

SESSION FIVE—READINGS

Read these to think about the writing of information and disinformation:

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/12/20/escape-from-spiderhead> (content warning for language instances)

<https://granta.com/five-are-the-fingers-and-five-are-the-sins/>

<https://granta.com/a-new-front-line/>

INTRO:

In our three readings this week, George Saunders' short story, "Escape from Spiderhead," Rebecca Watson's essay "Five Are the Fingers, Five Are the Sins," and Lindsey Hilsum's reporting in "A New Front Line," we are confronted with varying shades of truth and disinformation as experienced by: intimates in Saunders' future dystopian prison; Italians influenced by Gabriele D'Annunzio during World War 1; and war journalist Marie Colvin in Syria. Each of these pieces demonstrates something about how expectant we humans are for veracity and how easily we can be led to accept obfuscation, propaganda, and misinformation instead.

What I am most curious about in these three pieces, though, is the ways in which our own assumptions of intimacy or familiarity play into expectations and understandings of truth in our own lives and in the lives of characters or subjects. In fiction and creative nonfiction, we often talk about how reliable or unreliable narrators appear. However, we often neglect to recognize how complicit we are in perceiving those levels of reliability based on our own assumptions of the relationships in the world of the story and between the players in the story.

These assumptions seem to play into our ideas of who is and who is not a reliable narrator. They also play into our own engagement with the truth-seemingness of what we read. In "Escape from Spiderhead", for example, we see assumptions of intimacy in Jeff's longstanding and

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familiar relationships with the Abnesti and the other researchers/wardens and the other prisoners, two of whom he falls in and out of drug-induced love with quickly. In “Five Are the Fingers, Five Are the Sins”, Gabriele D’Annunzio plays on Italians sense of shared national patriotism to call them to fight alongside him in war. Meanwhile, in “A New Front Line”, because warzone journalists such as Marie Colvin and Javier Valdez Cárdenas are reporting from the front lines, they become familiar faces associated with the conflict in a particular region. Because they are in the conflict zone, we believe we are seeing the full story as it exists on the ground. However, because we do not always truly understand the levels of risk they and their sources are actually in, we are seeing a version of the truth that leaves a lot out.

In examining each of these stories, we can go a bit deeper into this idea of intimacy and assumption by determining, at least in part, whether or not we assume our narrators to be reliable or unreliable. For example, in “Escape from Spiderhead,” Jeff and Abnesti have been forced into their uneasy relationship and know each other’s behaviors well, or so they think. However, their assumptions about each other’s reliability begin to shift over the course of the story. In other words, based on their proximity to each other and frequency of engaging, they believe the other to be predictable and therefore reliable, VerbaLuce™ and VeriTalk™ aside. In the case of Jeff’s relationships with Rachel and Heather, the MobiPack chemicals force an intimacy and a kind of simulated transient truth. Jeff is surrounded by relationships that cause him to co-create, foster, and suffer through versions of the truth that are obfuscated, temporary, and ultimately unreliable.

In “Five Are the Fingers, Five Are the Sins”, writer, recluse, lothario, and full-time fascist Gabriele D’Annunzio insinuates himself into the larger body of Italians, even demanding that their children fight, during World War 1 by proclaiming, “We have no other value... but that of our blood to be shed’.” His countrymen responded en masse, ready to fight for Italy. Clearly, D’Annunzio’s call to his countrymen caused them to see themselves as part of one larger body, without realizing that in seeing themselves that way, they consequently became subject to manipulation and propaganda. Their perception of D’Annunzio’s reliability is based largely, according to writer Rebecca Watson, on his ceaseless pretensions to power and his success as a writer. However, it certainly could be argued that his persuasiveness was effective at least in part due to the large numbers of the populace who responded to his warmongering, seeing their duty to country in his words and seeing in him a fellow fighter.

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In “A New Front Line”, reporters work on the most dangerous front lines of Syria, Kosovo, Mexico, and other regions. Because of their proximity to and intimacy with the violence and events of the places from which they are reporting, we assume them to be not just the most authentic purveyors of the truth but also that they are safe from experiencing that same regional violence because of their role as journalists. Of course, we know that this isn’t really true, for they and their sources are often at great risk of being caught not just in the crossfire but also in the efforts of regional forces to squelch the truth. As journalist Zaina Arhaim wrote, “You are part of the story. It engulfs all aspects of your daily life.” Our assumption as consumers of news, however, means that we easily forget that the veracity of the reporting from conflict zones also hides many of the personal and interpersonal risks experienced by the reporters and their sources.

There is much more to discuss when it comes to reliable and unreliable narrators and our own understandings of how intimacy and familiarity play into our understandings of truth and non-truth in fiction and creative nonfiction. I’m interested to hear about your own experiences with and understandings of determining the level of veracity in narrators and the stories they tell.