

Human and Unalone: Possibilities for Intimacy in Fiction

Part I: Thinking Thoughts and Feeling Feelings

“I Remember Everything” by John Prine

I've been down this road before
Alone as I can be
Careful not to let my past
Go sneaking up on me
Got no future in my happiness
Though regrets are very few
Sometimes a little tenderness
Was the best that I could do

<https://www.npr.org/2020/06/12/875662975/watch-john-prine-play-his-last-recorded-song-i-remember-everything>

***Reality Hunger* by David Shields**

“I don't know what it's like inside you and you don't know what it's like inside me. A great book allows me to leap over that wall: in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness, I feel human and unalone” (141).

“We need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.” (Kafka)

Part 2: What I Mean By Intimacy

Intimacy = ‘perceived closeness resulting from shared access.’

Three Kinds of Shared Access:

1. *Access to Secrets (particularly pain)*. This occurs when a narrator opens his/her/their emotional life to the reader. For example, the narrator shares a secret, or makes an admission, or reveals a deep hurt or desire. When this happens, readers feel close to the text because something deep, as opposed to something superficial or merely informational, has been shared.
2. *Access to History*. This occurs when a narrator invites the reader into some kind of backstory. For example, the history of a marriage, the history of a house, or the history of how someone came to be where they are at the point of narration. When this happens, readers feel close to the text because they have been provided with significant past events. Additionally, how a speaker arranges these events is, itself, a kind of access. We understand not only what the speaker has included, but what they have omitted.
3. *Access to Place*. This occurs when a text sets its opening pages in a place with an intimate connotation (or intimate reality). For example, in some of the passages we’re about to look at, the story opens in a bedroom, or in a graveyard, or in a kitchen. All of these locations, for different reasons, evoke a sense of intimacy.

Part 3: Illustrative Texts

***Heavy* by Kiese Laymon**

I did not want to write to you. I wanted to write a lie. I did not want to write honestly about black lies, black thighs, black loves, black laughs, black foods, black addictions, black stretch marks, black dollars, black words, black abuses, black blues, black belly buttons, black wins, black beens, black bends, black consent, black parents, or black children. I did not want to write about us. I wanted to write an American memoir.

I wanted to write a lie.

I wanted to do that old black work of pandering and lying to folk who pay us to pander and lie to them every day. I wanted to write about our families' relationships to simple carbohydrates, deep-fried meats, and high-fructose corn syrup. I wanted the book to begin with my weighing 319 pounds and end with my weighing 165 pounds. I wanted to pepper the book with acerbic warnings to us fat black folk in the Deep South and saccharine sentimental exhortations from Grandmama. I did not want you to laugh.

I wanted to write a lie.

“The Sun, The Moon, The Stars” by Junot Diaz

I'm not a bad guy. I know how that sounds—defensive, unscrupulous—but it's true. I'm like everybody else: weak, full of mistakes, but basically good. Magdalena disagrees though. She considers me a typical Dominican man: a *sucio*, an asshole. See, many months ago, when Magda was still my girl, when I didn't have to be careful about almost anything, I cheated on her with this chick who had tons of eighties freestyle hair. Didn't tell Magda about it, either. You know how it is. A smelly bone like that, better off buried in the backyard of your life. Magda only found out because homegirl wrote her a fucking *letter*. And the letter had *details*. Shit you wouldn't tell your boys drunk.

“Feeling Fucked Up” by Etheridge Knight

Lord she's gone done left me done packed / up and split
and I with no way to make her
come back and everywhere the world is bare
bright bone white crystal sand glistens
dope death dead dying and jiving drove
her away made her take her laughter and her smiles
and her softness and her midnight sighs—

Fuck Coltrane and music and clouds drifting in the sky
fuck the sea and trees and the sky and birds
and alligators and all the animals that roam the earth
fuck marx and mao fuck fidel and nkrumah and

democracy and communism fuck smack and pot
and red ripe tomatoes fuck joseph fuck mary fuck
god jesus and all the disciples fuck fanon nixon
and malcolm fuck the revolution fuck freedom fuck
the whole muthafucking thing
all i want now is my woman back
so my soul can sing

***Sylvia* by Leonard Michaels**

In 1960, after two years of graduate school at Berkeley, I returned to New York without a Ph.D. or any idea of what I'd do, only a desire to write stories. I'd also been to graduate school at the University of Michigan, from 1953 to 1956. All in all, five years of classes in literature. I don't know how else I might have spent those five years, but I didn't want to hear more lectures, study for more exams, or see myself growing old in the library. There was an advertisement in the school paper for someone to take a car from Berkeley to New York, expenses paid. I made a phone call. A few days later, I was driving a Cadillac convertible through mountains and prairies, going back home, an overspecialized man, twenty-seven years old, who smoked cigarettes and could give no better account of himself than to say "I love to read." It doesn't qualify the essential picture, but I had a lot of friends, got along with my parents, and women liked me. Speeding toward the great city in a big, smooth-flowing car that wasn't mine, I felt humored by the world.

"In a U-Haul North of Damascus" by David Bottoms

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Lord, what are the sins
I have tried to leave behind me? The bad checks,
the workless days, the scotch bottles thrown across the fence
and into the woods, the cruelty of silence,
the cruelty of lies, the jealousy,
the indifference?

What are these on the scale of sin
or failure
that they should follow me through the streets of Columbus,
the moon-streaked fields between Benevolence
and Cuthbert where dwarfed cotton sparkles like pearls
on the shoulders of the road. What are these
that they should find me half-lost,
sick and sleepless
behind the wheel of this U-Haul truck parked in a field
on Georgia 45
a few miles north of Damascus,
some makeshift rest stop for eighteen wheelers
where the long white arms of oaks slap across trailers
and headlights glare all night through a wall of pines?

***Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard**

I used to have a cat, an old fighting tom, who would jump through the open window by my bed in the middle of night and land on my chest. I'd half-awaken. He'd stick his skull under my nose and purr, stinking of urine and blood. Some nights he kneaded my bare chest with his front paws, powerfully, arching his back, as if sharpening claws, or pummeling a mother for milk. And some mornings I'd wake in daylight to find my body covered with paw prints in blood; I looked as though I'd been painted with roses.

***The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* by Haruki Murakami**

When the phone rang I was in the kitchen, boiling a potful of spaghetti and whistling along with an FM broadcast of the overture to Rossini's *The Thieving Magpie*, which has to be the perfect music for cooking pasta.

I wanted to ignore the phone, not only because the spaghetti was nearly done, but because Claudio Abbado was bringing the London Symphony to its musical climax. Finally, though, I

had to give in. It could have been somebody with news of a job opening. I lowered the flame, went to the living room, and picked up the receiver.

“Ten minutes, please,” said a woman on the other end.

I’m not good at recognizing people’s voices, but this was not one I knew.

“Excuse me? To whom did you wish to speak?”

“To you, of course. Ten minutes, please. That’s all we need to understand each other.”

Her voice was low and soft but otherwise nondescript.

“Understand each other?”

“Each other’s feelings.”

Other recommended works: “Blues Ain’t No Mockinbird” by Toni Cade Bambara, *The Sportswriter* by Richard Ford, *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward, *Gilead* by Marilyn Robinson, “Maggie May” by Rod Stewart, “I Could See the Smallest Things” by Raymond Carver, *Fleabag*.