

FACTUAL FICTIONS: NARRATIVE TRUTH AND THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN DOCUMENTARY NOVEL

Leonora Flis. Newcastle

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Don DeLillo, reflecting upon his role as storyteller, states: “It’s curious to think about what a fiction writer can do as opposed to a journalist or a historian. They say that journalism is the first draft of history. And maybe in a curious way, fiction is the final draft” (Norris and Block 2007: np). Leonora Flis’ *Factual Fictions: Narrative Truth and the Contemporary American Documentary Novel* (2010) sets out to map the development of what Flis calls “the documentary novel”. Flis acknowledges the “terminological inconsistencies” (2010: 1) surrounding this literary genre that have led writers and scholars to employ varying terms such as “nonfiction novel” or “faction”, or to see these novels as works of historiographic metafiction or historical narratives (2010: 1-2). As Flis rightly acknowledges: “finding a uniform and a fixed definition [for the documentary novel] seems to be a virtually impossible task” (2010: 6). Thankfully this is not her intention in *Factual Fictions*. As she comes to demonstrate, the great value of this literary genre is its ability to adapt and be adapted by writers to tell the story of the socio-political and socio-cultural narratives that shape the experience of the everyday individual. The documentary novel, in various forms and under various guises, has existed since the beginning of time, since man (or indeed woman) sat down and spun his (or her) first yarn. Flis’ study focuses predominantly on the reappearance of the form in 1960s America for “it is in the United States that this particular literary genre or style of writing has developed in a truly versatile and abundant way” (2010: 2). Flis

offers a methodical and systematic mapping of the appearance and development of the documentary novel alongside the journalistic-literary phenomenon known as New Journalism. Flis also contextualises the development of the documentary novel alongside the major social, historical and cultural (American) events of that era that went hand in hand with this kind of fiction. These narratives, typified in the writing of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965), Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* (1968) and *The Executioner's Song* (1998), John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1997), and Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988) were not only great pieces of writing that enriched the American literary tradition but were a form of observing, reporting and interpreting the experience of the American people. These authors were also, and I'd say even more importantly, *writing* the experience of the American people.

The first chapters of *Factual Fictions* set out Flis' theoretical position on the reading of the documentary novel. Previous reviews of Flis' text have complained that the author "tends to work on the literary side of the literary journalism discussion more heavily than the journalism side" (Pauly 2010: 114). That is correct and not something that Flis should need to apologise for. With her feet firmly planted in the schools of post-structuralist and postmodernist thought she is interested in textuality, narrative and interpretation; in essence, the fictional nature of fact. The opening salvo of cultural theorists who move within the postmodern matrix may not bring anything new to our knowledge of the development of this field of thought, but it provides a strong theoretical scheme that sets up Flis' approach to interpreting the social construction and the sociological impact of the documentary novel.

Chapter Five provides Flis' application of her theoretical premise with what she calls "the practical analysis" (2010: 110) of these key documentary novels identified above. This has been a long time coming and I cannot help but feel that having four dense chapters on creating a theoretical framework and only one chapter dedicated to the readings of these key texts creates a certain imbalance in *Factual Fictions*. That said, Flis' analyses are sound (if short) in presenting the fluctuations in the ways these authors grapple with what they feel are their responsibilities toward the elements of fact and fiction in their works.

After the analysis of the American works Flis turns to the Slovene documentary narratives in Chapter Six. With so much of the text dedicated to (mostly) Anglophone theoretical and philosophical traditions as well as American literature, Flis' switch to the Slovene may seem abrasive. However, I found the chapter on the Slovene tradition to be hugely informative and a welcome window on a largely unknown literary tradition. While I found the impact (or lack thereof) of the main literary heavyweights that feature elsewhere in *Factual Fictions* to be notable, it is the mapping of the documentary novel in Slovenia that will be one of the main things I take away from this text.

The main reservation I have about the book is with its layout. The use of dense footnotes on each page often overpowers the main body of the text and you find your eyes flicking involuntarily between the principal point and the digression. This is a very ambitious and wide ranging account of the development of not only a literary genre, but also a method of thinking about human experience. As Flis herself admits, “I found myself grappling with a rather disparate array of disciplines and theoretical approaches” (2010: 9). Ultimately, I think that Flis gets it just right. There is also an absence of reference to other works that have documented the rise of the documentary novel in the United States, notably Thomas Connery’s *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism* (1992) and John Hartsock’s *A History of American Literary Journalism* (2000). A note on these texts would have provided further contextualisation for Flis’ arguments. That being said, Flis’ book will prove to be, as it was in many ways for me, an engaging, well-written, and most importantly of all, instructive and informative way into this literary genre that will appeal, I feel, to graduate and post-graduate students of the novel in all its guises.

The final chapter of the text, “Future Prospects of Nonfiction Writing”, speculates on the future of these documentary narratives. While Flis states fairly that “literature is losing its halo of a prestigious medium of communication in the world” (2010: 196), the relevance of the genre and indeed Flis’ study with regards to contemporary literature is evident if we consider the fundamental drive of these works. Richard Gray argues that writers of contemporary American fiction “have the chance, in short, of getting ‘into’ history, to participate in its processes and, in a perspectival sense at least, getting ‘out’ of it too —and enabling us, the reader, to begin to understand just how these processes work” (2011: 19). And this is what Flis highlights as the underlying drive of the documentary novel. It was the “birth of a new consciousness, stemming from a larger, more varied, and more complex sense of the immediate human situation” (2010: 29) in the tumultuous 60s that drove the everyday person, not only ivory tower philosophers, to question the (un)reliability of “truth”. And these people often looked to fiction for their answers. Don DeLillo, speaking in conversation with Anthony DeCurtis, is asked: “What does fiction offer people that history denies to them?” DeLillo’s reply is telling:

I think fiction rescues history from its confusions. It can do this in the somewhat superficial way of filling in blank spaces. But it also can operate in a deeper way: providing the balance and rhythm we don’t experience in our daily lives, in our real lives. So the novel which is within history can also operate outside it —correcting, clearing up and, perhaps most important of all, finding rhythms and symmetries that we simply don’t encounter else-where. (DeCurtis 2005: 64)

What Flis leaves us with is a reminder of the power of storytelling in understanding the human condition; in other words, that fact is ultimately found in fiction.

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