

Reception: texts, readers, audiences, history

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James Phelan, "Rhetoric, Ethics, Aesthetics, and Probability in Fiction and Nonfiction: *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Year of Magical Thinking*"

In the world of creative nonfiction, the first decade of the twenty-first century will likely be known as the Age of the Fraudulent Memoir. With James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, Matt McCarthy's *Odd Man Out*, Margaret B. Jones's *Love and Consequences* and several other books, we have witnessed an all-too-familiar narrative of reception. Chapter I: Initial reviewers and readers enthusiastically praise the memoir as an affectively powerful and ethically rewarding performance; they use adjectives such as "intense," "lacerating," "eye-opening," "humane," and "deeply affecting." Chapter II: Skeptics and fact checkers produce convincing evidence that the events could not have happened the way the memoirist represents them. Chapter III has two main variants, each of which also has a significant ethical dimension. In the first, the memoirist plays defense, either by denying that the difference between the actual experiences and the representation of them is a matter of any consequence or by playing the subjective truth card. That is, the memoirist argues that the narrative is not seeking historical truth but rather recounting the experiences as he or she remembers them. In the second variant, the memoirist admits to the distortions or fabrications but offers an ends-justifies-the-means defense. In all the celebrated cases, the memoirist's rationalization ultimately fails. Chapter IV: The audience splits into three main groups in their final assessment: many find the author guilty of lying to them; others say that they'll just read the memoir as

fiction; still others contend that the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is not important because “a good story is a good story” regardless of its generic status.

This narrative of reception raises--or revives--some larger questions about the connections among narrative, ethics, and the fiction-nonfiction distinction: can we identify any bottom-line distinction between fiction and non-fiction, and if so, how? If we can, what does it suggest about the efforts at genre-switching that the second group of readers opt for? If we can't, should we then, in our postmodern and poststructuralist age, side with the third group and just focus on the quality of the narrative independent of its status as fiction or nonfiction? In this essay, I will address these questions, beginning with the first one about the viability of the fiction-nonfiction distinction itself, seek to answer it in the affirmative, and consider the consequences of that answer for the other two questions. More specifically, I will argue that often there are intrinsic features of fictional and nonfictional narratives that work against the solution of genre-switching, and that decisions about the quality of a narrative are often dependent on its status as fiction or nonfiction. I will carry out this argument by focusing on some issues about plotting and probability in two representative examples, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

I am, of course, only the latest in a long line of narrative theorists who have addressed the fiction-nonfiction distinction, though my predecessors reach a variety of conclusions. Hayden White, for example, has emphasized the similarities of selection and plotting in both fiction and history, and his work has at the very least blurred the boundaries between the two genres. Dorrit Cohn, on the other hand, has identified what she regards as distinctive textual features that differentiate fiction from nonfiction.

Marie-Laure Ryan uses classical narratology and possible-worlds theory to argue for the viability of the distinction. Although I have learned from White, Cohn, Ryan, and others, I want to come at the question from a different angle, that provided by a rhetorical theory of narrative (see Booth, Phelan, and Rabinowitz).

This theory conceives of narrative as a multi-dimensional purposive communication from an author to an audience, or, in terms of the default definition: somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purposes that something happened. This orientation means that the theory puts as much emphasis on tellers and audiences as on the narrative text and as much emphasis on the ethical and affective dimensions of narrative as on its thematics. As a result of these emphases, the theory is as interested in the often tacit assumptions that authors and audiences operate with as it is in the formal features of texts, so I will begin by identifying those assumptions.

Tacit Assumptions about Fiction and Nonfiction

The most significant tacit assumption underlying the writing and reading of most fiction is that the genre entails its audience's double perspective on the characters and the action. (For the purposes of this essay, I will bracket metafiction, which sometimes plays with this tacit assumption—except to say that such play highlights its importance.)

Readers of fiction simultaneously participate in the illusion that the characters are independent agents pursuing their own ends and remain aware that the characters and their trajectories toward their fates are part of an authorial design and purpose. Ralph Rader's definition of the standard novel captures this tacit assumption very well: the novel, says Rader, is "a work which offers the reader a focal illusion of characters acting autonomously as if in the world of real experience within a subsidiary awareness of an

underlying constructive authorial purpose which gives the story an implicit significance and affective force which real world experience does not have” (72). I would slightly revise the end of Rader’s definition to read “an underlying constructive authorial purpose which gives the story a thematic, ethical, and affective significance and force which real world experience does not have.”

Peter J. Rabinowitz’s influential theory of audience has its roots in this understanding of the double consciousness we have in reading fiction. Rabinowitz contends that actual readers seek to join two audiences: (1) the narrative audience, whose members regard the characters and events as real and accept the facts of the storyworld as true; the narrative audience, in other words, is not aware of the illusion Rader talks about; and (2) the authorial audience, whose members are aware of the illusion and are able to tune in to the narrative’s “underlying constructive authorial purpose.” This theory of audience also means that the rhetorical approach considers reading as a two-step process: first, reading within the authorial and narrative audiences, and, then, second, assessing that reading experience from one’s own perspective.

From the perspective of the author, this tacit assumption about the double consciousness of readers helps reveal one of the fundamental challenges of writing successful fiction: to preserve the illusion that the characters are acting autonomously while also designing their actions and the consequences of those actions so that the audience recognizes their “thematic, ethical, and affective significance and force.” In this way, we can describe the author’s task as one that involves a particular combination of freedom and constraint. The author is free to invent characters and events, but the successful author accepts the constraint that he cannot sacrifice the illusion of autonomy

on the altar of underlying authorial purpose. Similarly, the author is free to invent characters and events, but the successful author accepts the constraint that their invention must somehow contribute to the larger significance of the fiction. Our experience as readers teaches us that the most successful fiction writers are the ones most adept at negotiating this relationship between freedom and constraint.

Jane Austen's revision to the ending of *Persuasion* provides an excellent illustration of this last point. *Persuasion* is different from Austen's other novels because it is a tale not of the discovery of love but rather a tale of its rediscovery. Eight years before the main action of the novel takes place, Anne Elliot had been persuaded by Lady Russell and her own conscience that she should reject Frederick Wentworth's marriage proposal. For Wentworth, Anne's rejection signals the end of their relationship and, he thinks, the end of his love for Anne. Although Anne never stops loving Frederick, she does stop believing that there is any chance he will forgive her and return to her. In the main action of the novel, events conspire to bring them back within each other's social orbit, and Wentworth gradually comes to rediscover his love for Anne--though he thinks that his awakening has come too late since it appears that she is on the verge of becoming engaged to William Elliot. At this point, Austen needs to find a way to overcome this final obstacle and reunite Anne and Frederick. In Austen's first effort, she transforms an awkward meeting into the moment of happiness. Wentworth's brother-in-law, Admiral Croft, who is renting the Elliot family home, commissions Wentworth to tell Anne that he will give up the lease once she is married to William. When Anne assures Wentworth that there will be no such marriage, the two exchange a very meaningful look and voila!

“all Suspense and Indecision were over. They were re-united. They were restored to all that had been lost” (263).

This ending is relatively effective, and it respects the major parameters of freedom and constraint governing the novel. The characters appear to be acting autonomously even as the ending includes two ethically satisfying elements: (1) William’s self-interested pursuit of Anne helps to bring about her engagement to Wentworth; and (2) Wentworth’s misdirected anger at Anne eventually leads to the early part of this scene in which he experiences a mild comic punishment before his ultimate happiness. But Austen wasn’t satisfied with this ending and replaced it with one in which Anne has a much more active role. She delivers a speech from the heart to Captain Harville about the greater constancy of women, a speech that Wentworth overhears and that gives him the hope and the courage to renew his proposal.

The revision is a significant improvement because it better completes the pattern of thematic, ethical, and affective force that Austen had been constructing prior to this point. Although Wentworth is the character who needs to change, and although Anne faces the strong restrictions on a woman’s behavior imposed by her society, Austen has been constructing a pattern in which Anne functions as the main agent in bringing about Wentworth’s change of understanding and feeling--and ultimately her own happiness. The original ending, despite its virtues, fails to follow through on this pattern, as it once again reduces Anne’s agency. The revision, however, brilliantly completes the pattern, and, in so doing, dramatically enhances the thematic, ethical, and affective force of Austen’s novel.¹

The case of *Persuasion* also helps us identify a key tacit assumption of authors and audiences of nonfiction, because it reminds us that we can applaud Austen's revision without having to worry about fact-checking it. Jane-ites need not live in fear that one day the smokinggun.com will prove that the first ending is actually the one supported by the historical evidence or, indeed, that both of Austen's endings are bogus, because their reporters have found evidence that a desperate Anne, on the first night of the trip to Lyme Regis, snuck into Wentworth's room and then ran off with him the next morning to Gretna Green. Jane-ites need not worry because these scenarios are based on a category mistake that entails treating fiction as if it were nonfiction. That mistake in turn reveals the main tacit assumption about nonfiction: it claims to represent people and events external to the textual world—and therefore can be contested by other representations of them. By contrast, when one fiction contests another, as, for example, when Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* contests Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the second work may lead us to revise our interpretations and evaluations of the first, but its contestation does not lead any readers to feel betrayed by Brontë in the way that so many felt betrayed by James Frey.

These considerations lead to a definition of standard literary nonfiction narrative parallel to Rader's definition of the novel: a work that offers the reader a representation of real people and events that is simultaneously responsible to their existence outside the textual world **and** shaped in the service of some underlying authorial purpose designed to give the people and events a thematic, affective, and ethical significance and force that would not be apparent without such shaping. This conception means that literary nonfiction operates with a different relationship between freedom and constraint than the

novel does. The author of literary nonfiction is free to shape the characters and events into his or her vision of their thematic, affective, and ethical significance within the limits imposed by the responsibility to the extratextual existence of those characters and events. This conception of nonfiction also means that we do not read it with the double consciousness operating in our reading of fiction, and, thus, we do not need to invoke a narrative audience distinct from the authorial audience. Furthermore, because we do not read with such a double-consciousness, the default assumption is that the “narrating-I” is a reliable representative of the implied author. Finally, this conception of nonfiction provides an explanation of the problem with fraudulent memoirs. In most of these cases, the authors become so enamored of their visions of the larger thematic, affective, and ethical purpose of the narrative that they no longer observe the constraint of being responsible to the extratextual existence of the characters and events. They sacrifice responsibility to the extratextual dimensions of their narrative on the altar of authorial purpose.

I contend that the differences in our tacit assumptions about fiction and nonfiction have consequences not just for the general frames of understanding within which we read each, but also for many more specific elements of our reading experience, though here I will focus on our responses to issues of plotting and probability. Before I turn to support this contention, I want to clarify the nature of my claims. My strong claim is that our tacit assumptions often lead us to respond very differently to the same kinds of textual phenomena in the two genres. But I also want to temper—or at least clarify--this claim in two related ways. First, I want to underline that I say “often” rather than “always.” I recognize the wide diversity of fictional and nonfictional narratives as well as the class of

narratives that seeks to trouble the fiction/nonfiction distinction, and I believe that such diversity should make theorists suspicious of claims that apply to all cases. My concern here is with the way our tacit assumptions about fiction and nonfiction often influence our responses to the way authors of the standard novel (as represented by *Pride and Prejudice*) and the contemporary literary memoir (as represented by *The Year of Magical Thinking*) handle aspects of plotting and probability. Second, I do not believe that our tacit assumptions are necessarily sufficient for us to be able to recognize whether a given memoir is fraudulent: the internal structures of some memoirs can wholly conform to our tacit assumptions about nonfiction and still be fraudulent. Sometimes we need the

Plotting and Probability in *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Year of Magical Thinking*

In *Pride and Prejudice* Austen famously tells a story about the transformation of negative first impressions (the phrase was her initial title for the book) into well-grounded feelings of passionate love. The easy part of her task is the representation of those negative first impressions. Austen manages that task with characteristic economy by bringing Elizabeth and Darcy together at the first ball and by having Elizabeth overhear Darcy's cold response to Bingley's offer to introduce him to her: "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men" (12). With that stroke, Austen clearly establishes Darcy's unfavorable first impression of Elizabeth and motivates hers of him. But this beginning also creates a certain problem for Austen's efforts to give her characters autonomy while also achieving her underlying purpose. Since the two characters won't voluntarily seek each other's company, how can she both

preserve the illusion of their autonomy and still bring about their eventual union? Austen goes with the most logical solution of having “circumstances” bring them into the same circles, but her different attention to the workings of circumstance early and late in the narrative reveals something significant about the relationship between the illusion of characters’ autonomy and authorial purpose both in *Pride and Prejudice* and the standard novel more generally. Early on Austen goes to considerable length to have the apparently autonomous actions of different characters be the means for bringing Darcy and Elizabeth together, but later on she is content to rely heavily on the good offices of the novelist’s dangerous friend, Chance—and, just as important, most readers are content with her contentment.

The first extended interaction between Elizabeth and Darcy after the ball occurs at Netherfield during the period when Elizabeth provides company and assistance to her ill sister Jane. In order to bring about this situation, Austen draws on the apparently autonomous actions of numerous characters. By my count, Austen takes six main steps in her plotting, each of which is carefully grounded in probabilities of character and circumstance. First, Caroline Bingley invites Jane to dine at Netherfield on a day when her brother and Darcy are out dining with officers. Both the absence of the gentlemen and the invitation fit with the social norms of the time and the characters of those involved. Second, although Jane asks to borrow the family carriage, Mrs. Bennet proposes that she go on horseback because “it seems likely to rain and then you’ll have to stay all night” —and thus, spend at least some time in Mr. Bingley’s company. Mrs. Bennet’s proposal is wholly in keeping with her character (“the business of her life was to get her daughters married” [5]), but the more sensible Mr. Bennet—and Jane—are

forced to accept that proposal because the horses that would drive the carriage are needed in the Bennet farm. Third, it rains hard as Jane rides to Netherfield. Of course it is Austen who assigns the horses to the Bennet farm and who controls the weather in the storyworld, but there is no strong intrusion of authorial purpose into the characters' autonomy here because it is perfectly natural for horses to work on a farm and for it to rain in Hertfordshire in the autumn.

Fourth, the hard rain brings on Jane's illness, and Mr. Bingley and his sister, as gracious hosts, insist on her staying at Netherfield until she gets well. Fifth, Elizabeth insists on going to visit Jane for a day, even if it means walking across the muddy fields—which it does. Sixth, when Elizabeth prepares to leave at the end of the first day's visit, Jane is so concerned that Miss Bingley insists that Elizabeth stay. Again with these last three steps everything is fully in keeping with nature (or beliefs about the connection between getting wet and becoming ill), the social norms of the time, and with the characters of those involved. After these elaborate arrangements, Austen then devotes the next five chapters to Elizabeth's time at Netherfield in the company of Darcy, a time during which Darcy begins to feel the danger of his attraction to Elizabeth.

By contrast Austen's arrangements for Elizabeth and Darcy's meeting at Pemberley are far less elaborate and far more dependent on Chance. First, it just so happens that the Gardiners are required to change their planned trip with Elizabeth so that they go to Derbyshire, the location of Pemberley, rather than the Lake Country. Second, once in Derbyshire, the Gardiners naturally want to see Pemberley. Elizabeth is reluctant to go, given that she has by this time rejected Darcy's marriage proposal and done so in a manner that she now deeply regrets. But after receiving assurances from the

chambermaid at their hotel that Darcy is away for the summer, Elizabeth consents. Third, Darcy then turns up “unexpectedly.” We might conclude that his arrival is a contrivance, an event motivated by authorial purpose that works against the illusion of the characters’ autonomy. But most readers don’t regard the meeting as something that violates the mimetic illusion, and I believe our tacit assumptions about fiction—and the placement of the meeting in the progression of the narrative—help explain why.

These assumptions help us recognize that Darcy’s arrival at Pemberley is unexpected by the narrative audience, that is, the audience engaged with the characters as autonomous actors, but wholly expected by the authorial audience, that is, the audience that knows the autonomy is an illusion. The authorial audience expects the meeting because **by this stage in the novel’s progression** that audience has intuited much of Austen’s underlying purpose and is desirous of having her achieve it. Indeed, for that reason, as soon as the Gardiners and Elizabeth get near Pemberley, the authorial audience begins to expect the meeting. Consequently, Austen does not need to go through the same kind of preparation for Darcy’s arrival at Pemberley that she does for Elizabeth’s stay at Netherfield.

And she doesn’t. She simply has the housekeeper at Pemberley update the chambermaid’s information with the report that Darcy is expected the next day with a large party and then, after Darcy shows up, has him explain that “business with his steward” (256) made him arrive a few hours ahead of the others. In other words, Austen’s reliance on Chance here is not a problem because (a) she has scrupulously avoided Chance in establishing the initial pattern of the progression; and (b) once the pattern of romantic comedy is established within our double-consciousness as readers of

fiction, we privilege authorial purpose to the point that we accept—and even expect—a certain license with the illusion of autonomy.

Now if this narrative were nonfictional, would Austen's handling of the meeting at Pemberley need to be different? Yes, but not because it relies on the workings of chance, since chance often does work in the extratextual world. Since the default of nonfiction is that the author has freedom to shape the narrative structure within the constraints of being responsible to the extratextual world, the meeting at Pemberley would not be understood as part of the author's invention of events. Thus, its justification cannot simply be that the meeting fits the pattern that the author has been arranging. Instead, it must both fit that pattern and observe the constraints of being responsible to the extratextual existence of characters and events. Consequently, if *Pride and Prejudice* were nonfiction, the author would need to address the apparent workings of Chance more fully than Austen does in the novel. In order to block the objection that she is neglecting her responsibility to the extratextual world, the author of the nonfiction would need either to call explicit attention to the workings of Chance (the functioning of Chance would add to the tellability of the narrative) or to show that what looks like Chance is actually the convergence of Elizabeth's and Darcy's different purposes. In light of this analysis, we would be justified in finding fault—ethically and aesthetically—with the author of standard literary nonfiction who, at a crucial stage in the representation of the events and their interconnections, relied on Chance in the way that Austen legitimately does in her novel. In sum, our tacit assumptions about fiction and nonfiction would lead us to strikingly different responses to the same textual phenomena.

As I turn to *The Year of Magical Thinking* I ask you to try the thought experiment of coming to it without knowing whether it is fiction or nonfiction. Here's a passage from very early in the narrative:

In outline.

It is now, as I begin to write this, the afternoon of October 4, 2004.

Nine months and five days ago, at approximately nine o'clock on the evening of October 30, 2003, my husband John Gregory Dunne, appeared to (or did) experience, at the table where he and I had just sat down to dinner in the living room of our apartment in New York, a sudden massive coronary event that caused his death. Our only child, Quintana, had been for the previous five nights unconscious in an intensive care unit at Beth Israel Medical Center's Singer Division, at that time a hospital on East End Avenue (it closed in August 2004) more commonly known as "Beth Israel North" or "the old Doctors' Hospital," where what had seemed a case of December flu sufficiently severe to take her to an emergency room on Christmas morning had exploded into pneumonia and septic shock. This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways that people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself. (6-7)

If we assume that this passage is fiction, then our dual perspective means that we also assume that the "I" who narrates this passage is a character distinct from Didion the

implied author. That assumption in turn means that we are on the lookout for discrepancies between the sense that the narrator will make of the weeks and months that followed the death of her husband and the sense that the implied Didion will invite her audience to make of that period. On the other hand, if we assume that this passage is nonfiction, then we also assume, as noted above, that the narrating-I is a reliable spokesperson for Didion and, thus, that the sense that the narrator makes of this period is the sense that Didion makes of it.

But is there any way to tell from the evidence of the passage itself whether it is fiction or nonfiction? If we focus only on the formal features of the passage, then I submit that the answer is no. Although the attention to the details about John's death and about Quintana's hospital suggests a scrupulosity about extratextual facts that may seem to signal nonfiction, we could also understand that attention as a contribution to the mimetic portrait of a detail-oriented character narrator. But if we focus on the formal features of the passage in conjunction with the tacit assumptions that govern fiction and nonfiction, then I think the answer is a tentative yes. What's more, when we add more passages and ask the same question, then we need no longer be tentative and can say yes with considerable confidence.

The most salient feature of the passage is its jump from the journalistic reporting ("in outline") of two heartrending events to the more philosophical statement of purpose. But for now let's focus on those two events: the death of the narrator's husband and the life-threatening illness of the couple's only child. (I bracket for now the question of whether husband and child are people with an extratextual existence or characters in a novel.) Another salient feature is the way that the passage sets up a clear hierarchy

between those events: “the period” that will be the focus of the book begins not with the onset of Quintana’s illness but with the moment of John’s death at approximately 9 o’clock on the evening of December 30, 2003. To put the point even more strongly, the implied Didion and the narrator not only give Quintana’s illness secondary status but treat it as necessary exposition for the main event. Furthermore, because the passage treats Quintana’s illness this way, we can infer either that, on October 4, 2004, Quintana is still alive—and no longer in critical condition—or that the narrator has some serious ethical deficiencies. If Quintana had died, then there are strong ethical and aesthetic reasons for a reliable narrator to include that event as part of the outline. The ethical reasons become apparent once we consider the consequences for not including it: the narrator would appear to be incredibly callous. But nothing else in the passage suggests that attitude, so this line of thinking seems unfruitful. The aesthetic reasons can be put more positively: Quintana’s death would give greater force and significance to the task the narrator sets for herself and explicitly articulates here: coming to terms with the period in which the two events would have occurred and reflecting on that set of difficult issues.

Now let us consider the passage in relation to the tacit assumptions we make when reading fiction. From this perspective, Didion’s treatment of Quintana seems at best an unwise use of her novelist’s freedom and a worst a huge mistake. If *The Year of Magical Thinking* is a novel about a woman’s effort to come to terms with the sudden death of her husband after almost forty years of marriage, then it ought to stay focused on the loss and the effort to come to terms. Giving the character narrator a daughter with a life-threatening illness blurs the novel’s focus by introducing a second global instability,

one that also makes the narrative seem excessive. Most editors, it's fair to say, would advise Didion the novelist to "lose the daughter." Alternatively, if Didion insisted on keeping the daughter in the narrative, then Didion ought to have the courage and the aesthetic sense to kill her off before October 4, 2004. Such an event would allow the novel to broaden its focus to the character narrator's double loss and to her correspondingly more extensive meditation on death, illness, marriage, parenthood, and mourning. But of course this strategy would require revising this passage by making the daughter's death part of the outline. Read as fiction, the current passage, with its backgrounding of the daughter's illness and its implication that the daughter's condition has improved by October 4, seems to be deeply flawed.

If we approach the passage as nonfiction, however, then Didion's decision to include Quintana's illness shifts from a matter of whether to a matter of how—and the choice of how seems very effective. Nonfiction's ethical imperative to be responsible to extratextual events means that Didion needs to include Quintana's situation. This constraint also means that, if Quintana has improved by October 4, then the narrative needs to reflect that extratextual reality. At the same time, the ethical imperative leaves Didion free to determine whether to foreground or background Quintana's illness. And Didion's decision to background it makes good sense: John's death, unlike Quintana's illness and improvement, brings about a permanent change in her life, and he had been her partner for almost forty years. Furthermore, the decision gives Didion a clear focus for the narrative to follow. Quintana's illness can be, as it is in this passage, an important part of that narrative, something that influences Didion's experiences and her reflections, but it will always function in relation to her effort to come to terms with John's death. It

is worth noting that, having made these decisions about how to be responsible to the extratextual facts about Quintana, Didion did not have to go back and revise the narrative when in the summer of 2005, shortly before *The Year of Magical Thinking* was published, Quintana passed away. As we come to the end of our thought experiment, we have good reasons to conclude once again that our tacit assumptions about fiction and nonfiction lead us to respond in markedly different ways to the same textual phenomena.

The reason I say that we can give a tentative but not a definitive yes to the question of whether we can conclude on the basis of this passage that the book is nonfiction is that it's still possible to imagine a plausible trajectory for a fictional narrative that would follow from this passage. That trajectory would resolve the potential problem of competition between the two instabilities by tying them together. More specifically, the solution would be to have the resolution of the instability about the daughter pave the way for the working through of the character narrator's mourning and melancholia. Although this solution might very well lead to a cloyingly sentimental narrative, its existence means that our initial "yes" must be tentative. When, however, we read the rest of the narrative, and discover more about Quintana's experiences, we can make that yes a definitive one.

Didion focuses on the instabilities of Quintana's health in chapters 8 through 12 of the narrative, a segment during which Didion oversees Quintana's treatment at UCLA Medical Center after she suffers a subdural hematoma. Quintana's experiences and Didion's response as loving, worried mother who is still dealing with the aftereffects of John's death take center stage in Chapters 8 and 9. But Chapter 10 returns the focus to John's death and its consequences for Didion, as she describes what she calls the "vortex

effect” (107), that is, the way that a small thing can trigger a set of memories of her life with John or her life with John and Quintana that ultimately lead her back to her grief over John’s loss and her anxiety about Quintana. Chapter 11 recounts the flight that returns Quintana to New York and then Chapter 12 abruptly resolves the instabilities about her illness as Didion effects a transition back to a focus on her own situation.

Here are the first two sentences of Chapter 12: “The day on which Quintana and I flew east on the Cessna that refueled in the cornfield in Kansas was April 30, 2004. During May and June and the half of July that she spent at the Rusk Institute there was very little I could do for her.” That paragraph ends “She was reaching a point at which she would need once again to be, if she was to recover, on her own.” And the next paragraph is a single sentence: “I determined to spend the summer reaching the same point.” And for the remaining eighty-five pages of the narrative, the adult Quintana appears only once, when Didion mentions that she attended Christmas dinner.

If *The Year of Magical Thinking* were fiction, then again we’d conclude that Didion had failed to exercise her novelistic freedom wisely. Rather than following the plausible trajectory we projected from the earlier passage, she give us one that raises questions about her ability to construct a coherent plot: Why give this character so much prominence, create so much readerly interest in the instability about her illness, and then essentially drop her out of the narrative? Again any good editor would advise Didion-the-novelist either to eliminate the character or do a lot more with her.

If, however, we approach the narrative as nonfiction, then Didion’s handling makes good sense. She is observing the constraints of the extratextual reality when she says that there was very little she could do for Quintana at this point, and her handling is

consistent with her decision to keep Quintana's experience subordinated to her efforts to come to terms with her grief about losing John. More than that, she identifies the link between the events of Quintana's life and the events of her own in her resolution to devote her summer to the same general project as Quintana. Thus, textual phenomena that would be a sign of Didion's aesthetic deficiencies if she were writing fiction are actually signs of her aesthetic skill and of her ethically responsible approach to the constraints of the genre.

Again I do not claim that *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Year of Magical Thinking* represent all fictions and nonfictions, but I would claim that they are representative of two large classes of narrative. I would claim further that the analysis of these two cases supports the position that for the standard novel and the standard literary memoir there is often an inextricable connection between fictionality and the handling of plotting and probability. Consequently, we have good reason to question the dictum that "a good story is a good story regardless of its generic status." Nevertheless, these conclusions are just small steps toward our understanding of the often complex relationships among readerly assumptions and the broad genres of fiction and nonfiction.

¹ This discussion draws on my previous analysis of the Austen's revision in *Experiencing Fiction*.

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