

DAVID SHIELDS

Novelist-turned-essayist David Shields is the author of ten books. His most recent, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, has been met with quite the varied response—lauded (by Lydia Davis, Wayne Koestenbaum, Ben Marcus, and many others) as often as it is excoriated (on the pages of *New York*, *Salon*, the *Guardian*, and many others). The Manifesto has a complex agenda: it argues, among other things, that the novel is no longer the literary form best suited to our culture's quest for reality (for which all art hungers); that the border between fiction and nonfiction must be erased; and that laws restricting literary appropriation must be eliminated. Bringing to life this credo that 'all art is theft' (to steal a line from Picasso), Shields has comprised *Reality Hunger* almost entirely of quotations from other authors. While his publisher refused to let him do so without including an appendix of citations, they did allow a small dotted line along the margins of those pages prefaced by an encouragement to remove them with the aid of scissors or a box knife. *Wag's Revue* essays editor Sandra Allen sat down to speak with David Shields in an Iowa City café.

Sandra Allen, Wag's Revue: Reality Hunger consists almost entirely of appropriated quotations, which you would have ideally published without any citations. In the reviews of the book, I noticed that people would write, "Shields says 'x'", and then—I found this to be strange—they wouldn't acknowledge that 'x' had been said by somebody else. Just so I can know, do you wish your reader to take all of the statements in this book as your own? Or do you want there to be some distance between what this text says and your actual opinions?

David Shields: Definitely the former. If I've quoted the passage I've owned it. James Wood, briefly mentioning my book in a review of another novel in the *New Yorker* had said, "Since

Shields... fills most of his book with contextless quotations from other writers... it is hard to divine exactly what or whom he dislikes.” That makes no sense to me. It’s so obvious that I own every single quote in it. I cited in the back and acknowledged the source of my remix as say Emerson, John D’Agata, Schopenhauer, or Sonny Rollins. Every single line I say, I believe. There’s even some counter-argument in the book, where I’ll quote someone who I think is wrong, but that’s just me saying, ‘Well maybe I’m wrong.’

SA: You’ve titled your book Reality Hunger. In it you charge that nonfiction should be the favored literature of our time because of its proximity to reality. I was never really clear, though, how you’re using the term ‘reality’, throughout.

DS: I’m using the term within quadruple quotation marks. I’m not naïvely asserting that nonfiction is uniquely real. However, there is to me an absolutely qualitative and substantial difference between the artifice that one finds in the novels of Franzen, McEwan, Atwood on the one hand, and the extraordinarily thin membrane, the attempt to get at something irreducibly ‘real’ that one finds in the work of, say, Amy Fusselman, Maggie Nelson, Simon Gray, Spalding Gray. There’s a wonderful line of Samuel Johnson in which he says, “The only end of writing is to enable the readers better to enjoy life, or better to endure it.” The books I love the most, the books that I’m trying to argue for, are those books that absolutely center on how the writer solved being alive. And that to me is real.

I also think, lastly, of a line by David Foster Wallace. Someone asked him why writing matters. And he said something like, ‘Because we’re existentially alone. I can’t know what you’re thinking and feeling and vice versa, and the best writing is a

bridge constructed across an abyss of human loneliness.' And the books I just mentioned, their *raison d'être* is this attempt to bridge the abyss of human loneliness.

SA: Your text argues that the divide between fiction and nonfiction is false, useless. And I'd agree; I think most essayists who know John D'Agata would.

DS: I would say on the one hand I'm trying—along with people like D'Agata, Vivian Gornick, Philip Lopate—to argue that from the beginning of time there's been this lineage of the personal essay (the lyric essay, however you want to phrase it). Part of what I'm trying to do is to carve out a space for nonfiction and say that nonfiction can easily stand with equal footing alongside poetry and especially fiction.

On the other hand, I do think there is something about our contemporary culture that is uniquely incongruent with the novel form. So many of the novelistic gestures do not matter anymore. Take setting. I think setting increasingly doesn't matter to our lives. Where we live matters in no way as much as it did for Balzac. The coherence of plot. I think the coherent plot belongs to a God-centered universe. To me if you have a coherent plot, you're essentially saying that God is in his heaven. I think fewer and fewer of us actually believe that. Even the idea of character. I think we increasingly question whether we have character. What with genomes, DNA,

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barcodes, Social Security numbers, increasingly character matters less than a whole series of numbers. Plot, setting, character—so much of what the novel does is irrelevant to a 2010 conception of culture: post-Wittgenstein, Freud, Heisenberg, Einstein.

SA: Aren't those concerns ones that postmodern novels by Pynchon or Amis or DeLillo have already pointed out and grappled with?

DS: Yes, the post-modern writers understand all that, though I think the heyday of postmodernism was quite a while ago. You read Pynchon now, or Coover or even Wallace's novels. Or—I'm not sure how postmodern this is—for some reason I have with me a book to read on airplanes, Roth's *Operation Shylock*, a book in which identity after identity after identity is getting undermined and scrutinized. Boy is it an expense of spirit in a waste of shame.

For me, a lot of writing has to do with loneliness and assuaging loneliness. What I find best at assuaging my loneliness is a writer who is meditating without a surrogate self on how he or she solves being alive, whether it's Pascal's *Pensées* or Rousseau's *Confessions*, or *Tristram Shandy*, or Lawrence Sterne, or Melville's *Moby Dick* or Proust or contemporary writers like Wallace or John D'Agata. It's just temperament or preference, but what I find moving about you is what you're thinking and feeling, not the plots you could make up. Even if those plots are self-mocking and shaggy dog.

The few novels that I like are not novelly novels. *Elizabeth Costello*. David Markson's last four books. I like Barry Hannah's *Boomerang*. Basically, the Coetzee [*Elizabeth Costello*] is probably not a bad text to mention. I even wrote

him a letter about this, and I think he implicitly agreed with it, in which I said, each chapter is your attempt to eviscerate an affirmation that you offered in a previous book. Each chapter takes away an affirmation that *Waiting for the Barbarians* or even *Disgrace* offered. I have a complicated relationship with Coetzee. I probably shouldn't quote him or paraphrase him, but anyway, I think that's what the book is about.

The meditative gesture, the psyche-seeking gesture, is by far the one that I find compelling. To me another great example is the opening of the *Great Gatsby*, in which Nick is just meditating on things. The intimacy between writer and reader there is extraordinary. And then we conjure up this boring plot, which takes me no deeper into anything.

SA: How can you simultaneously call for doing away with generic boundaries, and at the same time say our salvation is not the novel but the lyric essay? You said that novels are inappropriate to our time because their coherent plot means there's a God in their sky. And yet isn't there a spirituality to your exercise as well? Are you getting rid of God or are you changing His clothes?

DS: If it's a God it's definitely a very small 'g.' One review said this book has a kind of spiritual zeal. I guess I know what that means: I care about these ideas passionately, I do want to back-form the essaying tradition, as John [D'Agata] would say. There's this tradition that's been staring us in the face for thousands of years...

I'm a very secular being, I have no religious impulses I can identify, though there is something very Buddhist about this approach. I quote Yeats in the book, "It must go further still: that soul must become its own betrayer, its own deliverer,

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the one activity, the mirror turn lamp.” The idea is that you go so deeply into yourself, that you come out without a self. As Montaigne says, “Every man bears the whole stamp of the human condition.”

I want to go so deeply into the self that I dissolve the self. A writer who goes so deeply into himself comes out with something—god forbid—universal. That’s the spiritual quest that I’m okay with. So many of the writers I’m mentioning—Gray, Nelson, Fusselman—they all have this quality. They’re going with incredible intimacy into their own psyches but doing it with such laser precision and raw candor that their works come out demolishing the self and winding up with something inarguably universal. And obviously, 99.999% of all memoirs, all essays, completely fail at that. They end up being “Here’s how I grew up with my father, a car dealer in Cleveland, Ohio.” Okay, *fascinating*. Only occasionally does a work break through.

SA: So what you’re saying is, the odds of either a novel or an essay ‘breaking through’ are low, but for you, there’s better odds in the case of the essay because it conceals reality less.

DS: Yes, the odds are higher with the essay. I think we’ve lost our innocence toward the novel, toward story, toward anecdote. On some level, of course, it’s a temperamental difference; I maybe lack the “plot” gene or the DNA for

narrative or something. But the novel is a very middle-class, very middlebrow form. The origin of the novel had to do with flattering the middle class, the bourgeois, that its morays are fascinating.

Of course there is the occasional novel that is pretty good, like *Disgrace*.

SA: *A lot of Reality Hunger is spent ostensibly pointing out the downfalls of fiction—I believe your personal falling-out with the genre is partly what inspired you to write the book in the first place. In an interview with The Rumpus you said: “We need to write compressed stories that produce a ton of thought rather than elaborate stories that produce none.” My question is: can thought never be furthered by story?*

DS: I’ve read thousands of novels and I’ve written three of them. Narrative *can* be a metaphor for going deep inside the self. I’d be a fool to deny the fact that we dream in stories, that children are formed by stories, that we tell each other stories in order to live. I’m terribly interested in stories as part of a larger matrix.

What I find tedious are works that genuflect at the altar of narrative. What happens with so many books by supposedly intelligent writers is that the intelligence gets tamped down: ‘I’ll tell this story and the meaning will crawl through the cracks of the narrative at six crucial points.’ That’s not worth it. Part of my conversion, you could say, resulted of becoming aware of mortality. This is what I focused on in my previous book [*The Thing About Live is One Day You’ll Be Dead*]. This is it. This is my entire life. We are mortal beings watching the earth for a short time. I don’t have time for a 600-page novel that tells me that crime doesn’t pay.

SA: *But doesn't this dismissal also potentially dismiss art? Dismiss a reader experiencing the glorious immersion in the art that is Crime and Punishment, or for that matter Swann's Way or Ulysses or 2666?*

DS: First of all, most of the books that you mentioned were written a long time ago. I love Proust above all else pretty much. Of course if you want to read *Crime and Punishment*, *Swann's Way*, these glacially-paced novels that have no place in a 21st century universe, you can. Even the Bolaño was written ten or so years ago. I'm trying to figure out how we're going to write *now*.

By no means am I getting rid of art or of depth. There have been a couple of reviews that have said 'Shields doesn't want art.' On the contrary, I want to *renew* art. I want the novel and writing to be alive with the 21st century. I want writing that can compete with visual art and film. For me it's crazy to think that literature is going to do this by aping the gestures of Gustave Flaubert. We have to figure out an art that is frankly congruent with the attention deficit era we're in.

Art is not about worshipping the past. Art destroys what's there in order to create new art. The great art we love now was met with chaos and cacophony in its time. When Beethoven's fifth symphony was first played people ran out of the room at how discordant it was. Same with Monet and same with *Ulysses*. Obliterating the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, overturning laws regarding appropriation, creating new hybrid forms for the 21st century—that's *Reality Hunger's* project.

SA: *Along the lines of my question about whether you weren't just repeating the postmodernists: hasn't the academy been*

making a lot of similar points about the death of the novel, the death of the author, etc. for a long time?

DS: You mean, the deconstructionist mode has already done away with plot, so why do we need me to get rid of plot? I've read in and around all those guys—Derrida and Foucault and Saussure. I'm really influenced by Ronald Barthes. I'm not sure where to go with that other than to say I'm probably influenced by deconstruction's saying no more masters, no more masterpieces.

I want to destroy the Author—king of the universe cosmos—and make him more of a small author. Death of the author with a capital A. I want to restore him or her at ground level as a maker of extraordinarily raw and bubble-breaking improv. That's a useful metaphor, at least to me: so many of the works I love have a quasi-improvisational aspect to them. I'm trying to bury the author and then resurrect him as a kind of graffiti artist or improv actor or hip hop scratcher or DJ. The Maker of the Masterpieces seems to belong to a previous age.

SA: *Did you read the New York Times article that mentioned your book, and others, in claiming that despite the recent rash of works subtitled 'manifesto', they are not forward-thinking manifestos, but rather backwards-looking jeremiads? That the jeremiad is the truly American form?*

DS: Boy this guy really needed the \$500 paycheck for that, didn't he? I thought it was a harmless piece. He seemed to like my book okay. But I think in no way is my book a jeremiad. I think that mine is plenty forward-looking.

SA: *Do you think this book is inspiring change? How do you feel about the response it's garnered thus far?*

DS: I'm thrilled. It sounds self-congratulatory, but on *The New York Times* book review podcast, they ask Luc Sante, "Do you think this will change how writers go about their work?" and Luc Sante says, "It might." And I said, "Whoa."

Obviously, who could possibly know if it will change anything. A single book that was bought for almost no money—the advance for his book was infinitesimal—this odd little book that the publisher thought was destined for an odd little academic life in my view has pretty inarguably created this debate. You Google the book and there's hundreds of thousands of mentions. There are something like 600,000 blog posts about it.

It's a book that largely because of misreadings has got its claws in the culture. People love to argue about it. A friend of mine, Jonathan Lethem, just loves the bad reviews of this book because all they do is get trapped by it—the negative ones are just pure briar fox. They try to argue against the book and in so doing prove the book's argument, and I think in terms quite ignorant of what the book is actually about. The book has gotten cartoonized in a lot of ways.

SA: One prominent, perhaps 'cartoonish' point reviews have fixated on is that this book is simply a call for more memoir. Susan Salter Reynolds in The LA Times accused you of having "the voice of a child." While she agreed that

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it's "good" to write a manifesto calling for change she said: "But writing is not all autobiography. Not everything can be seen in a convex mirror. There is an important striving for something beyond the self that is the task of a mature organism. An organism that wants to evolve into something better, less venal, less hungry, less waaa waaa waaa."

DS: I wrote about bad reviews in *Enough About You*. There's a thing where reviewers use a review to show that they are more morally evolved, or more psychically evolved. I don't find anything more disgusting—it's such an easy pose. The gutsy review gets down in the muck and wrestles with the writer and may not agree with everything the writer writes, but gets in there and gets human with the writer. The whole essay gesture depends on the reader meeting the writer halfway and acknowledging their own humanness. Whereas this ludicrous posture of being this immortal who condescends to the writer because of his or her own humanness is deeply offensive and incredibly stupid.

Is this book going to change things? I think it amazingly has a chance to. So much of my project is what I call 'defining nonfiction upward.' So much defines nonfiction downward, like the banality of journalism and scholarship. So much of what I'm trying to do is define it upward as an epistemology, a trampoline off which to ask the most basic questions: what's real, what's knowledge, what's a self, what's an other. I feel that change; it seems like it might be happening, maybe thanks slightly in part to my book and a lot of other people's books.

SA: *On the topic of other people's books, and going back to that second tenet of what this book sets out to do: are you calling for the end of literary copyright entirely? What do you want exactly?*

DS: Basically, I'm arguing that creativity is virtually synonymous with plagiarism from the beginning of time. Artists have plundered from one another. Two-thirds of Shakespeare's *Henry V* is taken from another source. James Joyce said he'd be happy to be known to posterity as a "scissor and paste man." The idea of creating ex nihilo is a relatively new idea and only in the last 100 years or so, whereas a writer like Shakespeare or Montaigne or anyone of the pre-romantic era understood the creative act to be one of assimilation and collaboration and co-creation without citation.

In a way I'm just trying to have literature catch up with the other arts: the history of music, the history of hip hop for the last 30 years, the history of art at least since Duchamp. Writing needs to regain the freedoms that it had for millennia. We live in a bizarrely litigious time in which everything gets scrutinized by 'trial by Google'. Especially in a digitized universe that we live in where everything is available at the click of a button, if literary writing is going to go forward, writers have to be able to remix one another's art. A key term for me is 'Transformation.' Of course I don't want to say that I wrote *The Corrections*—

SA:—*You really wouldn't want that—*

DS:—I wouldn't want that anyway. [laughs] But there's Fair Use, there's Public Domain, and this there's something called Transformation. When Tchaikovsky uses the French national anthem in the 1812 Overture, has he transformed it? He has. Aaron Copeland in *Appalachian Overture*, does he translate the traditional melody *Simple Gifts*? Does Joyce transform the Greek myths? Of course.

So when people say, 'Oh my god, Ian McEwan took forty words from a 1940s nurse's journal!'—art's been doing this

for a long time. We've got to preserve that gray area, we've got to allow writers to steal from one another.

SA: But what of the issue of compensation? The potential trouble of Reality Hunger is that you're personally profiting from the liberal borrowing of others' words, that you haven't, like Radiohead with In Rainbows (an album you mention in the book), released this work for free. When your publisher said that you had to publish citations for all the quotes, why didn't you say, 'Screw you, publisher' and release it personally, free of charge, or something like that?

DS: One difference between me and Radiohead is a difference of economic models. A band like that can make huge amounts of money by performing in venues of say 50,000 people after having released an album for free. So the release of *In Rainbows* was almost like a gimmick because when they performed they then made, frankly, millions of dollars. That's not available to a writer, at least a writer of my standing. Second, I'm not going to make substantial money off this book. I spent thousands upon thousands of dollars making homemade copies and sending them out to people. I spent thousands of dollars paying for permissions and thousands of dollars to pay research assistants to track stuff down. I'll probably barely break even on it.

But quite apart from that, I think this book is a transitional text in a sense that it gestures toward a new model. The publisher said 'You seem to want the book without citations. We want the book with citations. There's nothing you can say that's going to change our mind. If you want the book without citations,' they said, without rancor, 'if we're not the publisher for you, you can go elsewhere. You can publish it at Kinko's.' So with about nine months to go until the publication of the

book, I had to get permissions from everyone, hundreds of people all over the world. They all agreed, except for one, I believe.

One person who I'd written twice trying to get her to give permission never got the letters. She found out just as the book was being published that she had been quoted a couple of times. She said, 'I'm 1/200th of the book, so I want 1/200th of the advance.' Because the advance was infinitesimal, we cut her a check for about two cents. 'Knock yourself out,' I said, 'Go get coffee.'

I do think it's an interesting question on a theoretical level. One Italian journalist said, 'Why don't you publish it without your name on it? No blurbs. No titles. No titles, just a blank book.' I said, 'Yeah, okay, *you* do that.' For me, it goes to the idea that it is *my* book. I think it's my best book, I think it's my most personal book. The idea that it's just a bunch of quotes from people is wrong.

It's a transformation. I've edited the quotes radically. I've rewritten almost every line. I'm positioned them to be something new. I've re-wired them. It's like saying 'Why does *Finnegan's Wake* have James Joyce's name on it?' I'm not comparing my book to *Finnegan's Wake*, of course. There's a wonderful line of Emerson where he says it's just as hard to quote somebody as it is to invent. There's an art to right quotation. The edition of it. The juxtaposition of it. I feel like I'm less of a writer than I am of a film editor. I take this raw material and I edit the hell out of it.

SA: I want to ask about using the alphabet to label your chapters. The first chapter, "Overture" is given the letter A, and it moves all the way to Z, "Coda." Is there a meaningful reason that you did this?

DS: You could also ask about the numbers on the little sections themselves, why numbers 1 through 618? A lot of my favorite books have a numerical or alphabetical order, like Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* or Pascal's *Pensées*.

The book is sort of an ode to doubt, an ode to epistemological uncertainty. For me that order, the numbering and alphabet, promise a rational universe. Then when book destroys that rationality, there's kind of an interesting play between a frame and what's inside the frame. There's a poignant comedy in, 'I'll show you how ordered everything is, I'll take you from a-z! Look here's this totally rational ordered universe, and by the way, within this rational universe things make precious little sense!'

On a trivial level, the book is crazy enough and chaotic enough that if I can give the reader a few handrails—number the sections, order the chapters a-z, put citations in the back—it gives a bit of a 'We're in chapter "M" now, okay it's about collage.'

SA: *A wag, you may know, is an old-fashioned term for a joker, or a wit. Who is your favorite wag, and why?*

DS: So many great wags ever—who comes to mind? Laurence Sterne.