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In Praise of Slim Volumes: Big Book, Big Evil

When I started it five years ago, I imagined my third book would be a memoir of sorts. The book would tell the story of my paternal grandmother, the seventeen years she spent alone in Siberian exile, and the eventual reunion with her children in Canada after more than two decades of separation. The book would contemplate the invisible lives of women and the nature of family history and memory. I also imagined it would be easy to write—this was perhaps my greatest delusion of all. Though it’s still a work in progress, the book is now in its final stages. Called *Sins of the Husband*, my would-be memoir has been anything but easy to write.

For me, the most difficult part of essaying is finding my way to the right form. When I succeed, the experience is almost physical: I experience a sort of *thunk* as the text’s pieces find their grooves and fall into place. All at once, there’s clarity. I see what I’m trying to say and how to say it simultaneously.

Generally speaking, we think of essays as smallish—ranging anywhere from a 750-word flash piece to a 10,000-word wandering and reflective text. Such essays usually live in journals, magazines, and collections.

But the audacious form that interests me is the book-length essay. What defines it? What are its limits?

What makes a book a book? These questions have obsessed me for a year.

Great writers know that a text will tell you what form it needs to take. Maggie Nelson, for example, describes the process of a text finding its shape like this: “I often want to write about something, or find myself writing about something, and then have to try out the material in various ways, until the form feels right, takes off. Until the form and content merge, as it were” (“Interview”). Eula Biss tells of something

similar: “I rarely decide before I write what it’s going to look like formally,” she writes. “I find that through the process” (“Influence, Chaos”).

My book took a sudden turn in 2012 when, hoping to get my hands on a copy of my grandmother’s arrest report, I requested copies of KGB documents about my family from a national archive in Lithuania. From the files that arrived in my mailbox, I learned new and shadowy truths about my grandfather, the Siberian grandmother’s husband. Amongst my discoveries: that he’d served as a municipal police chief in German-occupied Lithuania and that a massacre of Jewish women and children had taken place on his watch. Those discoveries changed my project overnight. My book was no longer about her. It would also have to be about him. For a long time, I was angry at my grandfather for hijacking my book, but that’s another story, perhaps for another time: at this point, the hijacking was one of content, not form.

To make sense of the yellowing and often manuscript files, I consulted historians, interviewed witnesses, and visited Holocaust survivors. I traveled to the Lithuanian-Prussian borderland region and wandered its forests in search of mass graves, which I found. In libraries and archives, I pored over microfiche copies of trial transcripts. Slowly, the gaps in my knowledge narrowed and I came to an understanding not only of what my grandfather had done in 1941 but also of what his actions had to do with his wife’s exile. In the end, I was left with three threads to contend with: my grandmother’s, my grandfather’s, and my own narrative of discovery. Try as I might to braid them, the strands wouldn’t hang together. The plait kept falling apart in my hands. The book had stalled: I’d said everything I had to say but it still wasn’t working. In 2015, as my family and I packed up our navy blue hatchback and headed for a lakeside cabin in Ontario, I knew I needed to go deep: over the fortnight my son spent at camp, I would radically restructure the draft that had been torturing me for months. The answer to the draft was clearly not in the narrative; it had to be found in the form.

“Writing is selection,” writes John McPhee in his essay “Omission.” There, McPhee likens writing to sculpting. As words and paragraphs fall away, the essence and true form of the work reveal themselves. Even when we know this to be true it can be hard not to lament so much seemingly wasted stone lying on the studio floor. McPhee, continuing with the sculpting analogy, makes his point succinctly: “Michelangelo, loosely, as we can imagine him with six tons of Carrara marble, a mallet, a point chisel, a pitching tool, a tooth chisel, a claw chisel, rasps, rifflers, and a bush hammer: ‘I’m just taking away what doesn’t belong there.’”

“Every time I cut a paragraph,” a scholar friend told me some years ago, “I lament the hour I wasted writing it.” She was working on her first book, that is, her tenure book, and had begun to falter under the pressure. A colleague and aspirant mentor (a pre-tenure academic who himself had not yet published a book) had planted this idea: according to him, the only productive use of writing time was to move a text forward. Cutting meant going backward: and moving in reverse, he implied, was for chumps. Of course, this is nonsense. For his sake, I hope that academic learned as much eventually, though, of course, not without doing damage to his confidante first.

I suspect that no writer would disagree with McPhee, when he writes, “a piece of writing should grow to whatever length is sustained by its selected material—that much and no more.” But do editors know this? Do they believe it? I put this question to Ethan Nosowsky, an editor at Graywolf. Here was his response: “I don’t favor short books over long books or vice versa. I want a long book to merit its pages; I want a short book to have density of thought and a torrid engagement with language or form.”

Just as long books must justify every leaf and every additional signature, short ones need earn their brevity.

The form of my manuscript emerged when I finally accepted that it was no memoir. My book, I came to understand, was an essay: a tiny book-length essay that simultaneously looked forward and backward and that put a series of questions about guilt, inheritance, and the overvaluing of origins at its center. And because it was an essay, neither the “real I” nor my “writing I” could remain the protagonist of the book. Nor could my grandparents, for that matter. For an essay “is something that tracks the evolution of a human mind,” writes John D’Agata. It charts the mental journey of a human being through the world. So, in the end, my book’s protagonist, if I can put it this way, was a thought process and journey of understanding.

Once I’d recognized the text’s true form, I also began to understand its texture and tone. It no longer wanted to be soft and loose, like a braid, but solid and hard, like a stone. What’s more, the deeper I cut, the longer I chiseled away, the sharper my focus grew. Soon I could see what my text desired: thinking, analysis, research, and concision. Above all, my book begged to be small.

Every day of editing brought more rubble to the floor. It wasn’t long before I’d sacrificed most of the framing travelogue in which my cousin and I rumbled across Siberia by train. I loved (and still love) these scenes detailing the weird meals of beef tongue and mayonnaise that we ate in the dining car, our visit to a hunter’s Tomsk apartment filled with taxidermied animals, and our ridiculous deportation from Belarus, but I ultimately had to admit that these episodes felt flabby, distracting, and even self-indulgent. They put me (and my exploits) at the center of a book that didn’t really want to be about me. Those Russian darlings were tripping up the engine of the narrative, making it sputter and distracting the reader, so I killed them.

The Alexandrian poet and scholar Callimachus is credited with the quip, “big book, big evil” (*Mega biblion mega kakon*). In truth, it’s not clear if Callimachus really said or wrote this phrase, though if he did, scholars

believe he meant it as a critique of his pupil Apollonius's overly wordy work. The ancient aphorism is funny in its hyperbole and probably shouldn't be taken too seriously: we all know that long books can be great. In fact, between slashing thousands of words from my manuscript, in my downtime and in the evenings, I hunkered down with Rosemary Sullivan's hefty brick called *Stalin's Daughter*. The point of "big book, big evil" is to remind us that Alexandrian poets valued elegance, concision, high polish, learning, and sophistication in their texts. It's what I was going for too.

The more I cut, the louder Callimachus roared, egging me on. And the more I listened to the Ancient by my side, the greater pleasure I took in my destruction. In the end, my manuscript's word count shrank from a respectable total 50,000 to an anxiety-inducing one of 30,000.

Was this a book? I worried as I watched a pair of loons dive and resurface, their unique bones solid to go deep. I mused on that metaphor all morning.

When I read Maggie Nelson's *Jane: A Murder* for the first time, the book left me breathless. It's a tiny text, perhaps some 25,000 words long, and as such it's dense and rigorous yet deeply personal and poetic. Above all, *Jane* is economical. Such a slim text, when it succeeds, contains no redundancy, no sloppy thinking, no useless ornamentation. The tiny essay-book, values minimalism and clean lines. ("Beauty rests on utility," the Shakers used to say.) I marveled and still marvel at the text's efficiency whenever I return to it with my students.

Jane does all the things I want to do in my work: it comes at a difficult subject (the murder of a family member and how to mourn her) both sideways and quietly. Yet its parts are so precise and powerful that they give the impression of intensification or concentration, like light focused through a lens or *demi-glace* reduced on the stovetop.

Tiny essay-books like *Jane* undulate between the big and the small. They take ordinary, mundane aspects of life and turn them over and over, examining them from all sides. And although you can gobble

one up in a day or over a few nights in bed, they aren't necessarily easy reads. Formally, tiny essay-books rely heavily on fragmentation and juxtaposition, so reading them often feels like a collaborative process. The reader must fill in blanks and silences.

Just as an essay must undulate thematically between the big and the small (between the universal and the particular), so too must an essayist move continually back and forth between the part and the whole when editing. Knowing what I know about writing, I dare suggest that most finely wrought tiny essay-books undergo a process of patient and repeated cutting, polishing, and rearranging. Not only must each individual fragment hold together and ultimately feel like a solid piece, but the whole must feel unified as well. Again, the Shakers: "Simplicity," they said, "is the embodiment of ... unity." But simplicity, as any writer knows, is hard-fought.

Many of the best recent texts of our genre, it seems, have exemplified a variation on the book-length essay. Think of *The Argonauts*, *Citizen*, *Ongoingness*, *Bluets*, and even of *Between the World and Me* and *On Immunity*, which are on the longer side of short but essay-books nonetheless.

There are others too—less-lauded, perhaps, but equally fine.

T Fleischmann's *Szyggy, Beauty: An Essay* (114 pages or about 14,000 words), for example, is an exquisite book that contemplates love, desire, queerness, friendship, and home. Both deeply intellectual and poignantly vulnerable, *Szyggy, Beauty* asks its readers to make meaning not only of the distilled and densely poetic paragraphs that appear side-by-side on page after page but also of the white space surrounding each fragment. Some of these passages consist of no more than three sentences: "The impulse to run your hand along the wall, touching it but so barely and forward. Sitting room and coats of paint. You shake out the sheets. You disperse like a drying pond."

The narrator of *Szyggy, Beauty* speaks as if into the wind: we can't hear everything said. We are not party to all the details of love and loss that this text outlines. We're not even sure who the beloved "you" in

the text is—whether it’s only one or a series of boys, young men, or grown men. The reader must ask herself what has gone unsaid and unwritten. What has fallen away? But ultimately and most importantly we must love and accept this text and its narrator as they are, for they are beautiful.

“Tis the good reader that makes the good book.” (Emerson, *Society and Solitude*)

In contrast to the quiet of *Syzygy, Beauty*, Brian Doyle’s *The Wet Engine* (117 pages or, by the author’s count, around 35,000 words) is chatty, familiar and, at times, even exuberant in tone. It is at once a swirling examination of the physical workings of the heart, a love letter to a son, and tribute to the cardiologist who saved the boy’s life. But like Fleischmann, Doyle too stitches together fragment upon fragment—a unifying feature of the tiny essay-book. The result is a layering of the heart’s meanings and significations, both literal and figurative, as well as a meditation on the miracle of its working as well as it does as often as it does. In a 2012 review, Kevin Haworth wrote of *The Wet Engine*, “it’s a short book, and it can feel a little claustrophobic in its intensity.” Fair enough, I suppose: it’s certainly possible to boil *demi-glace* a moment too long for certain tastes or to cut a little too close to the bone. Tiny-book-essaying is, after all, skilled and delicate work (like heart surgery?). But ultimately Haworth concedes “that’s a small quibble, well worth the trade-off.”

“Let the reader find that he cannot afford to omit any line of your writing because you have omitted every word that he can spare.” (Emerson, *Journals*)

The slimmest read in my personal one-woman tiny essay-book festival has been Penny Guisinger’s *Postcards from Here: A Memoir in Vignettes*. The text weighs in at a mere 65 pages, without back matter, and totaling only 12,000 words, Guisinger’s book wins the prize for slimmest. Deemed too small to travel unprotected,

Postcards arrived at my university library's circulation desk, nestled inside a sturdy pouch of thick cardboard and bookbinding tape. I couldn't help but laugh as I pulled it out of its capsule and showed it to a colleague I'd bumped into at the library. It seemed almost like a baby book. "I want to publish a book this small one day," I said to him. "That takes guts."

Of course, now, on reflection, I see that what it actually takes is discipline.

Postcards from Here is a snapshot of family life in rural Maine, about a lover's devotion to her partner, her children, and her craft. Although each fragment or vignette here carries a title, Guisinger could have easily have strung the pieces together, as Fleischmann has in *Syzygy, Beauty*, and let white space do the work of separation and punctuation.

Originally, I had thought to disqualify *Postcards from Here* from my survey of tiny essay-books, because I imagined the book's parts would be too disparate, too disjointed for my purposes. That it would be too much of a collection. But I was wrong. What has surprised me most about Guisinger's book are its unity and wholeness despite fragmentation. The text functions as a collection of mirror shards: when you look down at the mosaic of glass, a series of miniature images shimmer up at you (perhaps the sky, the landscape, or even your own face). Each piece is a distinct and total image in and of itself but it's also part of a bigger picture. "I'm less concerned with what it's called than I am about how it functions," wrote Guisinger, when I contacted her to verify *Postcards*' word count. "I have called it various things at various times. It's a memoir. It's a collection of micro-essays. It's a collection of flash nonfiction. Of vignettes. Whatever."

The boldest of Guisinger's fragments? It has to be "How to Go Bowling with Your Michigan Brother in Law," which reads, in its entirety: "Don't mention the unions."

Enough said.

At the end of that summer on the lake, we piled back into the blue hatchback and started our long journey south. At my son's feet once again: the laptop and a far slimmer manuscript.

From my desk at home, I prepared to send my manuscript to my editor at the University of Nebraska Press, prefacing it with a somewhat armored email. By then, the high of cutting so many words had worn off. "This is a book-length essay," I wrote, feigning certitude that what I'd named was a real genre. "In its brevity and restraint, it dialogues with texts like Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness*, Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, Eula Biss's *On Immunity*, and Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* and *The Argonauts*." I attached my now featherweight book and waited.

It wasn't long before my editor, Bridget Barry, opened my manuscript and sent a note back. "I wouldn't worry about the length," she wrote. "There's no point in adding extra material just for the sake of making a book longer."

I sighed with relief.

Some months later, once my interest in the tiny essay-book had become less materially urgent, I asked Barry the same series of questions I'd posed to Graywolf's Ethan Nosowsky. Namely: *How do editors view short books? What role does word-count play in the acquisitions process? How short is too short?* Both their responses make me suspect that word counts may be more of a concern amongst writers than editors. Here's what Barry wrote back:

Questions about manuscript length come up frequently when I'm speaking with new or prospective authors. My standard answer is that the book should be as long as the topic requires, which I realize somewhat evades the question and puts it back on the author. Successful books come in all sizes, though, so my primary concern is telling a good story or covering a topic thoroughly, whether that's in 100 pages or 1000. My main objective is for the book to appeal to as many potential readers/buyers as possible, which begins with the best possible execution of writing, so I'm open to various lengths. That being said, I do

think a book can be too short, at least from a publisher's standpoint. There are purely practical concerns about trim size, binding, and design with short books, and pricing also comes into play. Shorter books carry lower prices, which makes the profit margin tighter.

Once you slip below 25,000 words, all of these factors become trickier.

And so, now with my editor's permission, I sing a praise song for the tiny essay-book: *Slim volume, great adventure! Tiny text, massive pleasure! Bitsy book, ginormous joy!*

Do challenges come with trying to place a small book? Yes. But long books too bring up issues.

Barry concluded her email thus:

I'm currently reading a book that's around 500 pages and the oppressive heat and humidity are making me rethink that choice! Besides the appeal of "beach reading," though, I think there are many readers attracted to writing that is especially finely wrought, and a short book is a good place to showcase these skills. Writing a short book, is, however, a skill.

Let us not, Dear Writers, fear the short book. Let us not apologize for the words that fall away as we chisel and polish. Let us listen for Callimachus thundering in our ears. Let us follow his advice and earn the brevity our texts might demand. Let us engage torridly with language and form.

Editors are already on board. We can be too.

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