

Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction

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We have found fiction wanting in myriad ways but rarely paused to wonder, or recall, what we once wanted from it.

I've always been aware of being an inconsistent personality. Of having a lot of contradictory voices knocking around my head. As a kid, I was ashamed of it. Other people seemed to feel strongly about themselves, to know exactly who they were. I was never like that. I could never shake the suspicion that everything about me was the consequence of a series of improbable accidents—not least of which was the 400 trillion-to-one accident of my birth. As I saw it, even my strongest feelings and convictions might easily be otherwise, had I been the child of the next family down the hall, or the child of another century, another country, another God. My mind wandered.

To give a concrete example: if the Pakistani girl next door happened to be painting *mehndi* on my hands—she liked to use me for practice—it was the work of a moment to imagine I was her sister. I'd envision living with Asma, and knowing and feeling the things she knew and felt. To tell the truth, I rarely entered a friend's home without wondering what it might be like to never leave. That is, what it would be like to be Polish or Ghanaian or Irish or Bengali, to be richer or poorer, to say these prayers or hold those politics. I was an equal-opportunity voyeur. I wanted to know what it was like to be everybody. Above all, I wondered what it would be like to believe the sorts of things I didn't believe. Whenever I spent time with my pious Uncle Ricky, and the moment came for everyone around the table to bow their heads, close their eyes, and thank God for a plate of *escovitch* fish, I could all too easily convince myself that I, too, was a witness of Jehovah. I'd see myself leaving the island, arriving in freezing England, shivering and gripping my own mother's hand, who was—in this peculiar fictional version—now my older sister.



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: *To Reason with Heathen at Harvest*, 2017. An exhibition of Yiadom-Boakye's work, curated by Hilton Als, is on view at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, September 12–December 15, 2019.

I don't claim I imagined any of this correctly—only compulsively. And what I did in life, I did with books. I lived in them and felt them live in me. I felt I *was* Jane Eyre and Celie and Mr. Biswas and David Copperfield. Our autobiographical coordinates rarely matched. I'd never had a friend die of consumption or been raped by my father or lived in Trinidad or the Deep South or the nineteenth century. But I'd been sad and lost, sometimes desperate, often confused. It was on the basis of such flimsy emotional clues that I found myself feeling with these imaginary strangers: feeling with them, for them, alongside them and through them, extrapolating from my own emotions, which, though strikingly minor when compared to the high dramas of fiction, still bore some relation to them, as all human feelings do. The voices of characters joined the ranks of all the other voices inside me, serving to make the idea of my "own voice" indistinct. Or maybe it's better to say: I've never believed myself to have a voice entirely separate from the many voices I hear, read, and internalize every day.

At some point during this inconsistent childhood, I was struck by an old cartoon I came across somewhere. It depicted Charles Dickens, the image of contentment, surrounded by all his characters come to life. I found that image comforting. Dickens didn't look worried or ashamed. Didn't appear to suspect he might be schizophrenic or in some other way pathological. He had a name for his condition: novelist. Early in my life, this became my cover story, too. And for years now, in the pages of novels, "I" have been both adult and child, male and female, black, brown, and white, gay and straight, funny and tragic, liberal and conservative, religious and godless, not to mention alive and dead. All the voices within me have had an airing, and though I never achieved the sense of contentment I saw in that cartoon—itself perhaps a fiction—over time I have striven to feel less shame about my compulsive interest in the lives of others and the multiple voices in my head. Still, whenever I am struck by the old self-loathing, I try to bring to mind that cartoon, alongside some well-worn lines of Walt Whitman's:

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*

I'm sure I'm not the first novelist to dig up that old Whitman chestnut in defense of our indefensible art. And it would be easy enough at this point to march onward and write a triumphalist defense of fiction, ridiculing those who hold the very practice in suspicion—the type of reader who wonders how a man wrote *Anna Karenina*, or why Zora Neale Hurston once wrote a book with no black people in it, or why a gay woman like Patricia Highsmith spent so much time imagining herself into the life of an (ostensibly) straight white man called Ripley. But I don't write fiction in a triumphalist spirit and I can't defend it in that way either. Besides which, a counter-voice in my head detects, in Whitman's lines, not a little entitlement.

Containing multitudes sounds, just now, like an act of colonization. Who is this Whitman, and who does he think he is, containing anyone? Let Whitman speak for Whitman—I'll speak for myself, thank you very much. How can Whitman—white, gay, American—possibly contain, say, a black polysexual British girl or a nonbinary Palestinian or a Republican Baptist from Atlanta? How can Whitman, dead in 1892, contain, or even know anything at all of the particularities of any of us, alive as we are, in this tumultuous year, 2019?

This inner voice suspects the problem starts in that word, *contain*, which would appear to share some lexical territory with other troubling discourses. The language of land rights. The language of prison ideology. The language of immigration policy. Even the language of military strategy. Nor does it seem at all surprising to me that we should, in 2019, have this hypersensitivity to language, given that it is something we carry about our person, in our mouths and our minds. It's right there, within our grasp, and we can effect change upon it, sometimes radical change. Whereas many more material issues—precisely economic inequality, criminal justice reform, immigration policy, and war—prove frighteningly intractable. Language becomes the convenient battlefield. And language is also, literally, the “containment.” The terms we choose—or the terms we are offered—behave as containers for our ideas, necessarily shaping and determining the form of what it is we think, or think we think. Our arguments about “cultural appropriation,” for example, cannot help but be heavily influenced by the term itself. Yet we treat those two carefully chosen words as if they were elemental, neutral in themselves, handed down from the heavens. When of course they are only, like all language, a verbal container, which, like all such containers, allows the emergence of certain ideas while limiting the possibilities of others.

What would our debates about fiction look like, I sometimes wonder, if our preferred verbal container for the phenomenon of writing about others was not “cultural appropriation” but rather “interpersonal voyeurism” or “profound-other-fascination” or even “cross-epidermal reanimation”? Our discussions would still be vibrant, perhaps even still furious—but I'm certain they would not be the same. Aren't we a little too passive in the face of inherited concepts? We allow them to think for us, and to stand as place markers when we can't be bothered to think. *What she said*. But surely the task of a writer is to think for herself! And immediately, within that bumptious exclamation mark, an internal voice notes the telltale whiff of baby boomer triumphalism, of Generation X moral irresponsibility.... I *do* believe a writer's task is to think for herself, although this task, to me, signifies not a fixed state but a continual process: thinking things afresh, each time, in each new situation. This requires not a little mental flexibility. No piety of the culture—whether it be *I think therefore I am*, *To be or not to be*, *You do*

you, or *I contain multitudes*—should or ever can be entirely fixed in place or protected from the currents of history. There is always the potential for radical change.

“Re-examine all you have been told,” Whitman tells us, “and dismiss whatever insults your own soul.” Full disclosure: what insults my soul is the idea—popular in the culture just now, and presented in widely variant degrees of complexity—that we can and should write only about people who are fundamentally “like” us: racially, sexually, genetically, nationally, politically, personally. That only an intimate authorial autobiographical connection with a character can be the rightful basis of a fiction. I do not believe that. I could not have written a single one of my books if I did. But I feel no sense of triumph in my apostasy. It might well be that we simply don’t want or need novels like mine anymore, or any of the kinds of fictions that, in order to exist, must fundamentally disagree with the new theory of “likeness.” It may be that the whole category of what we used to call fiction is becoming lost to us. And if enough people turn from the concept of fiction as it was once understood, then fighting this transformation will be like going to war against the neologism “impactful” or mourning the loss of the modal verb “shall.” As it is with language, so it goes with culture: what is not used or wanted dies. What is needed blooms and spreads.

Consequently, my interest here is not so much prescriptive as descriptive. For me the question is not: Should we abandon fiction? (Readers will decide that—are in the process of already deciding. Many decided some time ago.) The question is: Do we know what fiction *was*? We think we know. In the process of turning from it, we’ve accused it of appropriation, colonization, delusion, vanity, naiveté, political and moral irresponsibility. We have found fiction wanting in myriad ways but rarely paused to wonder, or recall, what we once wanted from it—what theories of self-and-other it offered us, or why, for so long, those theories felt meaningful to so many. Embarrassed by the novel—and its mortifying habit of putting words into the mouths of others—many have moved swiftly on to what they perceive to be safer ground, namely, the supposedly unquestionable authenticity of personal experience.

The old—and never especially helpful—adage *write what you know* has morphed into something more like a threat: *Stay in your lane*. This principle permits the category of fiction, but really only to the extent that we acknowledge and confess that personal experience is inviolate and nontransferable. It concedes that personal experience may be displayed, very carefully, to the unlike-us, to the stranger, even to the enemy—but insists it can never truly be shared by them. This rule also pertains in the opposite direction: the experience of the unlike-us can never be co-opted, ventriloquized, or otherwise “stolen” by us. (As the philosopher Anthony Appiah has noted, these ideas of cultural ownership share some DNA with the late-capitalist concept of brand

integrity.) Only those who are like us are like us. Only those who are like us can understand us—or should even try. Which entire philosophical edifice depends on visibility and legibility, that is, on the sense that we can be certain of who is and isn't "like us" simply by looking at them and/or listening to what they have to say.

Fiction didn't believe any of that. Fiction suspected that there is far more to people than what they choose to make manifest. Fiction wondered what likeness between selves might even mean, given the profound mystery of consciousness itself, which so many other disciplines—most notably philosophy—have probed for millennia without reaching any definitive conclusions. Fiction was suspicious of any theory of the self that appeared to be largely founded on what can be seen with the human eye, that is, those parts of our selves that are material, manifest, and clearly visible in a crowd. Fiction—at least the kind that was any good—was full of doubt, self-doubt above all. It had grave doubts about the nature of the self.



Walt Whitman; drawing by David Levine
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Like a lot of writers I want to believe in fiction. But I'm simultaneously full of doubt, as is my professional habit. I know that the old Whitmanesque defense needs an overhaul. Containment—as a metaphor for the act of writing about others—is unequal to the times we live in. These times in which so many of us feel a collective, desperate, and justified desire to be once and for all free of the limited—and limiting—fantasies and projections of other people. With all due respect to Whitman, then, I'm going to relegate him to the bench, and call up, in defense of fiction, another nineteenth-century poet, Emily Dickinson:

*I measure every Grief I meet
With narrow, probing, eyes—
I wonder if It weighs like Mine—
Or has an Easier size.*

This gets close to the experience of making up fictional people. It starts as a consciousness out in the world: looking, listening, noticing. A kind of awareness, attended by questions. What is it like to be that person? To feel what they feel? I wonder. Can I use what I feel to imagine what the other feels? A little later in the poem, Dickinson moves from the abstract to the precise:

*There's Grief of Want—and grief of Cold—
A sort they call "Despair"—
There's Banishment from native Eyes—
In sight of Native Air—*

She makes a map in her mind of possibilities. But later, as the poem concludes, she concedes that no mental map can ever be perfect, although this does not mean that such maps have no purpose:

*And though I may not guess the kind—
Correctly—yet to me
A piercing Comfort it affords
In passing Calvary—*

*To note the fashions—of the Cross—
And how they're mostly worn—
Still fascinated to presume
That Some—are like my own—*

In place of the potential hubris of containment, then, Dickinson offers us something else: the fascination of presumption. This presumption does not assume it is "correct," no more than I assumed, when I depicted the lives of a diverse collection of people in my first novel, that I was "correct." But I was fascinated to presume that some of the feelings of these imaginary people—feelings of loss of homeland, the anxiety of assimilation, battles with faith and its opposite—had some passing relation to feelings I have had or could imagine. That our griefs were not entirely unrelated. The joy of writing that book—and the risk of it—was in the uncertainty. I'd never been to war, Bangladesh, or early-twentieth-century Jamaica. I was not, myself, an immigrant. Could I make the reader believe in the imaginary people I placed in these fictional situations? Maybe, maybe not. Depends on the reader. "I don't believe it," the reader is always free to say, when confronted with this emotion or that, one action or another. Novels are machines for falsely generating belief and they succeed or fail on that basis. I know I can read the first sentence of a novel and find my reaction is *I don't believe you*. And many a reader must surely have turned from *White Teeth* in exactly the same spirit.

Yet the belief we're talking about is not empirical. In the writing of that book, I could not be "wrong," exactly, but I could be—and often was—totally unconvincing. I could fail to make my reader believe, but with the understanding that the belief for which fiction aims is of a very strange kind when we recall that everything in a novel is, by definition, not true. What, then, do we mean by it? In my capacity as a writing teacher, I've noticed, in the classroom, the emergence of a belief that fiction can or should be the product of an absolute form of "correctness." The student explains that I should believe in her character because this is *exactly* how X type of person would behave. How does she know? Because, as it happens, she herself is X type of person. Or she knows because she has spent a great deal of time

researching X type of person, and this novel is the consequence of her careful research. (Similar arguments can be found in the interviews of professional writers.)

As if fiction could argue itself into a reader's belief system! As if, armed with our collection of facts about what an X type of person feels, is, and does, always and everywhere, a writer could hope to bypass the intimate judgment of a reader, which happens sentence by sentence, moment by moment. Is it this judgment we fear? It's so uncertain, so risky. You can't quantify it—it's not data. It happens between one reader and one writer. It's a meeting—or sometimes a clash—of sensibilities, which often takes the form, as Dickinson understood, of griefs compared.

What do I have in common with Olive Kitteridge, a salty old white woman who has spent her entire life in Maine? And yet, as it turns out, her griefs are like my own. Not all of them. It's not a perfect mapping of self onto book—I've never met a book that did that, least of all my own. But some of Olive's grief weighed like mine. Certainly I might turn from a writer like Elizabeth Strout toward a writer like Toni Morrison and find our griefs more closely aligned, for obvious reasons like race and class, which two contingencies do so much to form a person's experience and therefore their sensibilities. But what passed between me and Olive was not nothing. I am fascinated to presume, as a reader, that many types of people, strange to me in life, might be revealed, through the intimate space of fiction, to have griefs not unlike my own. And so I read.

But reading seems to be easier to defend than writing. Writing is a far larger act of presumption. Sensing this, we seek to shore up the act of writing with false defenses, like the dubious idea that one could ever be absolutely "correct" when it comes to representing fictional human behavior. I understand the desire—I have it myself—but what I don't get is how anyone can possibly hope to achieve it. What does it mean, after all, to say "A Bengali woman would never say that!" or "A gay man would never feel that!" or "A black woman would never do that!"? How can such things possibly be claimed absolutely, unless we already have some form of fixed caricature in our minds? (It is to be noted that the argument "A white man would never say that!" is rarely heard and is almost structurally unimaginable. Why? Because to be such a self is to be afforded all possible human potentialities, not only a circumscribed few.)

But perhaps I am asking the question the wrong way round. The counterargument would be that when it comes to presumption, we are in far less danger of error when writer and subject are as alike as possible. The risk of containment is the risk of false knowledge being presented as truth—it is the risk of caricature. Those who are unlike

us have a long and dismal history of trying to contain us in false images. And so—the argument runs—if we are to be contained by language, let that language at least be our own.

In an ideal world, one way to mitigate the problem of false containment would be with variety. I can't imagine the white man who felt, upon the publication of *Rabbit, Run*, contained or threatened as a white man by Updike's portrayal of Rabbit Angstrom—but then there were such a variety of portrayals of white men in the culture that no one presentation had to bear the weight of representation of an entire people. Rabbit Angstrom was not *the* white man. He was just one white man among many, and so Updike's portrayal of him had no power to distort a white man's social capital in America. (Meanwhile, the black men in Updike's books, almost all caricatures, are precisely evidence of grotesque containment.) By contrast, when Margaret Mitchell published *Gone With the Wind*, there were a vanishingly small number of nontoxic representations of black women in the culture, and therefore the damage Mitchell did with her notorious "Mammy" character was substantial: she placed a fresh dose of an old poison into the culture that still exists and reached even me, aged twelve, in my little corner of London, looking for some form of cultural reflection, any kind at all, but finding only distorted mirrors, monstrous cliché, debasing ridicule, false containment.

Given this history, it's natural that we should fear and be suspicious of representations of us by those who are not like us. Equally rational is the assumption that those who are like us will at least take care with their depictions, and will be motivated by love and intimate knowledge instead of prejudice and phobia. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, writing by women, and by oppressed minorities of all kinds, has wondrously expanded the literary landscape, ennobling griefs that had, historically, either passed unnoticed or been brutally suppressed and caricatured. We're eager to speak for ourselves. But in our justified desire to level or even obliterate the old power structures—to reclaim our agency when it comes to the representation of selves—we can, sometimes, forget the mystery that lies at the heart of all selfhood. Of what a self may contain that is both unseen and ultimately unknowable. Of what invisible griefs we might share, over and above our many manifest and significant differences. We also forget what writers are: people with voices in our heads and a great deal of inappropriate curiosity about the lives of others.

Most of us have love for, and interest in, our own lives—our "own people." Our lives are nonfiction. This is my family. My neighborhood. My body. My reality. Fiction, as a mode, shared this love and interest but always with the twist of, well, fiction. It was always interested not only in how things are but also in how things *might be otherwise*. I once wrote a novel about an imaginary, multihyphenated British-Jewish-Chinese boy. It was love and interest that motivated me, but my love

and interest was located in the other. In my case, love of and interest in Judaism and Buddhism—two systems of thought in which I have no birthright. But also deep curiosity about this imagined person, Alex-Li, whose voice I had in my head.

Alex-Li is a weird, nerdy, obsessive, melancholy type of guy. Though you wouldn't know it to look at him, he's probably more "like me" than any character I ever created. But the question is: In what does this "like me" consist? He doesn't look like me. We don't share the same gods. We don't share the same race or gender. But he is a part of my soul. And fiction is one of the few places left on this earth where a crazy sentence like that makes any sense at all. Alex-Li is not "correct." He cannot and doesn't aim to represent the community of half-Jewish, half-Chinese people. In the spirit of Kafka, he barely represents himself. And so it may be that by his existence he is in fact oppressive, simply because he is "taking up space" where a "real" half-Jewish, half-Chinese fictional character might be. He cannot defend himself from that accusation—and it would be out of character for him to try. All he can say is that he doesn't mind if he is unread, unbought, unloved. But if even one person happens to come across him and find that his feelings and their own have a similar weight, then he will have completed his absurd fictional role in this world.



Toni Morrison; drawing by David Levine
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Perhaps "containment" and the "fascination to presume" are not that different. They carry the same risk: being wrong. Maybe we only think of it as containment when it goes wrong. The textbook example is *Madame Bovary*. For over a century, women have profoundly identified with this imaginary woman, created by a man, who himself supposedly claimed an outrageous personal identification with the other: *Madame Bovary, c'est moi*. I am one of those women readers, and yet there are many moments in *Madame Bovary* when I feel the presence of a masculine consciousness behind it all, as I do when I read *Anna Karenina*. Which is to say the mapping of self to other that Flaubert and Tolstoy attempted is not perfect. But it is not nothing. *Anna Karenina* has meant as much to me as any imaginary woman could.

And I, along with generations of women readers, have wondered: How could a man know so much of us? But the mystery is not so mysterious. Husbands know a great deal about wives, after all, and wives about husbands. Lovers know each other. Brothers know a lot about sisters and vice versa. Muslims and Christians and Jews know one another, or think they do. Our social and personal lives are a

process of continual fictionalization, as we internalize the other-we-are-not, dramatize them, imagine them, speak for them and through them. The accuracy of this fictionalization is never guaranteed, but without an ability to at least guess at what the other might be thinking, we could have no social lives at all. One of the things fiction did is make this process explicit—visible. All storytelling is the invitation to enter a parallel space, a hypothetical arena, in which you have imagined access to whatever is not you. And if fiction had a belief about itself, it was that fiction had empathy in its DNA, that it was the product of compassion. I could fill a library with self-congratulatory quotes about this belief, but I will choose one I found recently in a memoir by the wonderful Colombian writer Héctor Abad:

Compassion is largely a quality of the imagination: it consists of the ability to imagine what we would feel if we were suffering the same situation. It has always seemed to me that people without compassion lack a literary imagination—the capacity great novels give us for putting ourselves in another's place—and are incapable of seeing that life has many twists and turns and that at any given moment we could find ourselves in someone else's shoes: suffering pain, poverty, oppression, injustice or torture.

This was what fiction believed about itself, but like all beliefs not a little of it was always wishful thinking. Has fiction, over the centuries, been the creator of compassion or a vehicle for containment? I think we can make both cases. Fiction was often interested in the other but more often than not spoke for the other instead of actually publishing them. Fiction gave us *Madame Bovary* but also *Uncle Tom*. (It's also given us a marvelous, separate literature that has no interest in human selves of any kind—which is concerned instead with animals, trees, extraterrestrials, inanimate objects, ideas, language itself.) But whether fiction's curiosity about the other was compassionate or containing, one thing you could always say for it was that it *was* interested.

By contrast, a prominent component of the new philosophy is a performative display of non-interest, a great pride in not being interested in the other, which is sometimes characterized as revenge and sometimes as an act of self-preservation. (When you feel hatred coming from the other, it's reasonable to turn from the other completely.) The expression of this pride usually comes in some version of *I've had enough of, I just can't with*—fill in the blank. And the strange thing is that the people we now cast into this place of non-interest were once the very people fiction was most curious about. The conflicted, the liars, the self-deceiving, the willfully blind, the object, the unresolved, the imperfect, the evil, the unwell, the lost and divided. Those were once fiction's people.

What all liberation movements want, surely, is comprehension and compassion. Their members want to be seen and named correctly. To be respected and known. But that is by no means all they want. They

also want to be free. They want education and rights and the ability to live in safety. Sometimes, in order to secure these things, an ideology of separatism emerges, because the compassion of the other is in no way available, or has historically never appeared, and it is assumed it never will. Everyone, politically and personally, has a right to the ideology of separatism. It is the hard-won right of the political realist and the student of history. But fiction's business was with the people, all the people, all the time. This in no way meant that fiction had to be *about* all the people—it very rarely was—but only that the identity, sensibilities, and feelings of the reader could never be entirely known, controlled, or predetermined.

Toni Morrison wrote for her people primarily. But a variety of readers will be moved by the stations of the cross depicted within. And be surprised to find griefs not unlike their own, just as Morrison found griefs not unlike her own in Faulkner and—if you read her academic essays on American literature—a thousand less likely places. Even if we practice a form of separatism in our fiction—books for our people, our community, our crowd—the infinite variety of selves and experience that lie within whoever claims to be “a people” will overwhelm any fantasy we have of controlling the reactions of our readers. I can still pick up a novel by a woman like me in every particular—same race, class, sexuality, nationality, heritage—read the first sentence and find she is not, after all, “like me.” Our sensibilities are different. Our griefs have different weights. But none of this will make me either put her book aside or read it ravenously. The only thing that can decide the fitness (or otherwise) of a book for me is this mysterious belief, which a writer can't summon by citing her copious research or explaining to me that all of this “really happened.” Belief in a novel is, for me, a by-product of a certain kind of sentence. Familiarity, kinship, and compassion will play their part, but if the sentences don't speak to me, nothing else will. I believe in a sentence of balance, care, rigor, and integrity. The sort of sentence that makes me feel—against all empirical evidence to the contrary—that what I am reading is, fictionally speaking, true.

We behave as if we don't want to be known by one another, but we sometimes seem oblivious to the idea that we spend our days feeding ourselves into a great engine of knowing, one that believes it knows every single thing about us: our tastes, our opinions, our beliefs, what we'll buy, who we'll love, where we'll go. The unseen actors who harvest this knowledge not only hope to know us perfectly but also to modify us, to their own ends. And this essay, too, will no doubt enter that same digital maw, and be transformed from ideas to data points, and responded to, perhaps, with a series of pat phrases, first spotted by the machine, then turned viral, and now returned to us as if it were our own language. “I just can't with Zadie Smith right now,” or else “This Zadie Smith is everything,” or—well, you know the drill. We've

gotten into the habit of not experiencing the private, risky act of reading so much as performing our response to what we read, which is then translated into data points.

And the dark joke at the end of it all is that these unique selves to which we feel so attached, that we believe to be nontransferable, and with which some of us hope to write fiction—these spectacularly individualized selves who hold this opinion rather than that, who claim one identity as superior to another—are entirely irrelevant to the second, shadow text that lies behind it all. To the technological monopolies that buy and sell your data—and for whom your daily input of personal information is only raw product, to be traded like orange juice futures or corn yields—you reveal yourself not so much in your views or hot takes as by the frequency of your posts or tweets, their length or syntax, the pattern of their links and follows. They do not care that you are woke or unwoke, patriot or activist. To that shadow text, all you are is data. You are the person who tweets fourteen times in twenty minutes and therefore is needy in some way and vulnerable to a particular kind of political advertising, or else you are the person who moves through a series of lifestyle and news sites, which route will predict, with extraordinary specificity, the likelihood of your booking a vacation in early February or voting in November.

This data version of you is “correct” to the nth degree: it sees all and knows all, and makes the fuzzy knowledge of selves that fiction once claimed look truly pathetic. A book does not watch us reading it; it cannot morph itself, page by page, to suit our tastes, or deliver to us only depictions of people we already know and among whom we feel comfortable. It cannot note our reactions and then skew its stories to confirm our worldview or reinforce our prejudices. A book does not know when we pick it up and put it down; it cannot nudge us into the belief that we must look at it first thing upon waking and last thing at night, and though it may prove addictive, it will never know exactly how or why. Only the algorithms can do all this—and so much more.*

By now, the idea of depriving this digital maw of its daily diet of “you” has become inconceivable. Meanwhile, the closed circle that fiction once required—reader, writer, book—feels so antiquated we hardly see the point of it. Why have a silent dialogue with an invisible person about imaginary things? Besides, the question of fiction’s utility is, in truth, another ambivalent tale. How many compassionate stories about the other do *we* need to tell *you* before *you* see *us* as fully human, the way you see yourself? Depending on what you believe, either all those compassionate stories made no difference at all, or they are the foundation upon which all liberation movements stand.

To speak for myself, as a reader, the balance has been on the side of compassion. I have closed novels and stared at their back covers for a long moment and felt known in a way I cannot honestly say I have felt known by many real-life interactions with human beings, or even by

myself. For though the other may not know us perfectly or even well, the hard truth is we do not always know ourselves perfectly or well. Indeed, there are things to which subjectivity is blind and which only those on the outside *can* see. But, frustratingly, there are no fixed rules to regulate this process. We know some representations are privileged and some ignored. Prejudice in these matters must be thought through, each and every time. Is this novel before me an attempt at compassion or an act of containment? Each reader will decide. This is the work of an individual consciousness and cannot be delegated to generalized arguments, not even the prepackaged mental container of “cultural appropriation.”

We can suspect that some people will tell our story better than others. But we can never be entirely certain. Despite the confidence of the data harvesters, a self can never be known perfectly or in its entirety. The intimate meeting between a book and its reader can't be predetermined. To put it another way, a book can try to modify your behavior, but it has no way of knowing for sure that it has. In front of a book you are still free. Between reader and book, there is only the continual risk of wrongness, word by word, sentence by sentence. The Internet does not get to decide. Nor does the writer. Only the reader decides. So decide.

Zadie Smith

Zadie Smith's new story collection, *Grand Union*, was published in October. (February 2020)

* For more on the digital exploitation and modification of selfhood, see Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (PublicAffairs, 2019). ↵