

RMIT University

Sian Prior

Postcard to David Foster Wallace

Biographical note:

Sian Prior is an RMIT PhD candidate in Creative Writing. She teaches nonfiction and journalism in several RMIT writing courses and has run workshops for Writers Victoria, Northern Rivers Writer Centre and the Ubud Readers and Writers Festival. Sian has been a journalist and broadcaster for two decades, presenting arts programs for ABC radio and contributing to a range of newspapers and magazines. Her most recent publications include a short story in the *Sleepers almanac edition 7*, a chapter in Penguin's *Women of letters* anthology and an excerpt from her memoir-in-progress in QUT journal *Rex*. sianprior.com

Key words:

Creative writing – Nonfiction – Travel writing – Truth – Authenticity – Reality

'I have seen fluorescent luggage and fluorescent sunglasses and fluorescent pince-nez and over twenty different makes of rubber thong. I have heard steel drums and eaten conch fritters and watched a woman in silver lame projectile vomit inside a glass elevator. I have pointed rhythmically at the ceiling to the two-hour beat of the same disco music I hated pointed at the ceiling to in 1977 ...'

Dear David Foster Wallace,

I have lugged a heavy heart over the Snowy Mountains, breathless with grief, and later planned how to turn my personal lovelorn anguish into profitable literary activity.

I have enticed my aging mother into a small canoe, observed as her face turned the colour of talcum powder while we paddled towards an ever receding East Timorese island and later pondered how to convert her distress into a witty 'bad travel' column.

I have visited a cyclone-wrecked Queensland coastal town and gathered quotes illustrative of the resilience of the human spirit while sitting in the local doctor's surgery nursing a bladder infection and feeling anything but resilient.

I have lain awake and alone in a Balinese beachside bamboo hut, sipping from duty-free bottles of vodka in an effort to banish insomnia, while concocting a solo travel tale of meditative, curative relaxation.

I have camped at an indigenous eco-tourism resort in the Kimberley and plotted how to convert my trip into a feature article powerful enough to prevent a nearby indigenous heritage trail from being obliterated by an oil and gas refinery.

I have trundled around southwest Western Australia with teenage stepchildren mentally re-writing our family holiday, editing out their moods and inserting instead an angle about a pilgrimage to the corners of places.

I have tiptoed across the luminescent sand of a dry lake bed at sunset, trying to avoid stepping on sixty thousand year old human remains, memorizing the exact phrases uttered by our loquacious tour guide so I could create a caricature of him that would make my readers giggle.

In my efforts to create memorable stories that would make people want to pack a bag, join an airport queue and catch a plane to wherever I've just been, I have taken the truth and applied a hole-punch to it. I have gathered the facts and 'told them slant'.

I have observed my suitcase-wheeling self as if through the mirrored window of a border police interview room, looking for signs and symptoms, tics and traits that will serve my story well, whichever story I'm fixing to tell.

Heartbroken writer. Nerdy writer. City stressed writer. Nature loving writer. Mother loving writer. Amateur paleontologist writer. Fictional portraits, all of them, painted

with a palette of facts. Avatars of myself uniquely designed to make my readers want to do what I've done, see what I've seen.

I have not made stuff up. Yes I have left stuff out, yes I have re-ordered stuff, but I have not told lies.

I have acknowledged the blur, fashioned the narrative, created the patterns and connections that may have 'seemed at the time to be absent from the events the words describe'.

But have I failed you, David Foster Wallace?

I read your essay 'Shipping Out' – your anti-'essaymercial' essay about all the un-fun supposedly-fun things you'd never do again on a cruise ship – and I feel ashamed.

When you describe the employee who receives a bollocking from the bosses when you won't allow him to carry your bag up the port hallway of Deck 10, or the banal conversations you overhear at your dinner table night after night, or your 'dickering over trinkets with malnourished children', I feel reproached.

Surely this is Truth with a capital T. Surely this is writing in which 'the writer has reckoned with the self'.

Surely because you tell us about the ugliness that you found beneath the sparkling veneer of beauty, your writing is more authentic than my carefully-constructed travel articles published in newspaper lift-outs.

Surely because you tell us how miserable you were in an environment where happiness is practically mandatory, surely your writer's voice is less artfully, less archly-fashioned than mine.

Or not.

Here's the thing. Any personal narrative nonfiction writing requires us as writers to construct what Vivian Gornick, author of *The Situation and the Story*, calls a persona. This persona 'selects (what) to observe and what to ignore' and illuminates not just 'the situation' but also 'the story', the 'insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say'.

Writing travel articles for mainstream media outlets like daily broadsheets and their online equivalents usually involves three mandatory tasks: finding a personal angle on the travel experience, targeting a specific readership, and accentuating the positives. Those three tasks involve editing stuff out.

The long lists you wrote at the beginning of your essay, David Foster Wallace, lists of what you observed on that hell-ship, created the illusion that you were showing and telling us Everything with a capital E. And surely if you have told us Everything you have told us the Truth with a capital T.

But you weren't telling us Everything.

Because you had come to tell us about the fear and lure of death, a 'story' about existential despair in a 'situation' where you were meant to be re-discovering the allure of life. Your chosen persona was the *unhappy* camper. Your travel writer's

hole-punch was hard at work, just as mine has been, only in reverse: you were taking out the good bits and leaving us with the disappointments, the dislocation, the dystopia.

And you were paid to write this essay, just as I have been paid for my travel articles, and just as the writer you criticise in your essay, Frank Conroy from the Iowa Writers Workshop, was paid for his article written about the same trip you took, an article, in his case, about the *pleasures* of cruising.

Your editors at *Harpers* probably *knew* you were an agoraphobic aqua-phobic shark-phobic misanthropic vulnerable lonely guy when they commissioned you to write a piece about being in an environment where all of those fears and vulnerabilities would be exposed.

They got the product they paid for.

So perhaps none of us are lacking in sincerity. Perhaps we are all producing stories according to the dictates of house style and who is to say which of us is the *most* truthful, the *most* authentic?

Perhaps behind every first-person narrated travel story lies a ghost story, the story *behind* the 'story behind the situation', peopled by an infinite number of ghostly versions of ourselves and those we write about, all of us trapped in every different millisecond of our journeys, in every possible persona, embodying every fleeting mood or anxiety or transcendent moment of pleasure that we experience on that cruise ship or in that Timorese canoe or on that cyclone-ravaged beach, all of us ghost travellers waiting for our version of events to be recognised and acknowledged and written down as The Truth.

Waiting in vain, because for most stories, one persona is enough.

But why does the Truth still matter? Why can the question of authenticity cause us to feel shame when we're writing nonfiction? Why do I need to reassure myself that while I've edited stuff in and out in my travel articles, I haven't made stuff up?

Is it simply that no one trusts and no one likes a phony?

Another David, David Shields, has gathered together no less than 618 relevant quotes in order to demolish such quaint notions as 'truth' and 'objectivity' in nonfiction in his book *Reality hunger: a manifesto*. In a section entitled 'reality' Shields has inserted this quote:

That person over there? He's doing one thing, thinking something else. Life is never false, and acting can be. Any person who comes in here as a customer is not phony, whereas if a guy comes in posing as a customer, there might be something phony about it, and the reason it's phony is that he's really thinking, *How am I doing? Do they like me?*

In the end, David Foster Wallace, are we all just hoping that our readers will like us? And that if they like us, we will like ourselves?

Having a lovely time, wish you were still here.

All the best,

Sian

.....

Dear Sian,

Many thanks for your postcard. These days it seems practically everybody is interested in writing *about* me but very few bother to write *to* me. And almost nobody sends postcards any more.

It's early morning here but I have decided to skip the Buffet'n'Bainmarie Breakfast (it's the same stuff every morning) and stay in my cabin to respond to the thoughts you outlined in your correspondence. To be honest, I'm surprised by how hung up you seem to be on this idea of 'authenticity'. Surely post-modernism put an end to that particular fetish, along with those other antiquated concepts you referred to, 'truth' and 'sincerity'.

But I noticed (because now I can see Everything) that in your travels you recently visited the Musée Quai Branly in Paris, a museum dedicated to exhibiting the material artefacts of so-called 'primitive' cultures. I also noticed (because now I can feel Everything) how uncomfortable you felt in that environment, how you were simultaneously entranced by the exoticism of the exhibits, seduced by the romance of Otherness embodied by the collection, emotionally persuaded by the framing of these cultures as somehow irreducibly authentic, at the same time as you were critical of the commodification of authenticity the collection represented. I heard (because now I can hear Everything) you and your friend deriding the 'authentic' products in the museum shop (a veritable smorgasbord of woven, dotted, carved, strung, beaded baubles and bling) as 'exo-merch'.

I also observed you when you visited that Balinese fishing village (the one where you drank yourself to sleep) and saw how worried you were about whether the publication of your travel article would help to wash away the 'authentic' lifestyle of those people as effectively as the rising tides of climate change that you wrote about in your piece. I heard the internal monologue in which you debated with yourself about whether the business your article might bring to the village would be 'good' for the locals or whether this was a fiction you told yourself to salve your conscience, a case of attitudinal in-authenticity, aka bad faith.

You must have noticed that although the post-modernists switched off authenticity's life-support system, the tourism industry continues to apply mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Tourism councils continue to set 'Authenticity guidelines' and the like for their members who are in the business of business. This is because the business people understand that the tourists with the cameras slung around their necks still crave this stuff like infants crave their mother's milk. Those tourists still project their appetite for something that tastes like authenticity onto the people, places and things

they're photographing. And most travel editors, understanding this appetite as keenly as the business people who fill their publication's advertising slots, still privilege the features that deliver textual 'exo-merch' to their readers.

There are limits, though. As you pointed out, my *Harpers* editor was willing to indulge my penchant for making long lists of the ways in which I suffered on this ship on my first visit. That was more the exception than the rule. Although vivid descriptions of the colourful lifestyles of The Other are generally pleasing to travel editors, 'authentic' descriptions of an author's mental suffering are not usually warmly welcomed by the editors of colourful lifestyle magazines. I remember (because now I can read Everything) the email your editor sent you when you pitched her your travel article about mountain climbing as a cure for grief. She agreed to publish the article but only if you would 'take out a few of the over-the-top grief references!' She knew that there was a limit to her readers' appetite for your 'authentic' feelings of sadness and loss, and that above all they would want to know that you had triumphed over those feelings.

Do you recall, on the visit to Queensland's Mission Beach that you referred to in your postcard, how you marveled at the giant concrete cassowary that greeted you as you drove into town? Do you remember how you told your friend that it was an example of a 'shire promotional grotesque', a type of illusionistic tourist attraction for which the state of Queensland is famous? And how you related the story of the first time you'd visited Mission Beach when the bus driver had persuaded some thrilled Japanese backpackers that the concrete cassowary was life-size and that the real things were man-eaters? Do you remember lecturing your friend about how the history of illusionism extends back to the wall paintings of Pompeii, where real structures vanished behind *trompe l'oeil* murals, but how in this instance the idea of the real (emu-sized) cassowary vanishes behind the more exotic giant creature artificially constructed for the tourist's imagination?

Perhaps the traveller's so-called appetite for 'authenticity' is more akin to our appetite for the Giant Cassowary and the Big Pineapple. It's an appetite for the mystification or for the aggrandisement of reality. We *want* to be sold a fantasy; we want the 'drag' version of life; we want to have access to what Andy Warhol once described as an 'archive of the ideal'.

The book you mention by the other David, David Shields, has been described by its author as a manifesto for 'reality'. Because I am on a pleasure cruiser and there is pressure here to keep things pleasant, I will try not to dwell on the unpleasant fact that Shields once referred to my 'authorial presence' as 'that heavy breathing'. *Reality hunger* is a book whose back page blurb promises that it seeks to 'tear up the old culture in search of something new and more authentic'. What a confusing and contradictory image, given how we have usually equated 'old' cultures with 'authentic' cultures (as you saw in the Musée Quai Branly in Paris). Shields' book cites the example of the inclusion of 'larger and larger chunks of "reality"' in television as evidence for our appetite for the real, the authentic. But surely reality television shows like *Big Brother* are to real life what the giant concrete cassowary is to a real cassowary, an artificially constructed, overblown edifice designed to offer

viewers a delicious cocktail: the illusion of reality mixed with the pleasure of masquerade.

I am also trying not to dwell on my unpleasant suspicion that, judging from the material you quoted in your postcard, you suspect I might be a phony. According to several dictionaries I've consulted (I have a lot of time on my hands here) the term first appeared at the turn of the 19th century. It came from the word 'fawney', which referred to gilt rings that swindlers would shine up and sell as genuine gold rings to unsuspecting buyers. The word came to be used for anything that was fake or not genuine. Given the admissions you made in your postcard about how prettily you have shined up your own travel experiences for your editors, perhaps we're both equally vulnerable to the accusation of phoniness. You've been shining up brass and I've been tarnishing gold. I'd say we're square.

As for 'liking ourselves', I wish you luck in that endeavour. It's a battle I lost some time ago.

I will close now because Petra the cleaner is knocking at my door and I need to vacate so she can shine up my cabin for me.

Please write again. All distractions are welcome. As the brochure for this cruise promises, here we do Absolutely Nothing.

Regards,

David Foster Wallace

Endnote

A shorter version of this creative work was published in *Newswrite*, the magazine of the New South Wales Writers Centre, in February 2013. Works cited in these letters come from the following: p. 2 Foster Wallace 1996: 33, Shields 2010: 63; p. 3 Shields 2010: 65, Foster Wallace 1996: 34, Monson 2010:14, Gornick 2001: 13; p. 4 Gornick in Shields 2010: 53; p. 6 Ross 1989: 165, Powell 2011, Shields 2010: 3; p. 7 Harper 2012.

Works cited

Dickinson, E 1868 'Tell all the truth but tell it slant', in D Shields (ed) 2010 *Reality hunger: a manifesto*, New York: Alfred A Knopf, 63

Gornick, V 2001 *The situation and the story*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Harper, D 2012 *Online etymology dictionary, sponsored words*, at <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=phony> (accessed 15 March 2013)

Monson, A 2010 'Voir dire', in *Vanishing point: not a memoir*, Minneapolis: Graywolf P

Raban, J 1987 *For love and money: writing, reading, travelling, 1968–1987*, New York: Picador/Pan Books, in D Shields 2010 *Reality hunger: A manifesto*, New York: Alfred A Knopf, 65

Ross, A 1989 *No respect: intellectuals and pop culture*, New York: Routledge

Wallace, DF 1996 'Shipping out: on the (nearly lethal) comforts of a luxury cruise' *Harper's magazine* 292, 33–6