

John Russell. *Reciprocities in the Nonfiction Novel*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2000. ix + 238 pp.

Early in his first chapter, appropriately named “Locating the Nonfiction Novel: No Guides Need Apply,” John Russell makes a clear distinction between the nonfiction novel genre and that of the so-called New Journalism. In works of literary journalism, Russell contends, the writer acts as tour guide, directing our attention to events, people and places about which he or she already knows. The writer of the nonfiction novel, on the other hand, simply invites us along for the ride—and up in front, if you please, in case another set of eyes is needed to look for signs or scan the map and figure out where we are.

In *Reciprocities in the Nonfiction Novel*, Russell argues that the nonfiction novel “bridges a clear division between fiction and literary journalism. It is when some of the established forms of literature, such as essay, memoir, and travel writing (all neighbors of journalism), develop in idiosyncratic directions—meditative, confessional, rhetorical, dramatic—that they begin to merge with the imaginative forms of literature usually connoted by the word ‘fiction.’” Russell goes on to sift out the characteristics of the nonfiction novel in ever finer increments, embracing Eric Heyne’s notion of “factual adequacy,” for instance, advancing the idea that *bricolage* (“an unsystematic, almost haphazard way of thinking that leads to the absence of self-guidance”) is one of the hallmarks of the nonfiction novelist, and so on. From within his multi-faceted definition, Russell then turns his attention to “reciprocity” throughout the remaining chapters.

Reciprocities in the Nonfiction Novel discusses reciprocal relationships and acts of reciprocation in works as diverse in content as Isak Dinesen’s *Out of Africa*, Primo Levi’s *The Periodic Table*, and Honoria Murphy Donnelly and Richard Billings’s *Sara & Gerald*. Though the language of the discussion is at times less than completely accessible, Russell’s argument for the existence of these reciprocal relationships between people and between actions is clear, detailed, and well supported—not to mention enlightening.

Most of the relationships he examines illustrate reciprocity in the classical sense, that is, as an even-ing out, a balancing of the scales, a repayment in kind. The reciprocal relationships between the writers and the other “characters” that people their novels—such as that between Isak Dinesen and the “squatters” on her African estate—consistently illustrate the writers’ perception of these others as their equals (or betters). One also gets a clear sense of their indebtedness to the material, that the writers not only feel “privileged” to have had the experiences but also to have had the opportunity to achieve something of value by recounting them.

There is a clear sense of a balancing of the scales, for example, in the very structure of Primo Levi’s *The Periodic Table*. Simple, symmetrical, and well ordered, *The Periodic Table* seems a triumphant response to the fear and uncertainty of Levi’s life under the Nazi regime. That which was beyond his control is herein recounted as *he* sees fit; order

out of chaos personified. Clearly, Russell intends us to understand that there exist reciprocal relationships not only within the works themselves, but also between the works and their writers. Circumstances surrounding the publication of this book itself provide an excellent, albeit unintended, example of this reciprocal relationship between the writer and the work.

In his foreword to *Reciprocities in the Nonfiction Novel*, Neil D. Issacs tells of how age and a rapid deterioration of his mental and physical faculties robbed Russell of any memory of this book. In a poignantly recounted scene, Issacs tells of the writer's wife and son visiting him at the nursing home and "describing the book to a friend who had joined them on their daily visit. Jack, upbeat and lucid for the moment, listened with interest to the description—but without the context of long-term memory or recognition. 'That sounds great,' he said. 'I'd like to read it.'" In fact, he would have, and the work would have repaid the writer for its creation. As it is, another method of reciprocation is needed, and found. In a gentle irony, we find the best illustration of reciprocity not in the text of the book, but here before it begins. In what Issacs calls a "reversal of publishing protocol," *Reciprocities in the Nonfiction Novel* is dedicated to the writer himself--and that certainly seems as it should be.

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