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# True Fiction: Three Writers' Approaches to Fact and/or Fiction

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**True Fiction: Three Writers' Approaches to Fact and/or Fiction**

by Anna Krauthamer

advised by Dan Chiasson

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Prerequisite for Honors in English

Wellesley College

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## *Introduction*

I chose to write this thesis after reading William Maxwell's work for the first time: something about *So Long, See You Tomorrow* struck me in a way that nothing I had ever read before did (several years later, that still holds true). I thought that this was the writer and novel I had always been waiting for, because, to borrow Maxwell's own language about what he aimed to do in his own writing, here was "the line of truth exactly superimposed on the line of feeling." Without sensing any seeming discrepancy between his words and the emotional undercurrent beneath them, I responded instantly and profoundly to what I think is the most moving of all his novels, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, and therefore decided I should write a thesis on this book about an old man from the Midwest and a misunderstanding he faced years ago when he was only a child.

At first, though, translating this quality—by that I mean the sense that, in any given sentence, no other wording might encapsulate its meaning as fittingly as Maxwell has just put it—that belongs so specifically to *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, and a bit more broadly to Maxwell's work as a whole, was challenging. It turned out that moving and resonant as they were, Maxwell's accounts of the grief he experienced after his mother died, or the remorse and guilt he held on to for years after slighting a childhood friend, opened themselves less to examination than to praise, even awe, but still not academic exploration. Take this one, for example, which appears in the first few chapters of *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, in which

Maxwell, now an old man narrating his past, characterizes his experience of loss after his mother died when he was ten:

“It seemed like a mistake. And mistakes ought to be rectified, only this one couldn't be. Between the way things used to be and the way they were now was a void that couldn't be crossed. I had to find an explanation other than the real one, which was that we were no more immune to misfortune than anybody else, and the idea that kept recurring to me...was that I had inadvertently walked through a door that I shouldn't have gone through and couldn't get back to the place I hadn't meant to leave. Actually, it was other way round: I hadn't gone anywhere and nothing was changed, so far as the roof over our heads was concerned, it was just that she was in the cemetery.” (514)

Maxwell describes how surreal and awfully paradoxical great loss is—how loss instantly and sweepingly changes one's life and creates not just a distance but rather a “void” that cannot be crossed. His writing here is so resonant (to me) partially because of, funnily enough, how informal it sounds—he uses contradictions and simple, short language to gesture at something complicated. To this time borrow John Updike in his *New Yorker* essay about Maxwell, this passage exemplifies Maxwell's talent as using “modest specifics, clearly rendered” to get at the “nearly unbearable heart truth,” or in other words, to gesture toward the things that are often the most impossible to communicate with quiet, piercing language that is able to make murkiness clear.

For Maxwell, that “unbearable heart truth” almost always meant his mother's death. Before her death, Maxwell grew up with his two parents and his older brother, and described his childhood as a “beautiful, imaginative, protected

world.” When his mother died suddenly of Spanish influenza, Maxwell decried that “the worst that could happen had happened” and “the shine went out of everything.” Her death features prominently in his work, most so in *They Came Like Swallows*, which recreates the perspectives of Maxwell, his older brother, and his father in the time immediately surrounding his mother’s death. I read in a biography that during one analytic session, Maxwell cried out that he “can’t bear it” about the loss of his mother. Not couldn’t, but can’t. This blurring of time, in his inability to ever really recover from his loss and distinguish his past from his present, occurs in *They Came Like Swallows*, too. Maxwell, then a middle-aged man, wrote about his mother’s death as his childhood self. He goes back in time to before his mother died, suggesting a fixation with that time period that, whether in his work or in his mind, he cannot escape.

However, this fixation speaks for itself, in the above passage and in much elsewhere of Maxwell’s fictional work. What makes the passage so remarkable is not that it holds great allusive power, making us understand its emotional content by way of distant but brilliant analogy or because of its unusual but successful form, but instead its nearly literal, exacting abilities to capture the same fixation Maxwell (in similar, albeit less filtered) language describes himself as expressing in his psychoanalyst’s office. In the passage from *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, he puts into stark, yet humanistic, terms the counterpoint of his own emotional life, replicating inner life off the page to inner life on the page. This is, I think, remarkable and rare, but—that is praise, and there are so many ways to sing Maxwell’s praises! As a

result, when I sat down to write a thesis about Maxwell, I did not know what I could say.

In fact, I have since realized that, in what at first seemed to me like a cruel and horrifying twist, it is precisely *because* of what I love about Maxwell that I did not know how to sustain an academic thesis about him. Because he creates so little space between his words and what they intend to express, I thought that there was similarly little to examine in his work; I love reading him because it is like reading someone write about my own thoughts, except more eloquently and exactly. What else is there to say, really? I began to think that I had confused being fascinated by a writer with simply falling in love with him; the former holds a lot to unpack and the latter little to say, just feel.

In frustration I turned to other writers who seemed to bear vague likenesses to Maxwell, more in the goal of distracting myself than thinking, at first, that they could really teach me anything new about someone whose work I thought I had read completely thoroughly. Of course I, fortunately, discovered that the opposite was true. What is most obvious and idiosyncratic, I think, about Maxwell, is how autobiographical his novels are, especially as he progresses in his career—they move away from a certain Woolf-inspired Modernism (that, I believe, he picked up less because that style spoke to him and more because of Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, and specifically, Mrs. Ramsay's, the mother's, death resonated to him) to the quietly suggestive, realistically descriptive voice we see in the above passage. As such I looked at writers who, broadly speaking, also notably enact a dynamic between what we might think of as fact and fiction, or the impersonal and the personal, or



truth and—imagination? Are these distinctions reliable ones, or even concrete distinctions at all?

That was what I ended up realizing about Maxwell that in turn prompted the focus of my thesis: that his incorporation of autobiography, which I had previously thought merely provided his work's character as opposed to any wider-reaching implications, actually challenges our understandings of what it can mean to write fiction, non-fiction, or both. Joan Didion, the subject of my second chapter (Maxwell is the subject of my first) writes novels, memoirs, and essays. Even though these categories broadly function as ways to understand her different works, they have their limitations; I focus on Didion's essays and how even though some of them are less the classic personal essay than a piece of reportage or journalistic criticism, they still rest on her personal character with which she infuses an essay, however subtly, to make their argument.

Similarly, *So Long, See You Tomorrow* actually works, at the level of the sentence and across the entire novel, to convey meaning, or what we can understand as truth within *So Long, See You Tomorrow's* context, by combining Maxwell's autobiographical facts, his "personal" tone that comes from the book's likewise personal nature, and fiction in the purest sense of the word. Though the first sections of *So Long, See You Tomorrow* recreate parts of Maxwell's childhood, before and mostly after his mother died, it also reminisces on a friendship he had with a local boy, whom he calls Cletus Smith, whose family were farmers. *So Long, See You Tomorrow* is told in retrospect from the perspective of an older man (a man similar in age to Maxwell when he wrote the book) about his guilt over a moral

failing he believes he had made in his youth. In the novel, the Smiths and the Wilsons, neighboring families who live in the farmlands right outside of Lincoln, Illinois, collide into each other only to rip themselves apart later, the implications of which are the most destructive for eleven-year-old Cletus—the only person to whom Maxwell was in anyway connected in either family.

The novel is based on real events that happened between two families in Lincoln early in the 20th century; what we read in the novel is Maxwell's imagining of the private happenings in the families--their thoughts, their feelings, their lives--based on what little he read in newspaper clippings and hearsay. Years after the tragedy took place, the narrator in *So Long, See You Tomorrow* saw Cletus once more in the hallway of a large public school they both attended. Neither speaks to the other, and the narrator, now much older when he tells us about it, has regretted his silence for the rest of his life. He fears Cletus might have interpreted his silence as disdain over what happened to Cletus's family, when really, the narrator did not know what to say to a boy his own age who had experienced such trauma.

What makes *So Long, See You Tomorrow* seem like both memoir and fiction is the way in which it is, at some moments, committed to depicting its characters' lives as closely as possible to who these people actually were in real life, and at other moments, content to drift into imaginative rumination. The narrator, a stand-in for Maxwell, lost his mother to the Spanish flu, had a distant and grief-stricken father, and would read in the attic for hours trying to not think about the fact that his mother was dead--these are all true about the real Maxwell, too. Everything we experience in *So Long, See You Tomorrow* that Maxwell also experienced firsthand is

as close an account as possible of what things really were like. Significantly, in Maxwell's preface to *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, he tells us that in investigating what happened to the two families on whom the story is based, he "permitted" himself to imagine whatever he couldn't find from old newspapers and police records. Hence, Maxwell took the little he knew to be true from the papers and then used his imagination to create intimate pictures of true events. He merged imagination with reality by filling in the blanks on his own--and what he puts in the blanks is revelatory.

Maxwell also says in the preface that after publishing *So Long, See You Tomorrow* he often "wondered if the boy (now, of course, an elderly man) would read it." Maxwell wonder about this lost anonymous boy is not just motivation or inspiration behind the novel, a reason confined to *So Long, See You Tomorrow's* premise. In his present day, Maxwell regretted, decades later, not saying anything to the other boy, on whom the character of Cletus was based, and whom he passed silently in a hallway long ago. Maxwell's admission in the preface that he thought frequently of the boy explicitly confirms that the narrator's guilt was also his own guilt. Maxwell wrote a novel that imagines the lives of characters based on people whom he only knew indirectly. I argue that because Maxwell's choice, to immerse himself with reimagining the tragic events that had damaged the real life Cletus, is redemptive, an effort to assuage his decades-old guilt, it casts new light on what it means for literature to be truthful. *So Long, See You Tomorrow* is both fiction in the most obvious understanding of the genre, like when Maxwell imagines the doomed farmers' lives, and completely factual in every letter of its making, in every word

that strives to achieve a real, concrete means, separate from any literary or artistic aims.

Maxwell was afraid that his silence that day in the hallway reflected judgment, fear, or disgust over what had happened to the boy and his family. *So Long, See You Tomorrow* empathizes with not just the boy and his family, but the other family torn apart by the novel's events, in the care and attention it gives to an intimate, fictional portrayal of their lives. The compassion he shows to the real life Cletus years later by writing *So Long, See You Tomorrow* might, it is obvious that Maxwell hoped, in some way undo Maxwell's youthful mistake; the novel could soothe the wound Maxwell feared he inflicted. Maybe, even, it was not only after publishing the novel, as he says in the preface, that Maxwell wondered if there'd be contact. Maybe he wondered about that possibility before he ever wrote the book.

But it is not only because *So Long, See You Tomorrow* might have had actual consequences on a person's life that it achieves what I call "creating truth." More specifically, its imagined rendering of the Smiths and Wilsons resembles what happens in all of fiction: an author takes a set of facts and tells stories about them. Because Maxwell is explicit about what he is doing—because he tells us he is creating stories about which, unlike his childhood and his family's life, he has little firsthand knowledge—he is able to place the imagination alongside facts we might read in a newspaper and then suggest that it is only through such a combination that we might see how literature can create truth. Through intent or motivation (in this case, a means of redemption for Maxwell), unembellished fact (the details of the Wilson murder Maxwell read about in old newspapers), and imagination (his

careful, compassionate revival of the Smiths and Wilsons), a writer can replicate the fullest sense of what we mean when we talk about truth. Usually, in literature or just in our everyday lives, we do not see the trifecta.

In my other chapters, I focus not on truth but on some the different ways a writer might surprise us in their understandings of either non-fiction or fiction. I do this because it is easy to interchange “truth” with “non-fiction” and “lie” or “fantasy” with “non-fiction,” so this focus seemed complimentary to my work with Maxwell. In my chapter on Joan Didion, I look at how her journalistic essays are able to make themselves more personal than we might originally expect, of that kind of essay in general, or even more personal than we might at first notice. And I look at how she, crucially, is able to do that without doing something another writer calls “committing fiction.” That is, she is able to make what we could also categorize as a piece of journalism, something we hope (for important reasons—we find out about current events from journalism) to be objective and clinical, because those are the values we associate with journalistic non-fiction, more personal due to her own idiosyncrasies as a writer. We often think about the personal and the fiction as being linked together more than the personal and non-fiction; I try to look at why those associations might be tenuous ones.

In my third chapter, which is on James Baldwin, I look at what is, very simply speaking, the opposite of what happens in the Didion chapter. If Didion places what we think of as fictive, personal elements, in her non-fiction, Baldwin places non-fiction within his own fiction—but unlike Maxwell, he does not tell us what he crosses that categorical boundary. Baldwin was a black, gay writer producing

novels for a white audience at a time when homosexuality was polarizing, controversial, and generally considered distasteful. Although his first novel, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, is transparently autobiographical in a way similar to *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, Baldwin's second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, is much less obvious about the personal sources from which it takes its content. I argue that Baldwin, by distancing himself from his characters and plot through fiction, is able to tell stories he might not have otherwise told. We see that in his depictions of raw, startling emotion amidst otherwise contained prose.

Even though this was a long and challenging process, those challenges redefined for me what it is to read—since I reevaluated writing my thesis just on Maxwell, I have considered carefully when we should and should not actively think about a writer's real life when considering her writing, how the personal and the imagination are always there, even when we think they aren't, and how it is not only words on a page but how they might work in tandem with, most movingly to me, an act of compassion for a long-gone child to create something truer than the words on a page had we not known the meaning behind them. I hope that comes through, and that if you ever read Maxwell or any other writer as important to you as he is to me, you might be able to understand your reaction to him as a response not just to great writing, but to a remarkable creation of truth.



## *Chapter One*

### *William Maxwell: Truth in Quietness, and How Self-Motivated Compassion Leads to Literary Truth*

When he was a boy, William Maxwell stalked an unfinished house in which he would soon live. The walls, ceilings, and floors were not all there when Maxwell wandered in the house, so he walked on balancing beams before they became bedrooms and looked through invisible walls at his surrounding hometown. Maxwell was not alone. Another boy was in the house with him. They perched on the beams and put their heads through gaping holes that were not yet windows together, until someone nailed floorboards in between the planks and covered those gaping holes a bit more and lay a roof over the whole thing so that it could be called a home.

William Keepers Maxwell, Jr. was born on August 16<sup>th</sup>, 1908, in Lincoln, Illinois, a town that prides itself on being the first to name itself after the president before his election. He was born to William Keepers Maxwell, Sr., and Eva Blossom Blinn Maxwell, and he died on July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2000. After his death, John Updike told *The New Yorker* that, as a writer, Maxwell used “modest specifics, clearly rendered,” and subdued “figurative language” in order to “get at the nearly unbearable heart truth.” Maxwell was better known, during his lifetime, for his work as *The New Yorker*’s fiction editor than he was for his own written work. But since his death, critics and scholars make comments similar to Updike’s, remarking on Maxwell’s quiet, subtle prose and simple, searching voice, and on their efficiency in relaying psychological



accuracy and in always invoking an atmosphere that operated in tandem with its content.

That quiet voice belies how Maxwell challenges the genres in which he wrote: Maxwell, we might say, aimed to “create truth” in his writing, merging what we consider to be fiction with what we consider to be non-fiction to, ultimately, assert meaning that transcends beyond what *only* fiction or *only* non-fiction might achieve on its own. Maxwell builds his own imaginative backstory into fact, suggesting there is no truth without the imagination.

“Create” is an interesting word; “create truth,” even more interesting. The broadest and most universally recognizable way to describe Maxwell’s fiction is to call it autobiographical. There are short stories, like “A Final Report,” in which Maxwell revisits a deceased family friend’s cluttered, overrun former home, and takes inventory of her old belongings, that do not seem like fiction at all. The names are real, the places are real, and even the dollar amount that the dead neighbor’s flower urn sold for at auction (fifteen dollars) is real, so what is not? It might be simple, but not simplistic, to ask—why is “A Final Report” fiction if there appears to be nothing fictional about it?

Perhaps the answer lies in how Maxwell revisited this old, now forgotten home. The dead woman whose home it was is Pearl M. Donald, Aunty Donald to Maxwell when he was a child, and before detailing what happened to Mrs. Donald’s house and possessions once she died, Maxwell explains their relationship:

*In the matter of the estate of Pearl. M. Donald, deceased, who carried me on a pillow when I was a sickly baby, a little over fifty years ago, Probate No. 2762, for many years my mother’s best friend and*

our next-door neighbor, a beautiful woman with a knife-edge to her voice and a grievance against her husband... (365)

“I don’t, of course, remember being carried on the pillow,” Maxwell clarifies, later in the story. Yet he interlays what he knows to be true with what *is* true, the impersonal voice and details with the personal ones, to weld fiction. Here, Maxwell acknowledges the limitation of memories; he is upfront about what he does and does not remember. And here, then, Maxwell does not present his knowledge of Mrs. Donald carrying him as an infant on a pillow as memory, but simply as a fact he knows to be true, probably because others told him it happened.

But then take *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. The novel began as a short story that centered on recollections of a childhood friend whose father murdered another farmer in Lincoln, Illinois. *The New Yorker* rejected the story after Maxwell wrote it in 1973. Years later, in January 1979, Maxwell submitted the manuscript, then a full novel, to his editor at Knopf. Its title then was “The Palace at 4 A.M.,” which references a work of art the novel’s narrator briefly and piercingly mentions before lapsing into his (the narrator’s) childhood memories. Roger Angell, at *The New Yorker*, edited the full manuscript with William Shawn’s (then editor of *The New Yorker*) consultation, and then published it in two parts, the first five chapters appearing in the magazine’s October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1979 edition and the last four the next week on October 8<sup>th</sup>. The Knopf edition, published a few months later in January 1980, remained nearly unchanged from its original serial iteration with the exception of a few minor changes in diction at Angell’s and Shawn’s advice. *So Long, See You Tomorrow* was Maxwell’s last novel.

*So Long, See You Tomorrow* crystallizes questions about fact and fiction into its every aspect, from phrases suggestive about the two genres' relationship, to the sentence level, to the novel's very facts—its making, its narration, and its movement from past events to storytelling. Before even undertaking *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, it is difficult to define, to separate, fact from fiction. If a fact is something that really did happen—if a fact is the opposite of a lie—written fiction is not fact's clear opposite. All fiction finds its origins in facts. Those facts differ in specificity, and it seems that the more specific the facts that inform fictional literature, the more closely fictional literature resembles fact. Fiction, then, originates from fact; it does not oppose fact. *So Long, See You Tomorrow* enacts this genre murkiness, and then goes on to suggest a new understanding of how the murkiness ultimately allows for the clearest kind of storytelling.

While fiction's boundaries are by nature unclear, its origins confusing its current form, its factual elements inseparable from its fictive ones, fact itself should be more defined. It is the foundation for all fiction, and foundations are strong and stable—solid floors that prevent whatever rests on top from falling through into some abyss. But *So Long, See You Tomorrow's* handling of fact renders that floor less solid than it might initially appear. The most important facts about *So Long, See You Tomorrow* relevant to how it offers an understanding of what it means to be truthful are: that retrospective narrator, too similar to Maxwell and yet never admittedly him, the retrospection that casts a shadow (or a light) on everything it describes, and, of course, the narrator's/Maxwell's guilt over the mistake he can neither absolve nor forget. And the similarities between Maxwell and the narrator are

important to revisit. The novel opens recounting a time in the narrator's childhood, the time right after his mother died. (Maxwell's mother also died when he was a child.) The narrator rests in those several years before leaving them to tell two families' stories.

*So Long, See You Tomorrow* is different from say, a work of historical fiction, which would read as both fictional and factual even without the author's biography at hand. Maxwell did write *So Long, See You Tomorrow* late enough in his career so that he could at least partially rest on his own life's facts, but it is mostly his tone—quiet and open—and his explicit acknowledgments of what in his novel is factual and what is fictive that, in turn, makes the novel read as autobiography rather than an unspoken reliance on us knowing the life from which these facts were taken.

What makes *So Long, See You Tomorrow* seem like both memoir and fiction is the way in which it is, at some moments, committed to depicting its characters' lives as closely as possible to who these people actually were in real life, and at other moments, content to drift into imaginative rumination. The narrator, like Maxwell, lost his mother to the Spanish flu, had a distant and grief-stricken father, and would read in the attic for hours trying to not think about the fact that his mother was dead.

These skeletal elements of the novel, that compose its structure and broad motion from one chapter to the next, enact the ways in which fact and fiction shape each other. The novel's movement to its purest fiction—its creation of the Smiths' and Wilsons' lives—juxtaposes fact as origin and fact as utterly restricted from the fiction it inspires. This creation shows its early beginnings in the section of the

novel that addresses the narrator's childhood, and his friendship with Cletus, one of the Smith children. The narrator alleges that Lloyd Wilson, later to be murdered by Clarence Smith, as living the last few weeks of his life "like a figure in a dream...in slow motion."

It is like a figure in a dream that Lloyd Wilson appears in *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, at once vividly realized and unavoidably real, and yet—those touches that bring Lloyd Wilson to life emerge through the mind's inventive brushstrokes. The narrator focuses on the morning "Lloyd Wilson," for that was never anyone's real name, died, picturing that "on the morning that he was killed he left the barn door open wide so as to catch the morning light when it came. The light from his lantern must have fallen just short of the toe of the murderer's boot." The first sentence, or part of it, comes from the newspaper clippings and their offerings of hard fact; we can imagine a murdered man's family recalling how he always left the barn door open while doing early morning chores. But then the narrator moves quietly into speculation, at *this moment* in the novel, quietly enough that we must take apart the sentence to notice when fact shifts into disguised fiction. Lloyd Wilson's motivation for leaving the barn door open wide—"so as to catch the morning light when it came"—accompanies the fact of opening the door. "So" briefly, nearly invisibly, assigns a wish, something intangible and unknowable to anyone but its owner, to a fact that made its way to small town crime reporting. The fiction that is at play only lies within a character's mind, at first. But then the fiction expands, growing in subtlety as it moves from within a mind to outside of it. The morning light "must" have hit an exact point in space, the narrator notes. That

“must” does crucial work. It imposes the certainty of fact over what is otherwise negative space—the moment in which Lloyd Wilson died, a moment to which nobody, not even an invented character’s mind, can ever attest.

This invented moment leads into *So Long, See You Tomorrow*’s most striking shift—in tone, in story, and from mostly fact toward mostly fiction. First the narrator forms Lloyd Wilson’s mind, masquerading that formation as the kind of fact that might have appeared in the *Lincoln Courier-Herald*. Then the narrator, writing with the same assurance and clean reporting a crime reporter would, describes the scene, and in doing so further renders elements that should be empirical fact, not invented, as fictive. This subtle motion becomes an overt and prolonged admittance of storytelling embellishments, that begins with its narrator forming a distinction between assumption and knowledge:

I assume that I knew all this once, since it was published in the evening paper and I was old enough to read. In the course of time the details of the murder passed from my mind, and what I thought happened was so different from what actually did happen that it might almost have been something I made up out of whole cloth. And I might have gone right on thinking that Cletus’s father had come home unexpectedly and found Cletus’s mother in bed with a man and killed them both, but one day, as if I had suddenly broken through a brick wall, I realized that there are always sources of information about the past other than one’s own recollection...the Historical Society sent me, from its microfilm library, photostatic copies, not always entirely legible, of eight issues of a newspaper once as familiar to me as the back of my hand. It was, of course, much more than I had asked for, a small segment of the past, remote and yet in perfect focus, like something seen through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars. (533)

Those illegible “photostatic copies,” “remote and yet in perfect focus,” provide a useful analogy for understanding what Maxwell achieves in *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, as a whole. Indeed, they are even more than just an apt metaphor but, in the narrator’s described usage of them, also an exact description of Maxwell’s movement within the novel between fact—autobiography—and fiction—his imaginative truth—all in the service of creating that aforementioned “truth.” Maxwell moves back and forth between what is in “perfect focus,” and what is “remote.” Objects in perfect focus include his biographical facts—his mother’s death, his father’s remarriage, and his family’s subsequent move to Chicago away from Lincoln, the Smiths, and the Wilsons—the described and undeniable truths of the story behind novel that Maxwell provides a one-to-one transcription for in *So Long, See You Tomorrow*’s pages. “Remote” objects, distorted “like something seen through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars” (and yet, still, being in some way “in perfect focus” just like the geography of Lincoln, Illinois, or the date Maxwell’s brother was born), include, most importantly, the imagined lives of the Smiths and Wilsons.

At times, *So Long, See You Tomorrow* relies on very specific facts that appear explicitly and implicitly in its pages. The novel’s narrator, forever unnamed, bears a striking resemblance to Maxwell. There are moments in *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, when Maxwell is explicit about which events are fictional and which are not, but those moments differ from the above one from “A Final Report.” Let us revisit the young Maxwell and his unnamed childhood friend exploring the frames of something that was almost a house. We might accept this, this “fact” about

Maxwell's childhood, as truth in perfect focus. Maxwell wrote about Saturdays with this boy, whom he named Cletus Smith in *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. But it also may never have happened. Maxwell also wrote about visiting the house, alone this time and in the winter, and watched snow fall through the cracks—the gaps—into all of the still empty bedrooms. He questions his memory's accuracy; years later, Maxwell found a photograph depicting snowfall through an absent roof, and wanders if what he recalls as happening in the house was merely a projection onto a tangible image:

I seem to remember that I went to the new house one winter day and saw snow descending through the attic to the upstairs bedrooms. It could be also that I never did any such thing. I am fairly certain that in a snapshot album I have lost track of there was a picture of the house taken in the circumstances I have just described, and it is possible that I am remembering that rather than an actual experience. What we, or at any rate what I, refer to confidently as memory—meaning a moment, a scene, a fact that has been subjected to a fixative and thereby rescued from oblivion—is really a form of storytelling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the telling. Too many conflicting emotional interests are involved for life ever to be wholly acceptable, and possibly it is the work of the storyteller to rearrange things so that they conform to the end. In any case, in talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw. (528)

Maxwell then immediately describes the house in formation, the “gaping hole in the center” before someone installed the stairway. The narrative jumps from this rumination on memory to a literary transcription of the house, as Maxwell remembers it, as if the ruminative digression never happened—as if it does not cast a shadow on everything that follows.



But cast a shadow it does. The tone assumes a strange, subtle mix of the authoritative and the hesitant. Each sentence includes some sort of qualifier that halts its own language. First, Maxwell “seems” to remember going to his new childhood home; to edit the process of remembering, a process that, as the paragraph later acknowledges, edits itself, preventing both narrator and reader from “confidently” assuming any knowledge about that winter day. Though after that initial self-edit, the sentence strides forward, describing the sight of snow half-obscured by unfinished attic rafters, the entire next sentence retracts again. This new statement is definite yet tentative, and linguistically awkward: the narrator begins by offering what “could...also” have happened, then negates his own language. From there, he argues in favor of doubt, the sparse and quietly stammering wording working in broken harmony with its subject. “I am fairly certain” Maxwell proffers, a statement that is itself an oxymoron. There is no such thing as fairly certain, is there not? Then he explains “that in...a snapshot album I have lost track of”—the hard, concrete proof a photograph offers vanished, another kind of oxymoron in its way—“there was a picture of the house taken in the circumstances I have just described.” Maxwell’s own grammar confuses memory and fact: the “picture of the house” does not mimic “the circumstances I have just described,” but rather the picture was “taken” in described circumstances. A photograph, representative of hard fact, originates from language. Language creates evidence, and evidence creates language.

The subsequent definition of memory both continues to blur the line between language, or storytelling, and concrete fact, like that lost photograph *should*

contain. The definition begins with another qualification, the “we” amended to a less authoritative “I,” before stating precisely what memory can be. Memory is, according to Maxwell, a “moment, scene, or fact,” one of life’s seemingly undeniable truths, which is “subjected to a fixative” and thus saved from falling into the dark hole of oblivion. Yet, subjected to a fixative? To be subjected is to conform, perhaps unwillingly, to someone’s or something’s ideals, but a fixative is a substance, usually chemical, sometimes used to preserve ever-changing biological matter and generally used to keep things remaining as they are (which is what Maxwell wished to do after his mother died). Thus we see the concrete rendered *by* the concrete. Facts exist outside of language, off the page, so to speak, and they exist on the page. Both locations are concrete; all the moments, scenes, and facts, as well as the fixative, are real. It is in the rendering—in the storytelling—that memory’s subject loses, gains, and transforms its matter.

Even that definition emerges in latently clouded language, as if to avoid being too definitive in its assertions on memory and storytelling. Maxwell alludes to the psychological reasons behind memory’s alterations. There are, he asserts, the “conflicting emotional interests” that prevent life from “ever” being “wholly acceptable.” But we do not know what quite to make of this in the context we are given. What are, here, the emotional interests that have made the scene prompting this definition unacceptable? And life is not simply, coldly, clinically unacceptable; it is just always less than “wholly acceptable,” less than complete. The “ever,” too, dilutes the sentence’s force: life might be partially wholly acceptable, only not ever—only not always. Vague and inherently unanswerable questions of emotional

influence on its speaker's language, of what makes life but not language unacceptable, and of the exact nature of creation entangle Maxwell's reader: where does the truth lie in what we have read and in what we have yet to see?

This paragraph is the one that critics most often quote when commenting on Maxwell and what sets his fiction apart from the writers he is most often associated with, either because of his relationship to them as editor or because of their apparent similarities in content and style: Updike, John Cheever, Frank O'Connor, and even Virginia Woolf. Woolf's novels, especially *To The Lighthouse*, inspired Maxwell's earlier novels and his evolving dedication to representing individual consciousness, what were once considered mundane everyday details, and phenomenological experience in his own storytelling. Woolf, too, wrote novels of memory—again, especially, *To The Lighthouse*—that, like Maxwell would eventually, presented the process of remembering as simultaneously editing the past. The sentence that has risen most prominently out of this paragraph is “In any case, when talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw,” perhaps because it seems to profoundly and harshly, especially in contrast to Maxwell's otherwise reserved, gentle voice, disavow memory as an accurate groundwork for any story. In fact, the statement is so harsh, so striking, but also so simplistic that is notably and jarringly uncharacteristic of Maxwell. Perhaps he is hinting at something else with his declaration. He claims to lie with every word he uses talking about the past, and then spends an entire novel revisiting and reimagining things that happened long ago. It is almost as if he is begging him to see how we do more than lie about the past when we must speak of it, if indeed we even lie at all.

Maxwell does not merely acknowledge here that a memory of the past and the past itself misalign. He goes further, or at least toward a different direction, in pointing out the impossibility of precisely recreating the past in language, whether it is due to time, to “emotional interests,” or to the grander incapability of words to contain the complete phenomenological experience. That oft-quoted sentence seems to speak for itself, but the paragraph’s broader context, its analysis reveals, confuses the origin of a memory just as it blurred the photograph’s original circumstances. The paragraph’s voice, tentative and self-questioning, presents the lens for looking at memory as more of a reflexive prism than as a magnifying glass, even one that alters as it examines. Rather, the interaction of memory and literature resembles an ambiguous cycle, not unlike the chicken and the egg. Concrete fact originates from language, while language, of course, transforms, however subtly, concrete fact.

In an even wider context than this one paragraph that encapsulates the parasitical relationship between memory and literature which Maxwell strikes, we see the relationship’s intricate workings. *So Long, See You Tomorrow*’s plot divides into two stories. Their divergence as well as their overlap enact how muddled these origins are. *So Long, See You Tomorrow* begins as an autobiography. Its narrator remains nameless, but we know he is Maxwell. Tracing the narrator’s presence throughout *So Long, See You Tomorrow* often provides insight into whether Maxwell is presenting truth in “perfect focus” or the imaginative truth that is more “remote,” a “segment of the past.”

Both the narrator and Maxwell were born in Lincoln, Illinois. Maxwell was born on August 16<sup>th</sup>, 1908. We do not know when the narrator was born, but when *So Long See You Tomorrow* opens, he is an old man looking back on his past. So was Maxwell. What Maxwell shares with *So Long, See You Tomorrow's* narrator first blur memory's, literature's, and facts' (or truth's?) interactions, for when reading Maxwell, it is undeniable that our impressions of the text would differ if we knew the intricate, photographic memories transcribed onto the page were never realized outside of Maxwell's mind. Maxwell's parents, William Keepers Maxwell and Blossom Blinn Maxwell, were also both Lincoln, Illinois natives. Maxwell Sr. was an insurance agent who traveled through Illinois four days per week for his work. Maxwell remembers him as reserved, practical, and distant, someone who "felt responsibility for his children rather than pleasure in them." Maxwell Jr. weighed four and a half pounds at birth, and was weak and sickly; his mother nursed him to health during the first months of his life. Maxwell remembers her as being "acutely responsive to other people's happiness or distress." Indeed, it is in his descriptions of his mother, in their subdued, measured, nearly clinical wording whose cumulative effect nevertheless is to create an angelic portrait of someone long gone, that we see Maxwell creating the "remote," that is, imaginative, truth.

Of her death, Maxwell said that his "childhood came to an end at that moment," that his father's face, upon return home to Lincoln, "had turned the color of ashes, and would stay that way for a whole year," that "the worst that could happen had happened," that "the shine went out of everything," and that "the light bulbs did not give off enough light, and the food had no flavor." These quotations,

just like any, can only obliquely gesture toward the magnitude his mother's loss weighed on Maxwell. Each phrase captures an impression—of food, of the light emanating from light bulbs, or more abstractly, the light emanating from anything, his father's face, the moment when one's childhood—what an arbitrary word—ends. Perhaps the closest we can arrive at in grasping Maxwell's impressions of his mother and of her death is in reading *They Came Like Swallows*, which presents a young boy's awareness of his idealized, idyllic mother only to then pluck her out the narrative after her death, so that her loss impresses upon us as does the book's characters. In *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, meanwhile, we learn of the loss, as we do of Maxwell's childhood, in retrospection—in the form of fictive memory that we know to be not entirely fictional.

Because the facts, the skeletal plot elements that accumulate to create a story, have their real life counterpoints, Maxwell's narrator, his fictional speaker, emerges as belonging to two worlds. The first person allows the reader a most direct sort of access to its user (its character). A character's thoughts unfold on the page. A window opens into a character's mind, that opening signaled to us by the "I." But in *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, only the facts we know—that I happen to know—about Maxwell's life inform us enough to call that its narrator Maxwell and Maxwell the narrator interchangeable. Who is the character behind the "I"?

Just after the passage in which Maxwell, here very much the narrator, formulates his definition of memory, the same man describes another day standing in the house that is still under construction. Standing among the house's gaping holes, the man remembers that "one day I looked down through this hole and saw

Cletus Smith standing on a pile of lumber looking at me. I suppose I said, “Come on up. Anyway, he did.” Cletus Smith is not that boy’s real name, and that fact poses a clear, almost straightforward interruption of memory transcribed as truth. Yet how this memory unfolds lies in that earlier definition of memory, whose formation places truth’s origin in memory at the same time that it distinguishes memory from what we assume to be empirical truth. “I suppose I said,” grasps the narrator, but each time the “I” appears it serves a distinct function. First the narrator “supposes;” he surmises words which he once spoke. Because these words were heard by another person, they embody empirical truth; recall the adage about the tree falling in the woods with no one around to bear witness. In that case, then, “said” resembles actualization, unlike “suppose,” which can only offer and reach. The “I” moves from truthful to fictive, paradoxically and conversely, because his admittance of not knowing is more accurate than the recreation of words he may or may not have spoken.

This motion recalls the earlier passage, with the photostatic lens, that in turn embodies the difference between literary truth—autobiography, in other words—and the imaginative form that Maxwell creates. When Maxwell moves away from himself as a narrator, writer, and self-historian, and toward inventing the Smiths’ and Wilsons’ lives, he also moves the narrative away from what we understand as autobiography and toward a fiction that nevertheless rests on that same autobiography. When he leaves facts behind to openly invent the Smiths’ and Wilsons’ lives, he subordinates those facts to nuance and his own perception (in turn, his perception of these strangers’ daily lives came out of how he hoped those

lives unfolded)—but is that subordination inherently untruthful, is it unlike what any other language does, to varying extents?

After spending the first third of *So Long, See You Tomorrow* recounting the narrator's life which closely resembles his, Maxwell shifts to imagining—explicitly, openly presenting it as imagination—the untold lives of the Smiths and Wilsons. He explains this move as an attempt to remedy a mistake he, Maxwell, made years ago. Maxwell's childhood friend Cletus, whom he walked around the unfinished house with, was the son of Clarence, a farmer and murderer. Clarence's wife and Cletus's mother had, according to the hearsay—unimagined—that informed *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, been having an affair with Lloyd Wilson. Clarence and Lloyd were fellow farmers and best friends, before Lloyd fell in love with Clarence's wife.

That is key: Lloyd and Fern, Clarence's wife, fall in love, at least in Maxwell's rendering of what precipitated the murder. The murder, or some version of it, did happen in Lincoln, but no newspaper ever described the relationship between Fern and Clarence with as much sensitivity and compassion as does Maxwell's narrator. This is because, years after the tragedy took place, the narrator in *So Long, See You Tomorrow* saw Cletus once more in the hallway of a large public school they both attended in Chicago, far away from Lincoln. Neither speaks to the other, and the narrator, now much older when he tells us about it, has regretted his silence for the rest of his life. He fixates on that silence in fear that it might have further damaged Cletus, a boy whose world was shaken by great violence and loss. Such loss was striking to Maxwell, because although his own experience of grief did not make it to the Lincoln newspapers, his childhood paralleled Cletus's in some fundamental way.



This is the connection that ties all of *So Long, See You Tomorrow's* parts together. The writer, forever grieving his mother, creates a narrator who can offer consolation to a boy whom the writer cannot forget because of the tragedies they both endured in their once-shared youths.

It is difficult to overstate the definitive role his mother played in Maxwell's life and, therefore, work. Nearly every one his novels feature her presence and absence. Between 1910, when Maxwell was two, and 1921, he lived with his family at 184 Ninth Street, then a large late Victorian house with eleven-foot ceilings and, to Maxwell, seemingly endless alcoves. The house is now gone despite the detail with which it appears in so much of Maxwell's fiction. In the January of 1915, Blossom took Maxwell into town to buy him a book she had loved as a child, *Toinette's Philip* by C.V. Jamison. The same scenes that his mother found moving Maxwell did as well. Maxwell imagined the moment, in which language connected to him that had years ago connected to his mother, as having a "great deal" of influence on his future. In this way, even when he did not write a novel in which her loss varies from being implicitly to explicitly lies in the pages, Blossom was always with Maxwell when he wrote.

Most of what we know about Maxwell's early childhood with his mother we know from its incarnations in his novels, in anecdotes presented as fiction. There are facts that exist on and off the page, though. In the August of 1918, the Spanish influenza spread to North America. By the end of the year, almost six hundred thousand died of it. The Spanish flu made its way to Lincoln, Illinois, in October of

that year. Over here months' course, it infected two thousand people in Lincoln, whose population at the time was around eleven thousand. Out of those two thousand, five hundred died.

Blossom Maxwell was pregnant with her and William Sr.'s third child that Christmas Eve. To protect her from infection, William Sr. took her to Bloomington, Illinois, only thirty minutes from Lincoln, to deliver. William and his older brother Hap stayed at home in Lincoln with their Aunt Maybel, William Sr.'s sister. On Christmas morning, both boys experienced early symptoms of the flu. In Bloomington, William and Blossom also took ill. On New Year's Day, Robert Blinn Maxwell was born. Blossom died three days later, on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1919, from double pneumonia, so that Christmas Eve ended up being the last time Maxwell saw his mother alive. We know these facts from Maxwell's biography. Nobody ever needed to imagine them for him.

Her death was the tragic, definitive moment in Maxwell's entire life, and provides us with enough psychological insight to say that Maxwell's later re-imagining of Cletus Smith and the events that similarly shaped his life function as a literary act of compassion. In addition to psychological insight though, *So Long, See You Tomorrow* gives us the dots to connect as mechanisms of truth and story-telling. Returning to Maxwell's creation of the Smiths and Wilsons, take the moment when Lloyd Wilson, the murdered man who had been in love with Fern Smith, Clarence's mother, admit their feelings for each other:

He was dumbfounded, and started to defend himself, and then broke off. If he didn't say what was on his heart now he might as well crawl into a hole somewhere and die. His life wouldn't be worth living...Out it came. Everything. Pouring out of him. He expected to be driven from the house and instead she looked at him the way she looked at her children when they were upset about something—as if, as a human being, he had a right to his feelings, whatever they were. When he took her in his arms she neither accepted his kiss nor rejected it. Instinct told him it would end badly.

(571)

Think about how differently Maxwell could have handled this moment. For obvious reasons, we could never expect a small-town newspaper to investigate a doomed love affair in this manner, but we would also probably not expect the hearsay and town gossip which also served as Maxwell's informational sources to comment on Fern and Lloyd like this. Lloyd seems to speak for Maxwell in this moment, realizing with wonder that Fern recognizes that “as a human being, he had a right to his feelings, whatever they were.” With short, abrupt, and emphatic phrases, Maxwell recreates—and in doing so, empathizes with—the rushed anxiety Lloyd felt in sharing the revelation that would lead to the end of his life. Perhaps most key is how their affair starts with Lloyd expressing what was in “his heart” with no agenda, even, at this moment, no passion—he is desperate, not desiring.

It is striking that Maxwell is with Lloyd and Fern here, not Clarence, who was Cletus's father, the man who shot Lloyd before killing himself. It seems a roundabout way for Maxwell to make amends—why not spend more time redeeming Clarence, the traditional villain who might need saving more than anyone else, than Lloyd and Fern, the similarly traditional victims? However, breaking tradition is key to Maxwell's larger achievement: to create a complete,

nuanced portrait of lives interrupted by tragedy. His creation is in itself an act of deep care and sensitivity, qualities that might jump off the page to Cletus Smith, wherever he may be.

## Chapter Two

### *Joan Didion: Implanting the Personal Without "Committing Fiction"*

Didion's venture into true crime strays from both Maxwell's. For one thing, Maxwell spends half a novel imagining the Smiths' and Wilsons' lives. Truman Capote, who belongs in any discussion about true crime writing in the mid-twentieth century, takes an entire book. Didion wrote a single essay, "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream," in which she writes a "story" about Lucille Miller and her husband's (alleged) murder. Maxwell's "true crime" is really less an attempt to match a narrative with a crime than it is an act of compassion, which channels the literary imagination as a tool through which the writer might redeem himself and possibly others in the creation of a new truth.

Didion's essay, though, weaves Lucille Miller and the facts surrounding her case to further part of *Slouching Toward Bethlehem's* larger notion: that California (and much else besides and beyond California) acts, broadly and perhaps more frequently than other places, as a counterpoint against which to measure how successful someone was in fulfilling her dream. Didion divided *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* into three sections; "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream" appears at the beginning of the section titled "Life Styles in the Golden Land." This section is the one that most closely follows the way in which California came, in the sixties, to function as a warm, glamorous-seeming, distant possible utopia, a golden version of New York in which the people who did manage to realize their dream realized their dream everyday on thousands of screens across America.

When Maxwell imagined the Smiths' and Wilsons' lives, he, as writer and narrator (as character) was essential to their story's existence. He infused life into their stories, which would not have, in turn, existed without his presence, in the novel or even in life. Those dreamy, strange sections, in which Maxwell switches from memoir to personal reporting to his rendering of whatever appeared in the newspaper about the murder, signify just how different his narrative styles are. The sections also serve as a constant reminder that Maxwell is inseparable from the Smiths' and Wilsons' lives; without his imagination, their lives as we could ever know of them would be confined to old newspapers in a small town in Illinois. Maxwell's distinctive voice characterizes those sections, but even more importantly, those sections' content would not exist without Maxwell. For him, true crime really becomes an opportunity to superimpose his own emotional needs onto bare facts displaced from another source—an act that works as a metaphor for fiction at large and, somehow, also as a perfectly idiosyncratic approach to the genre. While from a larger lens we can understand his undertaking of the Smiths and Wilsons as what happens in all of storytelling, from a more focused perspective we see that *his* reasons for resurrecting the Smiths and Wilsons are as central to their stories as are the facts of the murder or the Midwestern landscape.

This does not hold true either for "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream" or for Didion's other essay which we can understand as true crime, or at least parts of it, "The White Album" (which appeared in her later book of essays, also titled *The White Album*). Lucille Miller's crime in "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream"

gathered publicity at its time; it had an audience before Didion decided to write about it. Of course the crime lacks the motivation and approach Maxwell gave to the crime that interested him. This is obviously, automatically true, but the ways in which these differences manifest themselves in the work itself strike their own relationship between writer and content. What seems the most impersonal about Didion's work actually comes around to be inseparable from Didion the writer, and from what initially seems clinical, objective, and broad.

The titles, both essay and section, work to suggest, subliminally at this point, the strange mixture of silliness and tragedy that accompanies what happens when countless ordinary people share the same hopeless vision. Already, you notice a kind of distant echo between the two titles, a reverberation that builds up more steam in the essay's title itself. "Golden" in the essay title picks up a piece of the section's name, linking "dream" and "land" together—even likening them to each other. "Land," and not just any land but, of course, California, becomes a synonym for "dream" when the two echo and merge audibly and linguistically.

Further, a syntactical similarity creates the bottom layer of multiple repetitions and similarities across the two titles. Repetition can have several effects. It can emphasize a word, or, it can ultimately make us think about how meaningless words are, so that here, the underlying repetition between titles about California and within a single title hangs its suggestion over everything that follows. Just as the title becomes redundant—of course "dreams" belong to "dreamers" and of course "dreamers" have dreams," so what is the title even telling us?—so does the essay's protagonist, and the subject of Didion's venture into true crime, become a parody of

such fantasy that makes itself meaningless. In an interview with Sara Davidson, Didion talked about what that “repetition of phrases” causes, asserting that in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* such repetition seems “constantly necessary to remind the reader to make certain connections. Technically, [repetition] is almost a chant. You could read it as an attempt to cast a spell or come to terms with certain contemporary demons” (14).

Her comments about another’s use of repetition bear relevance to her own usage. Both titles do sound like chants, whose sound we typically associate with religions or cults; what is being worshipped here? Didion is saying something without actually saying it—instead, she draws on subtle stylistic underplay to suggest something at the same time that she presents us with facts. As we learn later in the essay, Lucille Miller worshipped many things, the result of which, Didion’s language works to allege, led to her murdering her husband because he misaligned with her own dreams. The essay’s title at first seems nothing but impersonal. “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” does not identify one specific dreamer, but instead makes a point to refer to the dreamers as an anonymous, plural “some,” and because “dreamers” and “Dream” do echo, neither can imbue the other with any additional meaning. The title seems removed from everyone and anything: Didion and the essay’s content.

In fact, reading further into the essay itself, you notice how Lucille Miller’s language—her real dialogue that Didion transcribed into her essay—circles in on itself, so that the more we learn about her the sillier and more futile she, as a character, as a failed dream, becomes. Lucille Miller’s husband died in a car accident



after midnight on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1964. She was the driver of the car that “came to a sudden stop, caught fire, and began to burn” (6). Lucille “cried to the friend called to comfort her” “what will I tell the children, when there’s nothing left, nothing left in the casket?” The following language—Didion’s own, not Lucille’s—seems to add little else to Lucille’s words but factual detail:

In fact there was something left, and a week later it lay in the Draper Mortuary Chapel in a closed bronze coffin blanketed with pink carnations. Some 200 mourners heard Elder Robert E. Denton of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church of Ontario speak of ‘the temper of fury that has broken out among us.’ For Gordon Miller, he said, there would be ‘no more death, no more heartaches, no more misunderstandings.’ Elder Ansel Bristol mentioned the ‘peculiar’ grief of the hour...a tape recording of the service was made for the widow, who was being held without bail in the San Bernardino County Jail on a charge of first-degree murder. (6-7)

At first glance the language seems like that of a reporter’s who strives to embellish as little as possible their story’s already-existing facts. Here we receive a stream of facts, some quantitative, which in particular seem to strip away personality from language. The more scientific, and quantitative, a piece of writing is, the more detached it appears from its maker; the writer is not the only one who could have put pen and paper to figures and data.

Each above sentence is a statement of fact, from asserting that “in fact there was something [Miller’s remains] left” to the “200 mourners,” to the Denton and Bristol quotes, to Lucille Miller’s location at the time of her husband’s funeral. At first it is hard to imagine that any of these statements could have been written any other way, which is another way of saying that there seems to be little else at work besides Didion relaying facts about Gordon Miller’s death to us. The idea is related

to why we do not remember a textbook or lab report for its voice but rather for its content. These few sentences provide a segue between Didion's introduction to the essay (and to California) and the sections of the essay that examine the crime in more depth, which means that the passage holds more weight than it would than had more sentences describing the funeral followed. It sets a tone for what follows. One effect these sentences' location has on us is that whatever *does* distinguish them from newspaper reportage appears at the surface more readily; sentences at the end of something reverberate more than those in the middle. What will distinguish them from a version of the facts we would read in a newspaper article therefore warrants scrutiny, because these touches are what make the retelling Didion's and not anyone else's.

The first sentence begins "In fact there was something left," referring to and moving on from Lucille Miller's screams the night her husband died. There could easily—in fact, there usually would be—a comma after "in fact." Its absence seems characteristic of Didion; she frequently leaves out punctuation in otherwise unaffected sentences to create a subtle emotional undercurrent. This is the first, and most subtle, way in which she weaves herself into her subject. "In fact, there was something left" is more matter-of-fact, but also, more argumentative than what Didion did write. Because it is more argumentative, the comma establishing an escalation in logic, the hypothetical sentence engages more directly with Lucille Miller and what she cried about than what Didion did write. Didion's actual sentence rushes through its words with no punctuation to temper its motion. Especially because this is something Didion does in many other places—in the first

sentence of “Goodbye to All That,” which appears later in *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* and ultimately, retroactively, shows that “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” is in fact a deeply personal essay—the missing comma is one of several clues in Didion’s introduction to the Miller case that the case itself is not her only subject.

Likewise, how Didion refers to the “something” that “was left” as “it” is a way of, deceptively, inserting herself into her list of facts. Extremely deceptive, because it seems there is no word more impersonal, anonymous, and vague than “it.” If this were mere journalism, we can more readily imagine the writer saying some version of “the remains” or “the deceased,” though, so that when Didion does something different, it warrants attention. Due to that same vagueness, the word also becomes ominous—why cannot Didion name what “it” is? In this case, “it” is the grotesque, charred remains of Gordon Miller. It is subtle, but by using such a small, euphemistic pronoun, Didion separates herself from the crime, from the remains—from it—and from Lucille Miller. The separation is intentional, especially among such measured language, and intent betrays what of herself Didion did indeed put into this reportage.

In the same interview with Sara Davidson, Didion revealed that she has “a very rigid sense of right and wrong...even the smallest things. A table can be right or wrong.” Without overstating how much we can transplant an excerpt from an interview, especially one about someone else’s novel, into the interpretation of an essay, essays differ from both fiction and reportage in that they are self-admittedly

“personal”—hence the personal essay. Her statement establishes a point of reference for Didion’s own writing, analogously to how “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” makes claims about other people, in writing that mimics the kind of writing we use only to describe others, while still being deeply idiosyncratic. Just like how her confession about how she views “even the smallest things” as being right or wrong, a perspective not universal to everyone, emerged in a general discussion, what makes Didon’s writing personal also rises amidst an essay masquerading as journalism. It is a useful way of looking at how the personal becomes inescapable even in a piece of writing that, theoretically, is categorizable as the impersonal.

Overstating the insight we can gain (or rather, cannot gain) into an author’s work from what we also know about his or her life is more dangerous when it comes to fiction, when the writer is not necessarily as forthright about their personal role in the work. By dangerous, I mean more prone to “misinterpretation,” to assuming that an author’s biography provides a key to decoding the work. See how that mode of interpretation forces the reader to only focus on one aspect of a given work—on its potential symbolism, which may or not be able to be deciphered with use of the author’s life as code-breaker. The perspective is purely psychoanalytic, because it forces a one-to-one relationship between events, characters, and moods in a written work and some potential version of those same aspects in the writer’s life. But, of course, many writers do not write so that their work might, if a reader tries hard enough and does enough research, be understood according to their lives’ details off the page.

When Maxwell makes explicit that his Smith and Wilson families as they exist in *So Long, See You Tomorrow* exist to appease his own guilt, he actually resembles, rather than the novelist, the personal essayist whose perspective and idiosyncrasies are open, admitted conditions of his essay. The “I” often seems less of a distinct character in a personal essay than in a novel; it seems to warrant less scrutiny. As such, Didion rarely refers to herself in the first-person in “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream.” The writer’s presence in her own essay emerges as one of the distinguishing characteristics between personal essay and journalism. The essay uses a writer’s life to elucidate events outside of that life and the journalistic report elucidates events.

Again, then, we ask—how is Didion’s essay not “mere journalism” and what is the significance of a personal essay appearing initially as reportage? A 1998 New York Times essay, “Word & Image: The Facts of Media Life,” circles around that question. Max Frankel premises his piece on fallen journalists and reporters, who were caught fabricating what the public thought would be news—for, in Frankel’s words, “committing fiction.” Mike Barnicle, one such reporter, “was rightly fired by The Boston Globe for spinning sob stories around characters nowhere to be found. But he simply labored in the style of Truman Capote[’s] inventive conjecture and made-up conversations of “In Cold Blood,” his “nonfiction novel.” This dichotomy, Frankel suggests, poses a contradiction: those whose job descriptions include telling the news commit a crime—“committing fiction”—when they elaborate on the facts they find, while everywhere else in our culture, we accept that “a good yarn justifies

cutting corners, imagining dialogue, inventing characters and otherwise torturing truth.” Such behavior makes newscasters liars, but Frankel remembers how Random House marketed *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* as “all true,” “even though John Berendt, the author, acknowledges ‘rounding the corners’ and inventing ‘to make a better narrative.’” Frankel points out how, in fact, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* appeared on The New York Times’ bestseller list for years as a nonfiction book.

Nonfiction as a genre exists in a more nebulous place, when it comes to the presentation of facts as truth—for isn’t that why the reporters are criticized, for claiming something to be true, when it is false? But nonfiction as a whole is not the same as reporting the news, although the former does include the latter. “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” encapsulates this tension, between a writer’s creativity and what we can call a professional and moral obligation to present fact only as fact, which emerges when we consider nonfiction as a whole. Further, “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” manages to do what Frankel acknowledges as elusive, even impossible—the essay manages to realize the exact equidistant point between journalism and fiction. As Frankel says, it is “unforgivably wrong to give fanciful stories the luster of fact,” or in other words to take fantasy and present them in a manner we accept as “fact.” To present fantasy as fact is the most obvious and direct way of giving facts such a luster, but Frankel also mentions how Frank McCourt forwent quotation marks in *Angela’s Ashes* because their presence acts as an alert that what follows is specifically fact and not fiction: quotation marks, very microscopically, enact the separation between a promised truth and an implied one.

*In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote's 1966 book, what we think of as being the first "nonfiction novel," and its differences and similarities to both Didion's and Maxwell's work, are important to our understand of how a writer might take fact, present it without committing fiction, and yet still create a piece of work deeply personal to his or her own emotional life. *In Cold Blood* recreates the murders of Herbert Clutter, his wife Bonnie, and their teenage children Nancy and Kenyon, killed in Holcomb, Kansas in 1959. Richard Hickrock and Perry Smith were arrested and eventually hanged for the murders in 1965. *In Cold Blood* does resemble the novel, as we think of it, in many ways. *In Cold Blood* mimics the average fictional novel in its sheer length (it is over three hundred pages long), in the way it follows its characters inner lives from an omnipresent perspective, and in its narrative flourishes (Capote follows Herbert Clutter the day he is killed, and embellishes Clutter's actions with sentences that end ominously—"...not knowing the day would be his last").

Figuratively and literally speaking, Capote adds the quotation marks McCourt abandons in *Angela's Ashes*. At the same time that he constructs a narrative that, if its real life inspiration were not known to us, we would probably assume was totally invented, he also denies inventing anything. That denial can be explicit. Or Capote can render his own denial more implicitly, like when he copies the financial details of Herbert Clutter's farm into the novel's pages or when he narratively follows a character's (whether he's the murdered or the murderer) steps on the day of the murder. Series of precise, minute details, like these that Capote recreates,

specifically and *intentionally* mimic—even more than mimic, they attempt to take the place of—the exact details we would expect to find in a police report or newspaper article.

To layer a “luster” of tone, voice, suggestion, concrete aspects like dialogue and even quotation marks, to suggest facts (transcriptions of real time events into writing), rather than fiction (also the transcription of events into writing, except this time, invented events), is distinct from what Didion does. Yet she does combine creative, personal, not quite factual, elements with the facts that exist—and somehow she avoids veering into the dangerous territory where Frankel asserts that so many other writers (like Capote) strayed. Because of specific stylistic elements contained within the essay, and because of several ways in which we can view it from a broader perspective, “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” functions as an example of how Didion is able both to confine, strictly, the personal within the impersonal and still let the former be essential to understanding the latter.

Those specific stylistic touches, like the repetitive titles—that gesture both toward larger themes the bare facts themselves do not promise, as the same time that they are a reflection of Didion’s own idiosyncrasies—aggregate throughout the essay to make “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” definitively Joan Didion’s personal essay and not report. They act as proof that a storyteller’s presence becomes a filter, a point of contrast, or some other inevitable distortion of the story she tells. This idea seems commonplace and obvious even in the broadest interpretation of what it means to tell a story. Yet it is a notion that disappears



when a writer commits fiction, because then his or her actions overshadow the inevitable presence, and the two become conflated.

In his 1968 review of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Dan Wakefield proclaims Didion's work as "a rich display of some of the best prose written today in this country." He qualifies that proclamation, though, filtering it through Capote's influential *In Cold Blood*: "now that Truman Capote has pronounced that such work may achieve the stature of 'art,' perhaps it is possible for this collection to be recognized as it should be, not as a better or worse example of what people call mere journalism..." Wakefield's review reacts to the nebulousness of the genre that Didion placed herself in—he commends her work without knowing quite how to categorize it.

Capote, whose work differs so significantly from Didion's, emerges as the standard against which to measure writing that at least resembles "mere journalism." In the time immediately following *In Cold Blood's* publication, categorically similar work seemed to follow in its footsteps; the comparisons appeared for better or worse. Capote's shadow, in its immediate wake, distorts the actual nature of Didion's own work. The review largely focuses Didion's "portraits" of her various subjects in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, whether they be Lucille Miller (whom Wakefield coins a "doomed bride") in "Some Dreamers of The Golden Dream," Joan Baez in a later essay, or, in the collection's titular essay, the 1960's hippie scene in Haight-Ashbury.

Portraits are, in our most basic and immediate understanding of them, pictures—visual, written—meant to represent its subject's likeness. Although

artists of every kind have diverged from that general understanding toward creating and presenting their own, Wakefield does suggest Didion to have similarly elaborated on the most literal idea of a portrait. He focuses on her ability to “capture” something of her subjects, and what she “shows” of them to us. Her “character”—which, for Didion, includes qualities like “grace, sophistication, and nuance,”—does come up, but as a tangential in Wakefield’s more directed placement of Didion as being a journalist, an artful one, like Capote proved journalists might be. Wakefield asserts that reading *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, “the reader comes to admire...the *character* of this observer at work, looking in as well as out.”

Probably without meaning to, Wakefield contradicts himself. If one is an observer, her character *should* remain contained to herself and not be relevant to what she observes. “Looking in” does not necessarily influence “looking out;” it is possible to look one way and then the other. But another, practical way of thinking about storytelling is by analogizing it to the act of observing. Telling a story is observing in that the observer always affects the observed; we can never know what some given scene would be like in an alternate world without our presence, because the very fact of it, our presence, acts as a filter that however subtly changes the story being told. Didion differs from Capote in that she changes the telling but not the story. She evokes the personal without creating a personal story; she already has someone else’s story to tell.

When Wakefield does allude to Didion’s “character,” however tangentially to his placement of her as a journalist and observer, he acknowledges her ability to transplant the personal—which we associate strongly with fiction because, often,

they become intertwined—onto what she “observes.” He also anticipates how now, around half a century later, we no longer think of Didion as a journalist but instead as a personal essayist. Current writings about her refer to her essays as being like memoirs, or note her persona tantamount in her work—“persona” and reportage generally belong to separate conversations, as they probably should. It is not just her character but also her larger body of work that has, since *In Cold Blood*, categorized Didion as an essayist rather than a reporter or journalist. Further, though, we do not need to look at her entire career to see why her current categorization is the most accurate one. Her final essay in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, called “Goodbye to All That,” clues us in to what her work actually does even within that first collection.

Taking a wider lens, it is obvious that *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* is largely about California because many of its individual essays are about California. The titular one, like “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream,” nearly resembles journalism, as we think of it, as well. Its observations about the hippie scene in Haight-Ashbury are exactly that, though: observations. Didion makes a point to describe herself throughout the essay as being removed from the scenes she witnesses. She wryly comments about how her small size allows her to slip in and out of groups without provoking reactions. In her own words, “you just had to hang around” to see what you wanted to see. The moments she recounts indeed support those statements about her barely perceptible presence. She narrates conversations that are hard to imagine one having with an outsider present, unless that outsider was as almost supernaturally unmoving as Didion describes herself as being.

Didion comes across as being so harmless and unnoticeable that, when she visits a place called the Warehouse, “not actually a warehouse but the garage of a condemned hotel” where “a floating number” of the people she observes live, she is able to witness a scene which strikes her. Though there to observe, Didion admits a personal reason for visiting the Warehouse:

One reason I particularly like the Warehouse is that a child named Michael is staying there now. Michael’s mother, Sue Ann, is a sweet wan girl who is always in the kitchen cooking seaweed or baking macrobiotic bread while Michael amuses himself with...an old tambourine or a rocking horse with the paint worn off...the first time I ever saw Michael was on that rocking horse, a very blond and pale and dirty child on a rocking horse with no paint. Michael is three years old. He is a bright child but does not yet talk. (95)

There are ways to remark on an unattended child’s presence in a unhygienic, drug-fueled, empty warehouse without infusing the personal into that description, but those ways do not appear here. As Susan Stanberg asserts in her interview with Didion, “your tone is as cool in these sketches [in “Slouching Towards Bethlehem”] as it is in the pieces of fiction, until you get to the end. It’s been sheer description...until the end...at the end you told about the three-year-old child.” Didion responds that “the child was rocking, always, on a rocking horse in a blue spotlight...I was terribly worried...I wanted to take the child out, but I had no business doing that.” The sentence, focusing blankly and starkly on the rocking horse, in the “journalistic” essay, resembles her own language in the interview with Stanberg. The rocking horse forces a not imperceptible similarity between the two sentences. Rather than originally suggest a personal connection between Didion’s own worries, emotions, and thoughts, and the descriptions she creates in “Slouching

Towards Bethlehem,” the similarity rather enforces the essay’s subtle clues that what initially seems like objective journalism is the evocation of personal commentary. The rocking horse’s recurring presence stands as confirmation rather than insinuation. The starkness with which Didion recounts Michael’s age, her attention to the rocking horse’s decrepit, quietly unsettling details (which in create the quietly unsettling scene we find Michael in), and the swiftness with which she moves from what Sue Ann is doing—unnecessarily baking “macrobiotic bread” and leaving Michael to “amuse himself”—are the first signs that the personal has infiltrated the seemingly impersonal. Didion’s interview only acts as verification of that implication.

Most accounts of Didion’s work make sure to mention her relationship to California—that her family, going back five generations, is from Sacramento, that she decisively moved there after living in New York for a few notable years, and that the California that become the landscape, physical and theoretical, for the American dream was also the same place where the Donner Party traveled to in 1846. The Donner Party was the group who, on their way from Illinois to Sacramento, became stranded in the Sierras. Forty-seven out of eighty-seven original members died while they were lost somewhere in the West; those that survived did so by eating their family and friend’s dead bodies. The essays “Joan Didion: Staking Out California,” by Michiko Kakutani, “Points West, Then and Now: The Fiction of Joan Didion,” by Thomas Mallon, and “Run River: Edenic Vision and Wasteland Nightmare,” by Katherine U. Henderson are among other pieces of criticism that focus, even rest, on the connection between the Donner Party and “Didion’s

California”—her great-great-great grandmother was a survivor. These essays would suggest that the wry, ominous touches like the creepily lyrical repetitive, echoing titles or statement about Lucille Miller’s dead husband’s remains emerge from that dark connection to a group of travellers heading to California to pursue greater dreams.

It is, of course, impossible to say that her detached history is just that—completely detached from Didion’s actual work. But it is equally impossible to argue successfully the opposite, which is that this connection to California as the morbid place of lost dreams underlies the forbidding sense we get reading Didion’s otherwise “descriptive,” cataloguing work. That is only conjecture. Instead, textual clues within a given piece suggest how she transplants the personal into the impersonal, as do the broader arrangements within, say, a collection of essays. The collection’s final essay, “Goodbye to All That,” is about New York, not California. It is, more specifically, about Didion’s disillusionment with New York after living there in her twenties. She opens the essay asserting that “it is easy to see the beginnings of things, and harder to see the ends” (225). Yet what “Goodbye to All That Does” hones in on the end of something—the end of Didion’s time in New York when she was young—more than it does on a beginning. The essay presents Didion’s fleeting, intense attachment with New York, and then, inseparably to her and to us as readers, her proportionally intense disillusionment with it, in the larger affect of presenting California as the place to escape. “Goodbye to All That” then can retroactively, retrospectively, circle back to *Slouching Toward Bethlehem’s* beginning; in a collection that at times looks at California through a (seemingly)

traditional journalistic lens, we ultimately see how California is for Didion, too, a place to follow dreams.

Take some of the first few sentences in “Goodbye to All That” in comparison to its last few. The first sentences capture what people tend to, it seems, find captivating about New York:

I can remember now, with a clarity that makes the nerves in the back of my neck constrict, when New York began for me, but I cannot lay my finger upon the moment it ended, can never cut through the ambiguities and second starts and broken resolves to the exact place on the page where the heroine is no longer as optimistic as she once was. When I first saw New York I was twenty, and it was summertime, and I got off a DC-7 at the old Idlewild temporary terminal in a new dress which had seemed very smart in Sacramento but seemed less smart already, even in the old Idlewild terminal... (226)

Her dashing, sprawling lists emulate the excitement she felt upon coming to New York at the same time that she, almost invisibly, hints at the despair and depression into which that excitement would one day collapse. In fact, the sentence that lists the “ambiguities and second starts” and other obstacles that supposedly prevent Didion from seeing when New York ended for her anticipates the following list; the two resemble each other in form, so that its beginning mimics, grammatically, and so ensnares New York’s end. There are other hints, too—Didion refers to the “old Idlewild terminal,” but this is her older, wiser, disenchanted self speaking, because the New York novice would not have known it was the “old” terminal.

Then there are some of the essay’s last few sentences, which summarize her move from New York to California in an attempt to recover from her depression:

All I mean is that I was very young in New York, and that at some point the golden rhythm was broken, and I am not that young anymore. The last time I was in New York was in a cold January, and everyone was tired and ill...we stayed ten days, and then we took an afternoon flight back to Los Angeles, and on the way home from the airport that night I could see the moon on the Pacific and smell jasmine all around...there were years when I called Los Angeles “the Coast,” but they seem a long time ago. (238)

Didion simplifies her personal contrast between New York and California in terms of being either “very young” (New York) or “not that young anymore” (California). In deceptively simplistic language, then, California emerges as not just the place to go to *escape* New York’s cold, alienating dreariness, but specifically the place that Didion moved to because of the lessons she learned in New York—because she consciously sought out “the moon on the Pacific” and the smell of “jasmine all around” instead of a place where, hyperbolically, “everyone was tired and ill.” Contained in this hyperbolic depiction of New York versus the sensory loveliness of California is the knowledge that it is really not such a simple, black-and-white contrast, but that Didion’s own motivations for moving to California create that seemingly benign comparison.

If we then apply this essay’s implications to the collection as a whole, which is inevitable, we should question why they appear alongside each other. The seriousness and forebodingness with which Didion infuses her journalistic essays about California originate in the seriousness and forebodingness that accompanied her own move there, it seems. While these personal motivations do not limit or distort the moments in which she offers reportage, they cultivate a character, a



mood, that builds a further dimension into what otherwise would just be “fact” in how we have grown accustomed to understanding it.

### *Chapter Three*

#### *James Baldwin: The Necessity of Fiction*

Unlike Didion and Maxwell, James Baldwin places nonfiction within his fiction writing. Like Maxwell, the characters and events that appear in his novels bear undeniable resemblance to Baldwin's own life. Baldwin was, unlike Didion and Maxwell, though, a public figure and activist in the civil rights movement. He faced a contradiction that neither of the other two faced.

Arguably, Maxwell and Didion were representatives of their own audiences. Maxwell wrote about the Midwest, a landscape whose real-life inhabitants probably did not comprise his readership, but he also wrote about Harold and Barbara Rhodes from New York as they travel to Europe in *The Chateau*, or about the Upper East Side that was his actual home in so many of his short stories. He moved from Harvard to New York, where he would eventually edit the *New Yorker*. Didion is as much a California writer as a New York one; she started her career in New York (where she lives now). Maxwell and Didion were central to the dominant, white, and privileged New York writing culture to which Baldwin, a black, gay writer, was in many senses an outsider.

Baldwin did grow up in New York, in Harlem, where he was raised by his mother, Emma Jones, and his stepfather David Baldwin. The family grew up extremely poor. Baldwin attended various public schools in New York and in the meantime was, along with his family, a part of a church community. Beginning when he was fourteen he attended the Pentecostal Church in Upper Manhattan, and

though he later renounced religion—asserting that Christianity perpetuated slavery’s oppression by masking its present day repercussions in the guise of presenting salvation as the ultimate escape. Still, though, before he matured into these views, he converted at fourteen—a conversion scene occurs in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, his first novel that is often considered to be largely autobiographical.

*Go Tell It on the Mountain* is about a poor, black adolescent boy named John Grimes, who grows up in Harlem in an environment that recalls Baldwin’s own childhood—the volatile father, the passive mother, the both rich and foreboding Harlem streets outside the family’s small apartment. John grapples with his church and religion in general, feeling at times entranced by its spiritual power and at other times confused, even alienated, by sermons and messages to which he cannot immediately relate.

The novel is in equal parts about John’s tumultuous relationship with his father, a devoutly religious and violently angry man. Baldwin wrote about, either obliquely or explicitly depending on the given work, his relationship with his own father. Like how Didion seemed to have transplanted what she said in the interview about Michael, the three year-old boy living in the Warehouse in Haight Ashbury, into “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” much of Baldwin’s own admissions about his father find their near counterpoint in *Go Tell It On the Mountain*. Especially in his famous essay, “Notes on a Native Son,” which appeared in a non-fiction essay collection of the same name, Baldwin recounts memories of his late father that recall scenes in *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, and vice versa. Unlike Didion, Baldwin moves between non-fiction—“Notes on a Native Son,” for example—to fiction—*Go Tell It*

*On the Mountain*, rather than from non-fiction (the interview, her essays like “Goodbye to All That” that are more openly and expansively personal) to a different kind of non-fiction (her journalistic personal essays).

That difference, though, is less significant than the implications behind their motions. Didion’s journalistic essays have a character that distinguish them from reportage, so that the work achieves its two functions: to reflect a writer’s idiosyncrasy that does not distort original fact, and then, to present that original fact contained from said idiosyncrasies without “committing fiction.” Maxwell places nonfiction within his fiction *and* fiction within his nonfiction to serve a transparently personal aim. His fictive creations, which are different from “committing fiction” in that he is open about what is invented and what is not, are inseparable from the Smiths’ and Wilsons’ real lives. Likewise, their real lives are immortalized in *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, through fiction that only exists because of a personal need for redemption—an act of compassion, which in every case is inherently, personally driven.

Meanwhile, Baldwin is more opaque about his fiction’s origins in his personal life—significantly, in his later novel, *Giovanni’s Room*, than he is in *Go Tell It On the Mountain*. *Go Tell It On the Mountain*’s black characters face racism and violence in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America; they are outsiders in their own city and, in John’s case, at least internally experience being an outsider even within their own community, whether that be home, neighborhood, or church. Baldwin openly addressed these experiences, on a personal but additionally and significantly, a societal scale, in his

non-fiction work; his critical, artistic examples of race and religion were part of his public persona. Although he criticized the label, he was an influential civil rights activist, having returned to the United States from Paris in 1957 because he felt compelled to report on what was happening in the South. Following his return to America, Baldwin published essays and articles on the movement in *Harpers*, *The Partisan Review*, *The New Yorker*, and other similar publications. He was an active and prominent figure, even a figurehead, for civil rights—in 1963 *Time* featured him on its cover and praised the “poignancy and abrasiveness” with which he approached “the dark realities of the racial ferment in North and South.”

Baldwin was a fixture, then, among publications based in New York and among the white, upper-middle class readers of that broader audience; his novels and essays were well-received and widely read. Part of his identity, for this audience, was inextricably linked to his work as a civil rights leader and his race. Baldwin’s race and activism were not invisible but rather openly, obviously a part of his public and written personas. *Go Tell It On the Mountain* embodies the dynamic involving Baldwin as prominent respected writer, Baldwin’s identity as a black writer, and the presence of his autobiography in his fictional work. The parallels between James Baldwin and John Grimes in *Go Tell It On the Mountain* are undeniable and prominent, comprising the novel’s most basic elements—character, plot, and setting. In his first novel, Baldwin explicitly links himself to his fictional character; how his readers knew and appreciated him as a writer and social figure intertwines with their understanding of *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, and, perhaps, of *Go Tell It On the Mountain’s* success.

For white audiences at a time when homosexuality was still very much controversial, Baldwin's first novel was more palatable. Arguably, *Go Tell It On the Mountain* compartmentalized what could have otherwise made Baldwin an outsider to his eventual readership. In contrast, *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin's second novel published in 1956, three years after *Go Tell It On the Mountain* during which time Baldwin also published *Notes of a Native Son* and a play called *The Amen Corner*, strikes a distance on its surface between Baldwin and the novel's content. *Giovanni's Room* follows David, an American, from New York to Paris as he inflicts pain on those he loves because of his own self-hatred about being gay. The novel's first paragraph not only describes David as white and blond, but even emphasize his appearance:

I stand at the window of this great house in the south of France...I watch my reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane. My reflection is tall...my blond hair gleams. My face is like a face you have seen many times. My ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe into a darker past. (221)

David does not mention his own appearance in the interest of emphasizing that he is white, not black. *Giovanni's Room* takes up a self-destructive and self-loathing, coldhearted and manipulative man whose own attempts to "conquer" a new landscape (in his case, not a "continent," but the distance between him and Giovanni) and ignore a "darker past" find their almost exaggerated replica in the novel's first sentences: it is relevant, even central to the rest of the novel's themes that David is white, blond, a product of European ancestry. Still, the passage has the straightforward, immediate function of distinguishing David the character from

Baldwin, the writer already established as a black civil rights essayist and/or autobiographical novelist.

Like David, Baldwin was gay (and as mentioned, similarly moved to France from New York before his eventual return back to the States). But creating a white character has the instant effect of preventing the kind of autobiographical comparisons that *Go Tell It On the Mountain* invites, even demands. It superficially denotes *Giovanni's Room* as fiction, disallowing the kind of genre confusion we encounter with *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, and even at times with *Go Tell It On the Mountain*. Therefore, a more underlying consequence of distancing himself from David in the starkest, most instantaneous terms is that Baldwin can then re-enter the novel on his own terms and layer into *Giovanni's Room* complex, unanswerable questions about homosexuality without deviating too far from, and polarizing, his own audience.

Raw emotion contrasts with David's contained, (painfully) self-aware narrative in *Giovanni's Room*. The emotional breaks amidst otherwise composed prose parallel how Baldwin's second novel, broadly speaking, allows an outlet for unfiltered depictions of homosexuality that might risk being too controversial for as of then unprepared audience. One recurring theme in *Giovanni's Room* is detachment from the person one—David—loves, the final self-punishing act, for him, that arise from what he experiences as the social and moral impossibilities of being gay in the 1950's. Note a later passage in which David envisions Giovanni, an Italian he meets in France and falls in love with, before Giovanni is about to be executed. David is not physically with Giovanni at this moment. In fact, the reason

Giovanni has fallen into such hopeless legal trouble is, David suggests, because of how David's profound rejection of him. Still, despite the alienation, which arose from David's own self-loathing and *own* alienation, raw love and passion still breaks through. Long after David leaves Giovanni and chooses to return to Hella, his American fiancé, in the hopes he can be fulfilled in a heterosexual marriage, David in the present pictures Giovanni in his mind:

Giovanni's face swings before me like an unexpected lantern on a dark, dark night. His eyes—his eyes, they glow like a tiger's eyes, they stare straight out, watching the approach of his last enemy, the hair of his flesh stands up. I cannot read what is in his eyes: if it is terror, then I have never seen terror, if it is anguish, then anguish has never laid hands on me. Now they approach, now the key turns in the lock, now they have him. (288)

David does not need to proclaim his lasting attachment to Giovanni for that attachment to be evident. It is already evident in how he merges his life with the last minutes of Giovanni's. David refers to this image of Giovanni's face in the present tense, as if it is really there before him. He renders the eyes in vivid, sensual terms, turning them into poetry--"they glow like tiger's eyes"—and showing their enigmatic quality. For all this description, David "cannot read" the emotion in the eyes. "Cannot" implies his unspoken efforts to do the opposite, to "read what is in his eyes," though. The word parallels how the novel as a whole enacts "unacceptable" emotions often by denoting their unacceptability. David, just like Baldwin himself, lacks a platform for expressing himself without some kind of qualifier, even opposite statement or negation, against what he actually means to say. This is not to state that this is David's function—to act as Baldwin's puppet.



Rather, we can find fictional mirrors in *Giovanni's Room* of Baldwin's own challenges, societal and literary, in openly addressing the novel's themes, and see representations of emotion that are so startling and vivid it is hard not to imagine their original, non-fictional source.

Likewise, as "...now they approach, now the key turns in the lock, now they have him," David, in picturing moment by moment the dreadful moments of Giovanni's execution, creates his own sense of dread. Why David cannot "read what is in his eyes" is ambiguous. He cannot read what is in Giovanni's eyes because the emotion they convey is too great, and possibly too awful, for David to allow himself to understand. The "terror" is so large that it overshadows what David knows to be terror; the "anguish" diminishes David's perception of anguish. David's admission that Giovanni's pain is so much more severe and dreadful than his own speaks to his need for self-punishment. Baldwin takes up not just David's homosexuality and the very existence of his relationship with Giovanni, but also David's need to torture himself with his actions' consequences (Giovanni's impending death), and, further and more complexly, David's own acknowledgement of a life he has tried, unsuccessfully, to lead. David has, attempted futilely up until this moment, to live without forming emotional attachments to anyone who might eventually cause so much devastation. David also cannot read Giovanni's eyes because, while he might picture Giovanni's execution in painstaking detail, his beloved Italian is of course not really there. This haunts David: he is not with Giovanni now, nor was he before when he should have been, and he never will be with him again. The irreversibility of this fact mirrors David's earlier realization that some "germ" is "trapped in the

room with [him], always has been, and always will be.” At both points, David recognizes his actions’ irrevocability and inescapability. And at both points this recognition is not a relief but a burden, because they are realizations that this character has been running away from all his life.

This is not a simple, superficial depiction, but rather an exploration of a relationship before, during, and after its end, and an examination of the psychological and societal factors at play—vast, complex questions that remain elusive to the characters themselves. Fictionalizing his content not only provides a less direct, seemingly less personal presentation of these questions and themes for his audience, but also, perhaps, for Baldwin himself. Unlike Maxwell’s transparency about the reasons behind fictionalizing his novel’s real-life origins, Baldwin remains elusive, staying out of *Giovanni’s Room*. David narrates the novel, so that Baldwin’s narrative voice can never enter. We can and should only conjecture, for Baldwin as a writer, why the distancing mechanisms he employs—the broadest such mechanism simply being taking on his novel’s content as fiction rather than a personal essay, for example, and, from there, creating a white character with his first-person narration, and even a character who is distanced from his own inner life—might allow him creative clarity in composing *Giovanni’s Room*. Still, though, the raw emotion Baldwin allows to break through his novel’s pages is so startling and moving that it is impossible not to assume its personal origins.

Meanwhile, reviews of *Giovanni’s Room* tiptoed around its emotional content, only vaguely gesturing toward the themes behind the plot. A 1956 New York Times review opens by commending Baldwin’s “boldness,” a well-intentioned but

euphemistic way of characterizing that raw emotion. The review by Granville Hicks goes on to say that “Mr. Baldwin writes of these matters with an unusual degree of candor and yet with such dignity and intensity that he is saved from sensationalism.” This is all true, but Hicks’s language is vague: “these matters” is inexact and broad. The short review’s final paragraph, though, best encapsulates how difficult a gay relationship’s portrayal was for critics to handle in a novel:

Much of the novel is laid in scenes of squalor, with a background of characters as grotesque and repulsive as any that can be found in Proust's "Cities of the Plain." But even as one is dismayed by Mr. Baldwin's materials, one rejoices in the skill with which he renders them. Nor is there any suspicion that he is working with these materials merely for the sake of shocking the reader. On the contrary, his intent is most serious. One of the lesser characters, in many ways a distasteful one, tells David that "not many people have ever died of love." "But," he goes on, "multitudes have perished, and are perishing every hour--and in the oddest places!--for the lack of it." This is Mr. Baldwin's subject, the rareness and difficulty of love, and, in his rather startling way, he does a great deal with it.

Largely speaking, “the rareness and difficulty of love” is *one* of Baldwin’s subjects in *Giovanni’s Room*, but not *the* subject. Equally as central to the novel is the self-loathing and existential anxiety David experiences specifically because he is gay and grew up in a family and society that implicitly and explicitly demanded traditional presentations of masculinity; David’s relationship with Giovanni emerges as “rare” precisely because it is so fulfilling and consuming in contrast to David’s half-hearted, empty relationship with his American fiancé Hella. The review renders *Giovanni’s Room* as much more general than it really is; the novel would not have its resonant, universal power if not for its origins in the personal and the specific.



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