

HIDDEN MEANINGS: CREATIVE FICTION, NON-FICTION, AND FACTS

SESSION ONE—Discussion

Below are the discussion questions for this session

1. Reality glints in the story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, by Jorge Luis Borges. His deft shuffling of fiction and reality entrances the reader as, with a magician's sleight of hand, he places a confidence-inspiring tome like the *Encyclopedia Britannica* alongside his made-up volume, the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. This co-mingling of truth and illusion is mirrored in his list of characters, some of whom are his actual friends and colleagues (his principle sidekick, Bioy, for instance), and others who are figures of pure invention. A reader who knew Borges might recognize some of the names and assume this was a true account. Borges employs in this story the cardinal rule in making a lie seem believable: seed it with truth.

In an essay on H.G. Wells, Borges wrote, "Work that endures is always capable of an infinite and plastic ambiguity; it is all things to all me, [...] it is a mirror that reflects the reader's own features." Mirrors are a key element of this story of Borges. In fact, mirrors and encyclopedias are the first things that greet us in this story, "I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia." If we think about it, mirrors and encyclopedias are two ways of figuring reality. Encyclopedias, along with libraries and bibliographies, purport to be storehouses of facts, data, examples and evidences. We think of an encyclopedia as a repository for knowledge and understanding. Mirrors are objects of illusion. They reflect reality, but in two dimensions, rather than three. They show us what we are, but backwards.

Think about the way Borges in this story cleverly subverts not only the facts but the reliability of the places we turn to for truth. In your comment below, discuss an aspect of this twisting of truth. You might talk about the mixing of fact and fiction, his use of symbolic elements like mirrors, books, libraries, and planets, or perhaps what you see as the interpretation of the central allegory. What does Borges achieve with his subversion?

2. "Tell all the truth but tell it slant." So begins a poem by the American poet Emily Dickinson. This idea of finding a different, "slanted" angle when approaching the truth is a fair descriptor of what Angela Pelster does in her story *The Boys of Karachay Lake*. The main events of the story – the radioactive waste contamination of Lake Karachay which has been described as the "most polluted spot on Earth" by the Worldwatch Institute – are not told as a series of facts. This story is not an attempt at journalistic exposition. Instead, it attempts to grasp at the more real (if fictionalized) experiences of those who live in the surrounding areas. Pelster seems to affirm the elusive nature of truth in this story with passages such as, "One night, maybe the townsfolk say, the ghosts of the boys climbed the dead fir trees along the shore and called to Rusalka until she came up from the lake, wailing." She throws the word "maybe" into the sentence and we are suddenly unsure of everything. To what does the "maybe" refer? Maybe it was night? Maybe the townspeople say this? Maybe the ghost boys climbed the trees? Maybe

HIDDEN MEANINGS: CREATIVE FICTION, NON-FICTION, AND FACTS

they summoned the river demon? With this one qualifying word, we are suddenly unsure of anything at all.

This intentional occlusion of what is actually happening is presented to us again by Artyom Sidorkin, the man whose extraordinary health condition ends the story. If we look carefully at this character we will note that he is described as “a boy-faced man;” his very appearance is deceptive, and that the name Artyom, means “pure health” which, depending on how you interpret the ending is either another deception, or a revealed truth. It is fitting then, that it is Artyom who tells us that “nobody knows anything; no one understands how this could have happened.”

Pelster further slants the truth by invoking Ruskalka, a Slavic folkloric water spirit. Along with the ghost boys, victims of radiation sickness, she haunts the story, and when the townspeople are not told what is happening, they make up their own stories, calling the maladies plaguing their town “river sickness.”

In the comments below, discuss Pelster’s use of slant in the story. How does she reveal truth by hiding it behind things like folktales and ghosts? What do these elements do for you the reader? Do they draw you in? Do they turn you away?

3. While Borges cleverly juxtaposes the real and the imaginal to make the fictional seem like fact, and Pelster turns fact into folklore, Peter Pomerantsev tackles the issue head-on in his article *Why We’re Post-Fact*. He describes a hauntingly Orwellian society where it no longer matters whether politicians tell lies; “all that matters is that the lie is clickable.” With dismay, we realize that this civilization built around carefully constructed narratives and a managed dialectic is our own.

I was particularly struck by Pomerantsev’s observation about current global nationalistic trends.

‘The twenty-first century,’ he writes, quoting Russian-American philologist Svetlana Boym, “is not characterized by the search for new-ness, but by the proliferation of nostalgias . . . nostalgic nationalists and nostalgic cosmopolitans, nostalgic environmentalists and nostalgic metrophiliacs (city lovers) exchange pixel fire in the blogosphere’. Thus Putin’s internet-troll armies sell dreams of a restored Russian Empire and Soviet Union; Trump tweets to ‘Make America Great Again’; Brexiteers yearn for a lost England on Facebook; while ISIS’s viral snuff movies glorify a mythic Caliphate.”

HIDDEN MEANINGS: CREATIVE FICTION, NON-FICTION, AND FACTS

In a “post-truth” time; a time where the truth has been revealed to have a multitude of often conflicting complexities (the “all-permeating late post-modernism and relativism”), is this pivot to nostalgia simply a longing for a time when things seemed more certain? When the very idea of “truth” was not an inaccessible mountain peak, but as simple as an encyclopedia entry? Does the past feel more “True” than the present? What about the future? Are we standing at the giddy precipice of complexity and relativism, and in fear of falling, grasping backward for a hand-hold?

Where does truth take place? Where does reality take place? Is everything, as the phenomenologists would contend, simply my perception? If something is not real — like Tlon, for instance, but it nonetheless affects real events, people, and outcomes, what then? If something like the Gulf of Tonkin incident can make use of misinformation to justify war initiatives, what is to be said? Do we become pragmatists and declare that the truth is secondary to the desired outcome? That, in certain cases, the ends justify the means?

If the Bible states, “The truth shall set you free,” and Rove tells us “We create reality,” What then is the relationship between facts, truth, and freedom? What stood out most to you in this essay? What is the goal in your own writing? Do you strive for factual exactness? Metaphysical truth? Emotional clarity? Spiritual or political or social or personal liberation? How can this emphasis better inform your writing?

4. Describe, if you are so inclined, the most *real* moment you have experienced. (If you prefer not to share a personal story, describe a moment of intense reality that a character of yours has experienced, or one you read in another book that affected you deeply.) How do you define reality in this context? When speaking of this experience do you use empirical, scientific language, or do you find yourself resorting to emotional discourse and metaphor? What does this reveal to you about truth? What impact did this experience have on you?