The Made-Up Self*, Carl Klaus remarks on Baldwin's use of both first- and third-person in his essay, “Stranger in a Village.” Klaus observes that Baldwin's use of “I” and “they”—what he calls “I vis-à-vis ‘They’”—is “a significant pattern that distinguishes Baldwin's essay from traditional pieces in which the persona typically develops through a concentration upon itself.” “Baldwin's ‘I,’” he writes, “is so preoccupied with ‘They’ as to suggest at first that his persona is in a sense

inseparable from the villagers—one might even say in thrall to them, given his obsessive concern with their perception and treatment of him.” Klaus concludes, “Baldwin’s ‘I’ subsequently engages in such a thoughtful analysis of the interplay that his persona ultimately comes across as a compelling interpreter.”

James Baldwin wrote about “truth.” His attempt at definition has become my lodestar: “Let us say then, that truth, as used here, is meant to imply a devotion to the human being.”

It’d be convenient to conflate two children who shared their stories—their lives—with me for the sake of “my” story. It’d be easy and I am tempted. I confess, I want easy. Part of me might even expect it, might confuse what I am lucky to have as a choice with a right. Part of me knows that if I made one kid from two, if I compressed time or fabricated events or scenes, I might even get away with it because I’m me and not someone else. Part of me wants to yell at writers who blur boundaries because that’s easy too. But I want something closer to truth. And, as Baldwin said, “You have to strip yourself of all your disguises. Some of which you didn’t know you had.” So I obsess myself with “my” characters. I make their voices, their ideas, their words, their perceptions—their—my preoccupation, even though it’s hard and I’m sure to come up short.

Later, Older took the time to send me a beautiful paragraph by Eduardo Galeano: “I’m not asking you to describe the rain falling the night the archangel arrived; I’m demanding that you get me wet. Make up your mind, Mr. Writer, and for once in your life be the flower that smells rather than the chronicler of the aroma. There’s not much pleasure in writing what you live. The challenge is to live what you write.”

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Last January, on “60 Minutes,” Greg Mortenson made a public apology. “I’d like to thank...Jon Krakauer,” he said. Dan Ariely wouldn’t have been surprised. “Every time we lie, we dilute the trust,” he explained when we corresponded. Ariely can’t prove this with empirical evidence, but, still, he believes this

to be true. When Ariely was in high school in Israel, a magnesium battlefield flare exploded at his feet, and he was trapped in a chemical fire. He spent three years in a hospital. In an essay, he later wrote, “The experience of pain has led me to beauty.” And also, “as I am not very concerned with my personal ‘small problems,’ I...can’t get too excited about the ‘small problems’ others are experiencing.”

All the same, Ariely took time to respond to my questions: Given everything we know, why do nonfiction writers continue to make stuff up and not tell readers? Given all we know, why do readers continue to feel betrayed when nonfiction writers do this?

“I don’t think this is planned,” he said in a recording he made because typing can be hard. “I think people start writing something that is based in reality, and then the boundary for what is acceptable and what is not acceptable is not very clear.” He said, “It’s very human.”

True, Kapuściński’s “incomprehensibility” lost him real-life confidences and readers, and this could fairly be called a tragedy. But his incomprehensibility also left others—Domoslawski, at least, and me—to wonder: Why the hell didn’t he—didn’t Frey, didn’t Dunham, didn’t Dillard—just tell us what he was up to? As Abbas Milani, the director of Iranian Studies who challenged Domoslawski to find one accurate passage in *Shah of Shabs*, wrote to Domoslawski, “If your friend had ‘sold’ this book as ‘faction,’ one could have applauded him.” One could have. But in the quiet space left by the absence of applause for another, one must confront something else.

Aristotle might have called my discovery of Kapuściński *anagnorisis*, meaning recognition.

Anagnorisis describes the effect of another of Aristotle’s terms, *peripeteia*, the literary device of sudden reversal. Aristotle believed that “the finest recognitions” are found at *peripeteia*, the moment at which readers discover reversal: *What we thought was true is false, what we thought was false is true*. In his essay, “The Art of Being Wrong,” the poet and journalist Henry Shukman makes this observation. “We love in our stories to see someone being wrong,” he says, because *peripeteia* arises “less in the character and more in us, the readers, as we realize...that we ourselves have been viewing things wrong.” The *peripeteian* experience

affirms a deeply felt intimation that our lives proceed through being disabused of our preconceptions, he argues, and it is through this experience that “we are free to meet the moment with a fresh intimacy.” And this is why I keep Kapuściński’s books on the shelf. Why I don’t feel bad I’m not a poet—that writing a good book is a horrible, exhausting struggle—but rather awed that anyone can try.

Which brings me back to *A Million Little Pieces*. Yes, I was annoyed by the book, but I also could not walk away from the story. *What happens next?* The Oprah-Frey saga could have ended with Oprah turning her back to Frey. But here’s the interesting thing, to me, anyway: It didn’t. Oprah invited Frey back to her show. “My position and my intention was, ‘How dare you. How dare you? How dare you lie to me. How dare you lie to the viewers,’” she said during the interview. “And it was not a position of, ‘Let me hear your story. Let me hear your side.’ ...And for that, I apologize.”

Her ego, she said during the interview, fueled her anger. How did Oprah feel when she said this? I have no idea. I have never met Oprah. Maybe Oprah would respond if I tried to reach her to ask. I know I am choosing not to work harder to talk to her in person, and I feel bad about that. But she receives more than 20,000 emails a week, I see on her website, and there is no link of any kind, anywhere, to a PR department, let alone a person, and I don’t know anyone who knows Oprah. And, really, who am I? So I imagine how Oprah felt when she publicly apologized to Frey. I imagine that when she discovered what she’d thought was true was false, what she’d thought was false was true, she was curious. She’d wondered, *Who, exactly, are you?* And this imagining of what it feels like to feel like Oprah trying to feel like Frey is easier than trying to crack Harpo Productions PR code, than sending e-mails into the void. As long as I don’t think too hard about how Oprah might feel about my using her story for my imagined purposes, I feel okay. As long as I tell you I’m imagining and as long as I tell myself Oprah is telling her own story, in her own words, I feel okay. As long as I tell myself I’m not afraid of failure and rejection, that I’m not undone by those of you already framing up any number of airtight comments arguing why I’m wrong, unworthy, unlikable, and probably stupid, too, not terrified by how easy it is to slip into deflection, into

oblivion, I feel just fine. But that's just me, and, as Orwell put it, "I have seen only one corner of events."

You see different places. You imagine other people.

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