

Let Go of Clean Corners, Break Open the Clouds – Seeking the Novelist’s Place in the Archives.

Published in May 2020 by the *Los Angeles Archives Collective*

[Seeking the Novelist’s Place in the Archives | Acid Free Magazine \(laacollective.org\)](https://laacollective.org)

In her essay collection *The Empathy Exams*, Leslie Jamison writes about the author James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, describing the book as “a magazine article gone rogue.” Part of the Farm Security Administration archiving program, the original work was to appear in a 1936 issue of *Fortune Magazine*, but ultimately got rejected by editors for its rambling nature. Finally published in 1941 and accompanied by the photographs of photojournalist Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* chronicles the life of Southern sharecropper families during the Great Depression. Over the course of nearly 500 pages, Agee weaves himself into the writing by examining his own placement within American poverty. He meanders, ultimately slipping out of the realm of archive-worthy journalism. In doing so he creates a literary experiment that readers either love or loathe to this day.

Jamison’s essay traces the parallels between herself and Agee when it comes to—as writers—falling short of maintaining focus on a reality outside of themselves. She, too, has set out to reflect on what she sees only to grow self-conscious of her place of privilege or preoccupied by fear, guilt or traumas. But while there may be shortcomings in the ability to see things objectively, Jamison emphasizes that what really matters about such writing is its functionality as a vehicle for “the stitching of a moral.”

The text of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is an archive of experiences of the Great Depression, just as Evans’ photos that accompany the book. But then this rogue, meandering book bursts with something else, too, I think.

Archive. The word has me seeing buildings full of folders, stacks of papers and photos, clouds full of documentaries. *Archive* has me seeing boxes—something hemmed in with corners to provide a permanent place. Something encased with black and white—indication that the value has been ordered.

I can’t help but think of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, with all its reflections and messy author intrusion, as something breaking the barriers of the archives. With all of Agee’s ponderings of his place within the document, isn’t he breaking a box? Mixing up all the papers? Tampering with a cloud?

With Agee, any chance for a clean corner is gone. He brings too much of his experience to it, too much worry about his shortcomings. He fusses too much in his head and it spills out everywhere. He can’t just let the records be. And so we can call it fiction, too. But it’s no less significant to call it fictional than to call it archival, right?

I like Jamison’s notion of such work as having a moral stitching. To think of Agee’s work this way hems back in the corners a bit.

X

There was a glitch in the life of the famous writer James Frey. In the mid-aughts he went from best-selling memoirist to getting shamed by Oprah Winfrey on her television show, after it came out that large passages of his memoirs weren’t true. Oprah, having included Frey in her Book Club, brought him onto her show and called him a liar. He had no idea she’d invited him on to do this.

I was an MFA student in writing at the time and had a professor who showed a clip of the episode in class. It was painful to watch. Frey eventually made a public apology. Oprah later apologized to him. He now writes for Pepsi. His next book, after those two controversial memoirs, got marketed as a novel. It,

too, became a best-seller and included this epigraph: *Nothing in this book should be considered accurate or reliable.*

Frey's success, post-public shaming, may be proof of our collective short attention span. Or, maybe our apathy. Or, maybe it's just, as Jamison says of Agee, that the true beating organ of the work lies in the overarching moral stitching—be it fact or fiction—and so we are good with just letting the text be text. What really matters is what moral we find within.

In class that day, watching Frey's beat-down by Oprah, we asked: *What is the responsibility of the writer to truth? Does he deserve such shame?* It's always hard to reach consensus in an MFA class, but we did agree that *fabrication* is not a word you want associated with your work. *Invention* sounds much nicer.

X

Let's call it a crossed line. When you take the true and filter in the not-so black and white. I've done it. Not in Frey's way, but more like Agee's. That intention of strictly documenting a record but then you find yourself standing in the way.

My first novel was about my experiences living for a year in Kurdistan, Iraq. This is what I wrote for *Necessary Fiction* following its publication, regarding my research methods:

I struggle with the word research. Research implies systematic observation and careful study. As an artist preoccupied with my internal responses to the world outside me, there was nothing systematic and careful to my engagement with Kurdistan — its environs, its people. I met it naturally reckless and messy. I scribbled, collected and cobbled. If I did research I did so with no methodology, no guiding objectives. I'm aware of (and in admiration of) others doing actual and concise research in and about Kurdistan. I can't confidently say what overlap, if any, might exist between our practices.

During an interview for the same book I was asked to assign percentages to how much of the book was factual versus fiction. It wasn't something I'd ever considered. I decided on 80% as the factual percentage. This surprised me. For some reason I thought I'd written more of a novel than I had. I wondered, had I archived something?

X

Some years later I set out to write a book of nonfiction. I wanted those hemmed in clean lines. I wanted to contribute something to the archives. I settled on Gyumri, Armenia—a former cultural capital of the Caucasus region, 80% destroyed after a 1988 earthquake, which took the lives of approximately 25,000. Over three decades later and thousands of Gyumri families still wait for permanent government housing. During my two research trips, I interviewed several people affected by the long-term devastation of the earthquake, spent time with the grassroots NGOs and recorded personal observations via notes, film and photographs. I also stayed with a banker named Levon, who advertised his personal home as a guest house, and who made advances toward me in the dark of his backyard one evening, too early into my stay.

I found this note to myself, written in preparation for my travels:

How have people adapted to rehabilitating and continuing life with limited/stunted assistance and resources? How are they utilizing what resources they have?

I set off for Armenia, serious about documentation and then I went home and wrote a novel. I went home with those field notes and interviews that reflected answers to questions about rehabilitation and resilience and weaved these things into a story about a foreign protagonist visiting the region who, among other unforeseen challenges, is violated by the banker whose house she stays at. As I reflected on the work I'd done, the documentation I had collected, the Agee effect settled in. Something about nonfiction felt cumbersome and restricting. I wanted to unhook the leash and just run about. I wanted to understand my experiences within the place I was documenting—so, I explored that intersection.

This is who I've realized I am as a writer, how my brain is wired. I can stray from the reality, but only when it includes some anchoring to reality. When I've dipped far into the archivable—the research serving as guardrails. Be it a photo I've taken or a photo I've seen. Be it an interview I've conducted myself or an interview I've read. This is where I feel I can really move forward.

It must have something to do with my desire to inform. I'm thinking of Jamison's *moral stitching* here. My desire to contribute some collected information that may grant some understanding of something. But so often I go back to that idea, as I imagine Agee did and perhaps Frey did (maybe?): what, as the writer, is my responsibility to the facts?

X

I leap to the question of, well, what can you learn from the writing? It's often thought that nonfiction is the informer and fiction is the entertainer. But this implies that creative input fails to lend itself to education. And that just isn't so.

The writer and PhD holding sociologist Malka Older talks of bringing her experiences, her international relief work, her understanding of the climate crisis, to her work of science fiction. On the surface, what could be further from being archive-esque than science fiction? But Older, in conversation about her writing, speaks of *world building*—imaginative worlds across the universe, or stories of artificial intelligence—and how such a way of building might inform our understanding of the world we live in, our folly as humans, our disasters and potential disasters. Is a short story about a future world mostly immersed under water not lending itself to being something archival? Is it not boxing something up for us to study, as the Farm Security Administration's archives teach us about the Great Depression? Older seems to create seemingly impossible worlds to make us reflect on what we really experience.

X

When I consider my responsibility as a writer, I think mostly about the people I have written about. It has always been a preoccupation—the people who let me record what they had to say, the people who even listened to my questions, the people who let me use their likeness but also let me morph them into new people. I've collected and contained these people on the page, and included myself in there as well, so that maybe someone somewhere might learn something from it. I can only hope I've done it right. I only know I've tried.