

Editor's Note

***The Florida Review* is Thirty-Something: A Meditation on Fact, Fact Checking, and Tradition**

Here at *The Florida Review*, we've been arguing over what counts as truth. It all started with fact-checking, a task I assigned to a detail oriented member of the editorial staff—let's call him "Joe." I asked Joe to research whether the winner of the editors' award in nonfiction had accurately described the political situation in Iran that she fled by crossing the desert with drug smugglers, in fear for her own life. The answer: she had. I didn't know whether our graphic narrative, "Off the Bone," was memoir or fiction, but it still seemed important to know whether or not, as depicted, research into a human/ape hybrid had gone on during Stalin's regime. Surprisingly (to me), it had.

Just as surprisingly, Joe advocated asking the artist, Kelly Clancy, to reword—and maybe even redraw—a few frames. In Clancy's narrative, a character suggests that Stalin had the man/ape researcher killed. Joe's research revealed that Stalin had the researcher exiled. Whether the death that followed exile had anything to do with Stalin, according to him, could not be verified. We argued this issue up and down.

In nonfiction, what matters is the presentation, whether it's an individual's dialogue and perception, or the writer's overall claim, I said. And if it's fiction, it doesn't matter, at all.

Joe disagreed. Sure, it's worse if it's supposed to be nonfiction, he said. But even fiction owes an allegiance to historical fact.

In purely historiographical terms, I agreed that he had a point. However, in literary terms, I felt that Joe was a bit off the mark. Whether the piece is fiction or nonfiction, I argued, the claims about Stalin are still clearly the viewpoint of one person within the narrative, one fallible human being talking about how he lived and what his circle believed in a country ruled by Stalin. The artist's allegiance is to how her characters lived, and what they believed and feared.

There was no convincing Joe of anything except that he had to live with the editor's decision. And so we did not ask Kelly Clancy to revise her graphic narrative.

This whole idea of fact checking makes me a little queasy. It's in the air, of course, after what has come to be called—in our office, anyway—*The James Frey Debacle*. I seem to encounter the fall-out everywhere, an extended dialogue about the primacy of verifiable fact. It's in trade journals,

the mainstream press, and even such unexpected venues as the large-format fashion magazine I picked up randomly last month in the ophthalmologist's waiting room. Right there, buried amongst articles on Charlize Theron, "celebrity kids," the latest designers, and "jewelry's hot new couple" (all of which were announced on the cover, along with the claim that "red is the new white"), was an article on David Sedaris (who was absent from the cover), and how the fact checkers at *The New Yorker* have been verifying his childhood memories. Was that old grandfather clock made of walnut, as Sedaris wrote, or cherry, as his father remembered? Did Sedaris really pay his sister a dime for a chicken leg when they were kids, or twenty cents, as she claimed? These less-than-earth-shattering details, it seems to me, matters of perspective and memory, might not merit hours of research and verification.

The relationship of something called "truth" to fact and perspective is in part the topic of this issue's interview with Terese Svoboda. She talks about how, as a novelist and poet, she approached a memoir about her uncle's life. What we count as truth shifts when we move from one genre to another. Narrative and character make their own demands on details.

Graphic narrative is relatively new to the literary scene and even newer to *The Florida Review*. Like poets, the artists who create graphic narrative don't always let on about whether their work is fiction or nonfiction. Pity the fiction and nonfiction writers: their relationship to truth—or reality—is proclaimed by the names of the genres they occupy. Poets and graphic artists don't have to tell readers whether their work is invented or remembered. Maybe they don't even have to decide that matter for themselves.

I told "Off the Bone" creator Kelly Clancy that we'd argued about her work, and asked her to weigh in on the matter of fact and truth. "I don't feel compelled to write stringently factual stories," she said. "The people I wish to chronicle most are those who have never been allowed to know the 'truth.' I am trying to document people whose history has been taken from them. I find it much more compelling to tell stories just as they are told to me, flaws and all, lest my work begin to read like some dry grocery list of dates and events. History in itself is not as interesting to me as an individual's interpretation and understanding of it."

Or, as the historian Edward Hallet Carr once observed: "Facts are empty sacks. They won't stand up until we put something in them." That "something" is constructed from memory, perception, interpretation, and all the other messy, confusing, and often exaggerated components of subjective experience. That "something" reflects what it is to live life as a human being, a creature with a physical—not mechanical—brain.

So, is Kelly Clancy's work fiction or nonfiction? "To those who care to compartmentalize, I would respond that my work is fiction—it is certainly not journalistically rigorous. But it is fiction in the same way your memories are fiction: the stories are believed in by someone as sincerely as you believe in your first bike ride." I think back to my first bike ride. What I remember is how my father urged me along, helped me up when I crashed, talked me into continuing. I believe in that memory. But there's no video, and my father doesn't really remember. That my memory can't be verified by a fact checker doesn't mean that it can never be put into words. Clancy's art is about what it's like to be alive in a given time and place, what people remember and believe. She says, "These are beliefs that have shaped [people's] lives as surely as your understanding of your hometown, or of the lives of your grandparents, or of the war for American Independence has shaped your own."

Clancy uses the term "document" often when referring to her characters, and she does base them on real people. The man in "Off the Bone," she says, "is based on a somewhat romantic heroin addict I knew when I worked in Turkmenistan." She adds: "I am interested in giving voice to the overlooked and misunderstood: the laid off factory workers in the Rust Belt, Americans who join the military straight out of high school, young Muslims who join extremist groups, Central Asian women after the fallout of the Soviet Union."

Whether you call her genre graphic narrative, cartoons, or comics doesn't concern Clancy all that much. "I'm really not one for semantics," she says. What she talks about instead of terminology is character and story. How experience, memory, beliefs, and place shape lives. She's not writing history per se. "The Turkmen I document have never known any form of a free press," she says. "They moved from a society with an almost entirely oral tradition to the repressive regimes of the Soviets and Turkmenbashi. They've been lied to for the past century, and they know better than anyone that history is malleable."

Here we are, long past the Cold War, at the cusp of a new president's administration, in the middle of two wars in the Middle East, publishing Clancy's narrative about the Cold War. *The Florida Review* began in 1972 (when the Berlin Wall was firmly in place and would be for almost another two decades, the Iron Curtain intact), as a decidedly literary—not political or historical—journal. But the stories we live brush against history and politics. And so in this issue, you'll find history and politics cropping up in unexpected places. Not just in Clancy's "cartoon," but also in Baron Wormser's essay review of the poet William Matthews's work. Politics and history provide

the back story to Farnoosh Moshiri's "Walking on Thorns" (winner of the editors' award in nonfiction), the life-and-death matter that sends her fleeing Iran—in the night, through the desert, led by drug smugglers, her drugged baby strapped to her back.

But this is not a particularly political issue. You'll find odes and lyrics and elegies. You'll find flowers and birds and love and heartbreak. Character-driven stories. Book reviews.

This isn't an "Anniversary Issue" for *The Florida Review*. While we're hurtling toward our fortieth year—2012, the next presidential election year—the journal is still only thirty-something. Still, we see it as a time to take stock, to consider where we've been and where we're going. We have an all new editorial staff, new office, and a soon-to-be-revealed new website.

The Florida Review is thirty-something. Back when I was in graduate school, my roommate was addicted to the popular television show "Thirty-Something," although she herself was only twenty-something. Absorbed in the library stacks and earning my black belt in martial arts, I never found time for the show. But I heard plenty from Jesse. What she liked: How the characters were grappling with identity, trying to settle down after years of dreaming, and forging commitments to careers, to love, to family. What to me all boils down to love and death, desire and loss, Eros and Thanatos.

The poet and essayist Thomas Lynch, during a reading here in Orlando a few years back, answered a question about the supposedly dark nature of his work by saying that life was, in essence, about sex and death. His words came back to me when we were putting together this issue, looking at how often death creeps into these pages. There's our award-winning story "Packing Boxes," about how death unexpectedly disrupts long-awaited plans for family, written by a relative new-comer to fiction, a physician by trade. Tracy Seeley's "Monument Rocks" is a lyrical blast of energy that dances around cancer. There's the essayist Steven Harvey's "Vow of Poverty," a stunningly beautiful and moving meditation on a death of one's own. Tony Hoagland's three poems forge a spark of life with death through furious images of fire and water and wind. Even Baron Wormser's essay review, a retrospective on the poet William Matthews, could be read in elegiac terms.

Death, like politics, is part of the air we breathe, the memories we forge.

Here in Orlando, we're settling into winter, a time when we can finally go outside without worrying about heat exhaustion. The shops carry down vests and wool coats, hats, and scarves, and those of us who are northern transplants try to remember what it was like to need such garments. Instead of scraping ice off our windshields, we are tilling the soil to plant gardens.

But it's not all flowers and citrus trees, all butterflies and hummingbirds. Down the street there's a thirty-something acre park where barred owls nest, and you can glimpse the occasional river otter, woodstork, blue heron, and kingfisher. Nearby, a couple of houses look abandoned. *For sale* signs have been replaced by *for rent* signs, but the houses remain empty. People we know have medical bills they can't pay, mortgages headed toward default. Signs left over from election day talk about hope. Some signs want us to "Vote No on Two." Other signs pay homage to the physical law that "for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction," and urge us to "Vote Yes on Two." *Two*, like its sister (or brother?) amendment, *eight*, in California, puts limits on the institution of marriage. Hope and restriction, economic doom and change. We live with this as much as we live with gardens, birds, and our eighty-degree December temperatures.

Here at *The Florida Review*, we're looking forward to how writers and artists grapple with such changes and reversals. We're planning our first special issue, on contemporary American Indian writing and art. We're redesigning our website, planning our fortieth anniversary celebration. We're returning to the publication schedule we followed several issues back, winter and summer (instead of fall and spring). We continue to open our mail eagerly, hoping to find more good work in genres relatively new to us: the next graphic narrative (or cartoon or comic), the next essay review, another work of literary journalism (check out Maureen Stanton's behind-the-scenes look at *Antiques Roadshow* in this issue). And we're also looking forward to our past: upholding the journal's tradition of publishing the best stories, poetry, memoirs, and reviews by new, emergent, and established writers.

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