

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

SESSION FOUR—DISCUSSION

Below are the discussion questions for this session:

1. In “The Cognitive Biases Tricking Your Brain”, Ben Yagoda writes: “If I had to single out a particular bias as the most pervasive and damaging, it would probably be confirmation bias. That’s the effect that leads us to look for evidence confirming what we already think or suspect, to view facts and ideas we encounter as further confirmation, and to discount or ignore any piece of evidence that seems to support an alternate view.”

It is easy to fall prey to confirmation bias as a nonfiction writer. When you are gathering “evidence” that supports the narrative you are trying to build, it’s tempting to interpret the facts through a lens that supports your own ideas.

Are there any moments in our readings where you think the author may be falling prey to cognitive bias?

How do you think you can combat against cognitive bias in your own work?

2. One of the things that distinguishes creative nonfiction from reporting is the injection of the author into the subject.

How do the authors of our readings include themselves in these pieces (site specific passages if possible)?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of covering a topic from a more personal angle?

Are there any moments in these pieces when you wish the author had been more explicit about their personal views or stake in the matter?

3. In “The Farm”, Charlie Jane Anders provides us with a fictional imagined future of journalism, where news reports are written and rewritten to try to please an audience of opinionated bots who mimic the irate comment section you can find at the bottom of any online publication now.

Although this is an exaggerated account, “The Farm” does a good job of representing how stifling it can be when you try to write exclusively to please an audience. On the one hand, we must think about how an audience will perceive our work in order to write something that is

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both clear and engaging. But on the other hand, worrying too much about how our writing will be judged or interpreted can kill creativity.

How do you balance consideration for the audience in your own work?

How does reader feedback shape your rewrites?

4. In "Propagandalands" Peter Pomerantsev describes a moment when he is asked to serve as a lookout for separatist snipers. "The window had been shattered in a previous gunfight," he writes, "and was held together with scotch tape. You couldn't see a single thing through it."

This essay is similar to that shattered window. Pomerantsev details the many ways both sides of the Ukrainian revolution have weaponized misinformation, but he doesn't seem interested in providing the reader with a clear account of the revolution itself. He represents several perspectives, and each side of the revolution has so many factions and names that it's nearly impossible to track which side a particular individual is on. The narrative is a mosaic of propaganda; we cannot see through it. There is corruption all around. Which side is right? Who is winning? These questions don't seem to interest the author, which raises the question:

What does Pomerantsev hope the reader will learn from this essay?

And:

What methods does he use to achieve this goal?