

# By Fact Alone: Sensationalism in Contemporary Nonfiction

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**T**HE NEW YORK TIMES reported recently that an unpublished author would receive nearly a million dollars to write a memoir. The offer was tendered on the basis of a twenty-page sample that prompted the executive editor at Random House to say, "I've seen enough to know what an extraordinary heart and soul exists in this book" (Rich, C1). Both the publisher's confidence and the size of the advance would be surprising in the absence of a single fact: the novice writer is Mimi Beardsley Alford, who as a nineteen-year-old White House intern engaged in an affair with President John F. Kennedy. For Random House, as for the readers expected to repay its investment, the true heart and soul of this story clearly lies in the author's choice of paramour rather than her literary gifts.

Sensational subject matter dominates contemporary nonfiction, and not just in the lucrative genre of memoir. In her essay "Black Swans," Lauren Slater describes the obsessive compulsive disorder that began to afflict her in her mid-twenties. The narrative moves from early signs of the illness in Slater's childhood perfectionism to its full onset years later:

What before had been inconsequential behaviors, such as counting to three before I went through a doorway or checking the stove several times before bed, now became imperatives. There were a thousand and one of them to follow: rules about how to step, what it meant to touch my mouth, a hot consuming urge to fix the crooked angles of the universe. It was constant, a cruel nattering. *There, that tilted picture on the wall. Scratch your head with your left hand only.* It was noise, the beak of a woodpecker in the soft bark of my brain. (*Best*, 147-48)

The novelty of Slater's symptoms and the vividness with which she portrays them raise the question of how much of this passage's interest comes from its content and how much from its writing. I felt the same curiosity once while reading an article about a homicidal doctor in *The New Yorker*. As I stayed up late learning how the criminal plotted his poisonings, I tried to decide if the author had drawn me in through his language and choice of detail, or merely appealed to my love of lurid stories. I could imagine attending as closely to the tale while overhearing it in a restaurant, and wondered where in such compelling case studies documentation ends and literature begins.

"And then she told him to get out"; "After shredding the first document he heard footsteps." Often mere words, artlessly composed, can create as much interest as the most careful prose. Raw experience possesses its own appeal, as any channel surfer knows who has paused, riveted, on video footage from a documentary police show. The public's taste for reading about extreme behavior has long enriched authors of crudely composed true crime books, celebrity biographies, and tawdry journalism. In recent years, however, such behavior has increasingly appeared in serious nonfiction as well. In her best-selling memoir, *The Kiss*, Kathryn Harrison recalls a sexual relationship with her father. Some critics praised Harrison's courage and spare prose, but others charged her with self exploitation.

Sensational subjects don't always mask cheap literary goods, but they can bestow a veneer of quality upon writing simply by making it fascinating. Conversely, an author such as Harrison may find that her facts obscure her craft no matter how artistically she expresses them. This essay will examine the extent to which highly dramatic material makes writing seem more or less accomplished than it is, and whether writers create subtler work and perhaps face a greater challenge in making ordinary topics interesting. Though some people might profess not to care whether nonfiction appeals to them for its content or its artistry, this ques-

tion affects everyone who writes and reads. Praise based upon the instant gratification provided by subject matter creates a hospitable climate for mediocre work.

It's fine for readers to seek and enjoy titillating information without regard for art, but those who do so risk missing out on the more profound ways that nonfiction can affect them. As the critic David Orr says about poetry, "The news we get from [it] isn't like the news we get from newspapers" (1). The news Orr refers to is a product of literary craftsmanship—there is a universality to a well-wrought memoir such as Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life* or Edward Hoagland's essays that more superficial works lack. Readers are also more likely to find their own lives reflected and illuminated in writing that doesn't feature extreme experience. It's doubtful that the author, publisher, or readers of *Once Upon a Secret*, Mimi Alford's forthcoming account of her liaison with JFK, will apply any of these criteria to her memoir.

Although most attempts to distinguish content from style in art soon mire in aesthetic quicksand, anyone who has ever browsed a bookstore or recommended a good read knows that subject matter matters. "Oh, that sounds great," we say, or "I love that kind of thing." Most discussions I have heard of *Into Thin Air*, Jon Krakauer's popular first-hand account of the 1996 Mount Everest disaster, center on blizzards, the indifference of nature, and twelve climbers' agonizing deaths, not Krakauer's writing. Someone who has not read the book might assume that the story came from news reports or word of mouth rather than a work of nonfiction. One could interpret this phenomenon in two ways: as a compliment to the book's verisimilitude (many lovers of *Anna Karenina* express themselves more volubly about Anna's adultery than about Tolstoy's prose); or as evidence that any member of the expedition could have produced an equally effective version.

Krakauer's story first appeared as an article in *Outside* magazine, which financed his climb in order to document the increasingly popular Everest expeditions. He conceived of his report as a work of journalism, concerned with style mainly

insofar as it contributed to clarity. I suspect that he would view his readers' preoccupation with the book's content rather than its prose as a compliment. He has said, "I think it's honest reporting, but I don't look at that as a great work of art. It's not art, it's reporting, it's squeezing the pus out of a wound" (*Iconoclasts*). In the book, Krakauer struggles to come to terms with his survival in the wake of so many deaths, but he largely eschews techniques—metaphor, imagery, lyrical language—associated with creative nonfiction. This strategy succeeds in a work whose focus is an historic tragedy rather than the author himself. Perhaps Krakauer's true literary achievement, easily overlooked, is that he tells his story as straightforwardly as possible.

But even admirers of Krakauer's reportage must ask whether they are mistaking readability for artistry, and praising a writer whose main feat was to find himself in the right place at the right time. A similar phenomenon occurs with poetry, when a poem's power derives more from what it describes than from its author's craft. In Raymond Carver's poems written after his diagnosis with terminal cancer, it is the biography that moves me, not the poetry. Carver's poem "Gravy," published three weeks before his death, is devastating as a valediction, but forgettable as verse.

No other word will do. For that's what it was.  
Gravy.  
Gravy, these past ten years.  
Alive, sober, working, loving, and  
being loved by a good woman. Eleven years  
ago he was told he had six months to live  
at the rate he was going. And he was going  
nowhere but down. So he changed his ways  
somehow. He quit drinking! And the rest?

from "Gravy" (*Path*, 118)

One could argue that Carver's art, like Krakauer's, lies in his directness, but I would find a synopsis of "Gravy" equally powerful, which makes me doubt its virtues as a poem. In contrast, the effect of Jon Silkin's elegy for his infant son owes as much to Silkin's phrasing as to his loss.

Something has ceased to come along with me.  
 Something like a person: something very like one.  
 And there was no nobility in it  
 Or anything like that.

Something was there like a one year  
 Old house, dumb as stone. While the near buildings  
 Sang like birds and laughed  
 Understanding the pact

They were to have with silence. But he  
 Neither sang nor laughed. He did not bless silence  
 Like bread, with words.  
 He did not forsake silence.

from "Death of a Son" (who died in a mental hospital aged one) [*Poems*, 49].

If we expect poems to be as memorable for their expression as for their information, should we hold nonfiction to the same standard? Or is this superfluous in a genre like biography, where a coherent, insightful account suffices? I appreciate purely informative biographies, but only for satisfying my curiosity; it takes an exceptional writer to capture a personality as well as actions. In W. J. Bate's *Samuel Johnson* and William Manchester's life of Winston Churchill, the biographer's prose functions like a painter's brushstrokes. Of the scenes from these books that stick in my memory, each depends as much on the author's rendering of the great man's behavior as on the behavior itself.

"I admire artists who succeed in dividing my attention more or less evenly between the world of their books and the art of their books," Annie Dillard writes. "The writer may . . . make of his work an original object in its own right, so that a reader may study the work with pleasure as well as the world that it describes" (*Inventing*, 158). This creative aspect of nonfiction is crucial in the genre of memoir, especially if the author's life lacks the inherent interest of that of a Johnson or a Churchill. But even if one's life is fascinating, one must ensure that the expression of the facts, rather than the facts alone, justifies both the writing and the reading of the piece. Many memoirists treat their shocking experiences as a kind of

publishing commodity that need only be converted into serviceable prose in order to appeal to readers. And who can blame them, given the public's enthusiasm for such books, and the tendency of reviewers to react as much to the behavior as to its portrayal?

The current popularity of these kinds of memoirs presents two challenges to readers. Not only must they locate the rare skillful book amid the flood of exploitative ones, they must see past its subject to appreciate its craft. I once assigned Harrison's *The Kiss* in a nonfiction writing class for adults. One man refused to finish it, calling it pornography and citing the following passage as evidence:

After dessert, we sit stiffly in the living room, all of us in separate chairs, the couch left empty. We watch a crime drama on television, and then we go to bed. The wind moans and whistles around the corners of the house. It makes a wild, keening sound; and when my father comes quietly through the guest room's door, he finds me still awake. He pulls back the covers, and I move over, expecting that he will lie beside me, hold me in apology for the words of the stepfather I know he dislikes. Imagining his shame, I feel sorry for him. But my father doesn't lie down.

Instead, he lifts the hem of my nightgown. He doesn't speak, and neither do I. Nor do I make any attempt to stay his hands. Beneath the nightgown I am wearing no underpants, and he opens my legs and puts his tongue between them. His mother's house! His mother's house! I think the words over and over, aware that such a setting for his advance cannot be insignificant, but not understanding its meaning. (127)

I don't consider this writing to be pornography, though the same details that add subtlety to the scene—the isolated seating in the living room; the portentous wind accompanying the father's visit—also make it more titillating. To her credit, Harrison doesn't just rely on her facts to attract the reader; she shows what besides those facts is essential to understanding them. Earlier in the book, the father has already spoken and acted inappropriately toward his daughter, praising her looks and kissing her deeply on the mouth, so this new advance merely confirms his depravity. Of more importance here is how the girl, twenty years old in this scene, responds.

Harrison conveys this by focusing on her perspective of her father's behavior instead of the behavior itself. She de-

scribes his approach through her eyes, and even implies that she encourages his touch through her passivity—"Nor do I make any attempt to stay his hands." She reports the climactic act dispassionately—"he opens my legs and puts his tongue between them"—and rather than dwelling on it as a pornographer would, she immediately starts to analyze: "His mother's house! His mother's house! I think the words over and over, aware that such a setting for his advance cannot be insignificant." She is as committed as Krakauer to "honest reporting," but she also aspires to art, which means using her story to pursue insight and even forgiveness. William Zinsser defines the memoirist's task as "to make sense of who we are, who we once were, and what values and heritage shaped us. If a writer seriously embarks on that quest, readers will be nourished by the journey, bringing along many associations with quests of their own" (*Inventing*, 6).

For all of Harrison's restraint in describing the incestuous act, however, it still dominates the reader's attention, confirming that even skilled writers have trouble making dramatic material conform to their literary visions. The importance of this goal and the degree to which Harrison succeeds at it are apparent when one compares *The Kiss* to a memoir whose author seems unconcerned with or incapable of shaping her experiences. Alison Weaver's *Gone to the Crazy's* covers the writer's life as a teenager and young adult, first at a "boot camp" type boarding school for troubled youth, and then as a drug abusing partier in New York City in the 1990s. Here she recalls a group therapy session at the school.

I said all this or something like it out loud in the Forum, and the next thing I knew I was Running Anger, screaming at my mother with all the rage in my body. I tried to remember what it felt like when she threw a wine glass at me or grabbed me with her sharp manicured nails. I tried to remember what it felt like when she looked at me as if I were a monster. Jerry talked me through it. He prodded deeply into me, peeling back layers one by one, like flaps of skin being pulled from a lab animal. I must have yelled for fifteen or twenty minutes. When I finished my throat was raw, and I could taste metal in my mouth. My nose had begun to bleed. For a minute, I sat there feeling—something, I don't know. Emptied. Hollowed out. But soon this emptiness began to fill with guilt, guilt for publicizing these things about my own mother. (125)

The only observed details here—the flung wine glass and manicured nails—feel more stagy than expressive, and the language is slack and general: “she looked at me as if I were a monster”; “I sat there feeling—something, I don’t know. Emptied. Hollowed out.” The passage doesn’t just lend itself to paraphrase, it is a paraphrase, leaving the reader with no memorable sense of the setting, the speaker, or her perspective. Where Harrison’s description of her father approaching her bed is impossible to shake, and colored by her frantic attempt to make sense of the encounter, Weaver’s vague self-analysis—“But soon this emptiness began to fill with guilt”—comes across as psychologically unpenetrating and artistically lazy. It bears out Dillard’s warning that “you have to take pains in a memoir not to hang on the reader’s arm, like a drunk, and say, ‘And then I did this and it was so interesting’” (*Inventing*, 16).

Reviewing Weaver’s book in the *Times*, Harrison faulted it for its voyeuristic strain, saying that it “provide(s) a window onto the kind of sordid scenes about which [readers] are curious but haven’t the information necessary to imagine for themselves” (2). She called the author’s attempts to analyze her behavior “facile and reductive,” but concluded that “it doesn’t really matter, as her readers won’t be looking for insight. They’ll just be looking” (3). The same could be said of those drawn to *The Kiss* for its scandalous disclosure, though one would hope that even a superficial reading would reveal that book’s literary quality. Still, my writing student’s dismissal of it as pornography shows the extent to which subject matter can overshadow craft.

*The Kiss* was one of several memoirs published in the 1990s that attracted readers as much for their authors’ experiences as for their writing. The best of these, Zinsser says, “elevate the pain of the past with forgiveness, arriving at a larger truth about families in various stages of brokenness. There’s no self-pity, no whining, no hunger for revenge” (*Inventing*, 5). Yet nowadays it seems that many memoirs are promoted and even purchased on the basis of their subject



matter. Faced with all the true stories of depression, dysfunction, and abuse in my local bookstore, I imagine editors gushing over these authors' two-page proposals, confident that the books will sell regardless of the quality of their prose. No wonder more and more writers see their painful pasts as tickets to publication and even riches, while less racy reminiscences languish in their memories or drawers. I suspect that some people have taken to memorizing their misery even as they endure it, envisioning its future incarnation as splashy nonfiction.

The devastating accident at the center of Natalie Kusz's memoir, *Road Song*, happened to the author when she was six. Far from sensationalizing her misfortune, Kusz places it in the context of challenges she and her family faced as homesteaders in rural Alaska. Yet I can't help feeling that my curiosity about Kusz's ordeal both exaggerates the force of her prose and eclipses its literary virtues. The accident occurs when Natalie arrives home from school to find her mother out. She goes to the house of a neighbor who owns sled dogs, and must walk past the chained animals on her way to the front door.

I stepped toward the end of the row and my arms began to drop slowly closer to my body. Inside the mittens, my thumbs were cold, as cold as my thighs, and I curled them in and out again. I was walking past the last dog and I felt brave, and I forgave him and bent to lay my mitten on his head. He surged forward on a chain much longer than I thought, leaping at my face, catching my hair in his mouth, shaking it in his teeth until the skin gave way with a jagged sound. My feet were too slow in my boots, and as I blundered backward they tangled in the chain, burning my legs on metal. I called out at Brian's window, expecting rescue, angry that it did not come, and I beat my arms in front of me, and the dog was back again, pulling me down.

A hole was worn in the snow, and I fit into it, arms and legs drawn up in front of me. The dog snatched and pulled at my mouth, eyes, hair; his breath clouded the air around us, but I did not feel its heat, or smell the blood sinking down between hairs of its muzzle. I watched my mitten come off in his teeth and sail upward, and it seemed unfair then and very sad that one hand should freeze all alone; I lifted the second mitten off and threw it away, then turned my face back again, overtaken suddenly by loneliness. A loud river ran in my ears, dragging me under. (47)

This writing contains many jewels traceable to Kusz's gifts for observation and language: the mitten as an emblem of her helplessness; her childish mourning of its loss ("it seemed unfair then and very sad"); the single verb "sail" conveying a sense of wonder as the girl succumbs to the dogs' power. Every time I read this passage, however, the horror of the attack monopolizes my attention. The instant the girl reaches toward the dog, I begin to crave plot over style without truly caring what words Kusz uses; her precise sentences and meticulous pacing, even the lyrical phrases "blood sinking down between hairs of its muzzle" and "a loud river ran in my ears," are reduced to decoration as I follow the attack to its conclusion. I admire Kusz's poetic touches, and prefer her version to a National Enquirer one, but nothing can diminish the lure of the facts.

Although Kusz's description of the attack occupies less than a page, the incident reverberates throughout her memoir, which opens, "Our first months in Alaska, that one long summertime before I was hurt. . ." (5). She recounts her recuperation and the long-term effects of her injuries (extensive facial scarring and the loss of an eye). Much like Harrison exploring her involvement in incest, Kusz tries to present her suffering as a lens through which the reader can view her adult character and the difficulties of being different. Yet the severity of her injuries precludes all but a sympathetic response; one can neither identify with her nor learn anything from her misfortune except the shattering effect of violence and unpredictability of life. When Natalie purchases a one-eyed fish, commenting that "I thought we made a match" (121), the reader feels like the clerk in the fish store, moved by her lighthearted acceptance of her oddity, but unable to stop gawking at her mutilated face.

Like Harrison, Kusz verges on sensationalism just by writing about what she knows. Perhaps she could have mitigated this by refocusing her piece—say, alluding obliquely to the attack and its damage while emphasizing the effect of her disfigurement upon herself and others. While this change

might have resulted in a subtler, if less immediately engrossing, essay, I doubt that it would have made the violence less conspicuous. Throughout *The Kiss*, Harrison confines her explicit references to incest to a few sentences, and surrounds them with analysis, but the shock is undiminished. If either writer downplayed her trauma any further, she would misrepresent its importance to her life.

The fact that Jo Ann Beard neither witnesses nor participates in the tragedy at the heart of "The Fourth State of Matter" gives her more flexibility in framing it. In the first ten pages of this autobiographical essay, Beard portrays herself as a woman coping with dual sorrows: abandonment by her husband, and the sufferings of her elderly, debilitated collie. She finds solace at her job in a university physics department, chatting with a sympathetic professor amid visits from scientists and graduate students. Beard combines wit ("I wish my *dog* was out tearing up the town and my *husband* was home sleeping on a blanket" [*Best*, 15]), and vivid characterizations (the preoccupied physicists; an ex-beauty queen animal control officer) in a pleasantly rambling narrative. Midway through the essay, however, while Beard is at home, a Chinese graduate student brings a gun into a physics seminar room and begins shooting people, carrying his rampage into the hall before finally turning the weapon on himself.

Naturally, the reader receives a jolt here as powerful as that first gunshot: I recall my hands tightening on the pages as I accelerated my reading in order to learn what happened. Recommending the essay to a friend, I reported that it "got good" at precisely this point. I later qualified that statement, realizing that by postponing this climax for ten pages, Beard allows the reader to form opinions and expectations about her characters. One hears enough about the murdered professor, Beard's boss and friend, to grieve for him, and reads a desperate letter the killer wrote to his sister in China, which illuminates his later actions. One purpose of this narrative structure is clear; possessed of a spectacular story, Beard must keep it from dominating her essay.

In the end, though, "The Fourth State of Matter" owes most of its power and probably its existence to the shooting, which proves more haunting than any of Beard's subplots or characterizations. While entertaining on their own, her romantic and domestic struggles only acquire a broader significance in the context of the murders. At the same time, these secondary stories help to elevate the essay above a grisly anecdote, making it as much about the way extraordinary experience colors ordinary experience as about the tragedy itself. Harrison and Kusz aspire to the same breadth, though they share Beard's dilemma: the event through which they hope to convey their message also distracts from it. Torn between suppressing the drama and surrendering to it, they choose a course of measured resistance, trying to portray their subject so that it does not upstage their writing—quite a challenge when dealing with incest, mutilation, or murder.

The comparatively ordinary events of George Orwell's youth both require and permit more inventiveness, yielding a more resonant autobiography. In his essay "Such, Such Were the Joys," Orwell recalls his three years as a student at an English prep school. In a scene where young Orwell is accused of bedwetting and submits to a flogging by his headmaster, the author benefits from a reader's familiarity with such Dickensian rituals from books and movies. Like Kusz, Orwell must avoid exploiting the brutality, but need not worry that the mere fact of it will preoccupy the reader. This makes it easier for him to shape the writing to his essay's needs. To this end, he details everything about the beating except the actual physical contact, reserving all of the passage's specificity for actions other than the violent one.

When I had said my say, he read me a short but pompous lecture, then seized me by the scruff of the neck, twisted me over and began beating me with the riding crop. He had a habit of continuing his lecture while he flogged you, and I remember the words "you dir-ty little boy" keeping time with the blows. The beating did not hurt (perhaps as it was the first time, he was not hitting me very hard), and I walked out feeling very much better. The fact that the beating had not hurt was a sort of victory and partially wiped out the shame of the bed-wetting. I was even incautious enough to wear a grin on my face. (12)

By manipulating his scene rather than simply reporting it, Orwell invests it with a profundity that no summary could match. He focuses on the headmaster's words and the boy's attention to them, not on how the blows sounded or felt or even where they landed. In this way, he refreshes a potential cliché and provides compact character studies of this resilient child and sadistic, small-minded adult. The incident's universality—a figure of authority abuses his power at the expense of a subordinate—elicits what Philip Lopate calls “that shiver of self-recognition . . . which all lovers of the personal essay await as a reward” (*Art*, xxv-xxvi). Harrison and Kusz attempt this, but only Orwell's subject is unassuming enough to permit it: were the headmaster to reach for a knife rather than a cane, or the boy to brandish a revolver, the reader would cease identifying with either character and just long to know what happened.

After recounting the beating, Orwell steps away from his narrative to reflect. Again, the accessibility of his subject, and his success in depicting his characters as universal types, allow the reader to identify with the lessons he draws from his punishment. Harrison's observation that her father chose to violate her in his mother's house, and Kusz's attempts to cope with her disfigurement, apply only to their specific, horrific experiences. The moral that Orwell extracts from his beating applies to anyone who has ever felt like a victim of circumstances.

Sin was not necessarily something that you did: it might be something that happened to you. I do not want to claim that this idea flashed into my mind as a complete novelty at this very moment, under the blows of Sim's cane: I must have had glimpses of it even before I left home, for my early childhood had not been altogether happy. But at any rate this was the great, abiding lesson of my boyhood: that I was in a world where it was not possible for me to be good. And the double-beating was a turning point, for it brought home to me for the first time the harshness of the environment into which I had been flung. Life was more terrible, and I was more wicked, than I had imagined. (13)

Effective personal essayists, Lopate writes, teach the reader “more about their habits of thought than about the

sorts of abuses and crimes that spice our afternoon TV talk shows: incest, date rape, addictions" (*Art*, xxvi-xxvii). Whereas one could paraphrase Kusz's and Harrison's traumas without diminishing their drama, Orwell's epiphany is bred into his sentences; he seems to refine his thoughts through language. The structure of his verbal argument bolsters the logic of the philosophical conclusions: "Sin was not . . ." / "It might be . . ."; "I do not want to claim . . ." / "But at any rate this was. . ." The passage's simplicity breathes conviction: "I was in a world where it was not possible for me to be good." A schoolboy could grasp this statement even while a team of ethicists debated it. Finally, the rhythm of the prose facilitates understanding, inviting rereading for both pleasure and meaning: "Life was more terrible, and I was more wicked, than I had imagined." Orwell arrives at this realization not just through his experience of the beating, but through having to articulate it in writing. If Harrison had made this statement after describing the encounter with her father, it would have sounded redundant.

In teaching memoirs such as Harrison's, Kusz's, and Beard's, I point out the techniques that each author uses to shape his or her material. Unfortunately, these are of limited use to students who see their lives as lacking comparable drama, and feel excluded by the trend toward nonfiction grounded in extreme experience. It is hard to find contemporary memoirists and essayists who write as absorbingly and profoundly on quotidian matters as Orwell, Virginia Wolff, E. B. White, and Montaigne. From its first sentence, White's 1949 essay, "Good-bye to Forty-eighth Street Turtle Bay," engages the reader as much through the novelty of its imagery as through its subject: "For some weeks now I have been engaged in dispersing the contents of this apartment, trying to persuade hundreds of inanimate objects to scatter and leave me alone" (*Essays*, 3).

By attributing consciousness and mobility to his belongings, White signals that we are in the hands of an inventive writer whose prose is neither enhanced nor undermined

by his information. Here, he makes the process of accumulating junk as compelling as a burst of gunfire.

A home is like a reservoir equipped with a check valve: the valve permits influx but prevents outflow. Acquisition goes on night and day—smoothly, subtly, imperceptibly. I have no sharp taste for acquiring things, but it is not necessary to desire things in order to acquire them. Goods and chattels seek a man out; they find him even though his guard is up. (*Essays*, 4)

It's hard to imagine White's piece appearing in one of today's fashionable venues for nonfiction. For example, the "Lives" essays published at the back of *The New York Times Magazine* seem designed to appeal either through their topicality or their examination of severe dysfunction or illness. Recently, the column has featured stories about or set in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Myanmar, Iran, and North Korea. Another batch from the same period discussed mastectomy, brain-stem injury, immune system toxicity, and developmental disability.

It doesn't surprise me when editors try to lure readers in this way, but I fear that the appetite for sensationalism has begun to affect how writers choose their material as well. Annie Dillard advises, "Embark upon a memoir for the same reason that you would embark on any other book: to fashion a text" (*Inventing*, 156), a reminder that of all the decisions confronting nonfiction writers today, those relating to subject matter may require the greatest courage and ingenuity of all. One hopes that as Mimi Alford records her intimate memories of JFK, she does not place too much credence in the publisher who found her book's heart and soul in a twenty-page sample, but will draw from her experiences the kind of news that can only be found in literature.

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