

10-1-2011

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Review of *Factual Fictions: Narrative Truth and the  
Contemporary American Documentary Novel* by  
Leonora Flis

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## The Documentary Novel and Its Many Theories

*Factual Fictions: Narrative Truth and the Contemporary American Documentary Novel*

by Leonora Flis. Newcastle on Tyne, U.K.: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010. Hardcover, 254 pp., \$59.99.

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One of the intellectual pleasures of literary journalism is that it offers endless opportunities to reflect upon the philosophical, social, and ethical complications of human storytelling. Leonora Flis plunges into this discussion with a sense of verve, determined not so much to resolve any of those complications but to lay them side by side, so that the reader might ponder their interconnections.

There is much terrain to cover. Literary theory has exploded over the course of the last half century, moving far beyond its ancient methods for analyzing writers' strategies, intentions, and biographies. Each new style of scholarship—structuralism, poststructuralism, fabulism, postmodernism—has left behind traces of its origins and theoretical ambitions, multiplying the possible vocabularies of interpretation. Flis's book demonstrates an acquaintance with the most important and relevant literary scholarship as well as a grasp of the issues at stake.

Ultimately, Flis hopes to unsettle and then remake our sense of how and why we create and enforce categories of "fact" and "fiction." Much of her book can be read as a wide-ranging review of the scholarly literature relevant to this task. She briskly calls out interlocutors from every corner of the intellectual world: Barthes, Dickstein, Hassan, Hutcheon, Iser, LaCapra, Scholes, and White from the literary critical establishment; Bakhtin, Derrida, Gadamer, Habermas, Lyotard, and Ricoeur from philosophy; Barthelme, Barth, Coover, DeLillo, and Gaddis from the fraternity of postmodern novelists; Foley, Hellmann, Hollowell, Lehman, and Zavarzadeh from students of the New Journalism; and Slovenian writers and critics such as Debeljak, Jovan, Kos, and Kovačič, whose work she finds relevant to the discussion. Ultimately, Flis wants to bring this scholarly apparatus to bear upon a group of books that she would characterize as "documentary novels": Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* and *The Executioner's Song*, and John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*.



Issues of great human importance play into these discussions. Twentieth-century thought (and experience) steadily eroded our confidence in fact as an indisputable realm of truth. We have come to recognize that writers necessarily choose some facts rather than others when constructing their stories; that we cannot easily ground our truth claims in an imagined domain of factual, objective reality that stands outside human thought or action; that “facts” might themselves be understood as part of the literary performance by which writers establish their credibility with readers; and that factual forms of literature come into existence as part of a contract between writers and readers that is being continuously renegotiated in the marketplace (i.e., fact as a guarantee of the veracity of a particular genre of writing).

Flis notes a similar set of complications that deflect our sense of what is “fiction.” The factual content of a story seems to have little to do with the narrative strategies employed by writers. Literary techniques generate their own sense of reality as they go, regardless of the kinds of stories in which they appear. All stories, whether “true” or not, or based in “fact,” are constructed objects. If one accepts the claim that language operates as a field of differences, in which concepts and narratives take on meaning only in relationship to each other, then our assumptions about texts and authors begin to disappear. Fact and fiction come to make sense only as oppositional terms in a fluid discourse. Seen from this perspective, the categories of fact and fiction help establish the rules of the game for group conflict. Groups embedded in historical, political, and cultural circumstances assert the fact-fiction distinction in order to enforce their misunderstandings of one another.

All this is heady stuff—absolutely relevant to the study of literary journalism but covered rather breathlessly in Flis’s book. In the end, she does not attempt to resolve these philosophical, critical debates (nobody else has, either), and her own claims on behalf of one or another position tend to be modest. In that sense *Factual Fictions* feels like the book of a young writer, anxious to display her command of the literature but not yet fully at home in her own voice or claims of authority. To her credit, Flis does recognize some of the practical and ethical complexities of the documentary novel. Both writers and readers often hope that a book will engage the world in order to make it intelligible. “I believe,” Flis writes, “that the New Journalism, the documentary novel, and fabulist experimentation all represent different types of response to the ambiguities and pressures of the present-day reality.” (62)

Flis tends to work the literary side of the literary journalism discussion more heavily than the journalism side. This is understandable—we all work within our own traditions—but in Flis’s book it leads to some gaps in the literature review. Scholars like Norman Sims, Thomas Connery, and John Hartsock have documented encounters between literature and journalism in the United States that date back many decades before the turmoil of the 1960s. Similarly, Lennard Davis wrote a book by the same name, *Factual Fictions*, in 1983, where he argued that the English novel emerged from an 18<sup>th</sup> century fact-fiction discourse, a view that supports many of Flis’s arguments. Most surprising was the lack of any mention to the work of David Eason, most notably his 1980s essays, “The New Journalism and the Image World,” and “On Journalistic Authority: The Janet Cooke Scandal.” Eason’s interpretations,

much influenced by the literary critical revolution Flis describes, have continued to shape American journalism scholars' views on these issues. Flis's references to the Slovenian scholarship on these issues will be helpful to many readers as a signal that all societies confront questions of textual authority, although she never fully explains the value of incorporating that scholarship into her argument.

Flis sometimes acknowledges the ethical complexity involved in reporting on or being reported on, but does not emphasize those issues in the same way that journalism scholars would. For journalists, texts never quite float free of their moorings. Subjects care about their portrayal and about the effect stories can have upon their friendships, careers, and sense of personal identity. Journalists write within a system of relationships—with sources, editors, fellow reporters, critics—that both enable and constrain their work. The organizations that publish journalists' work make a civic claim on their own behalf, and every other institution in society finds itself compelled to acknowledge that claim (whether they believe it or not), and to tailor their routines to its demands.

Every day groups battle over fact, fiction, and truth. Flis does not deny this fact; indeed her own analysis seems to affirm it. If the truth of a story cannot be established by reference to an autonomous outside force—a set of facts that exists apart from the stories in which they are embedded—then Flis argues that all we have left are the social negotiations by which we establish provisional truths in specific cases. That said, Flis seems more interested in how texts work than in how groups struggle.

The value of Flis's book, for me, was that it reminds us of how much we leave unspoken when we talk about literary journalism as a form of storytelling. Literary texts are contradictory and unfinished in exactly the ways that Flis notes, and we would do well to approach them with the philosophical and ethical caution she recommends. The fact is that we enchant ourselves with works of our own making, and truth has nothing to do with it.

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