

On Writing On the Hillside with Apollo

By Diane Ayres

When my novel, "Other Girls," was published, the first question I was asked in a press interview was: "Is this story true?"

I couldn't help but laugh.

"Well, of course, it's a true story," I cried, "it's fiction!"

I was being facetious, obviously. But nine out of ten people I meet ask me this question, and I never handle it gracefully. I usually waffle, shrugging, yes and no, because my novel is as much a true confession as it is a pack of lies. If someone believes it, then I've done my job, which is best described as the Art of lying.

I mean "lying" in the sense that Oscar Wilde meant it when he said that "...lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art." Apotheosis. The manipulation and elevation of characters and situations into the realm of the ideal. This kind of lying is inspired and inspiring. Wilde actually wrote a literary essay entitled "The Decay of Lying," in which he bemoaned the rise of a journalistic approach to Art:

"We have mistaken the common livery of the age for the vesture of the Muses, and spend our days in the sordid streets and hideous suburbs of our vile cities when we should be on the hillside with Apollo. Certainly we are a degraded race, and have sold our birthright for a mess of facts."

I would love to hear what he had to say about Reality TV.

But Wilde seems to have foreseen the sorry state of lying today, as the line between fiction and nonfiction is crossed more frequently to produce "true" crime novels and nonfiction bestsellers containing dialogue and other passages fabricated by the author. And, of course, Reality TV is drama better suited to fiction than the truth it pretends to be. It's no wonder so many people believe that fiction is true and journalism is suspect. The recent editorial upset at *The New York Times* is a case in point, and it involves a young reporter, Jayson Blair, who had been playing fast and loose with facts.

And now comes the reappearance of the poster boy of confabulation himself, Stephen Glass, who disgraced *The New Republic* not long ago for writing fictitious scenarios to enhance his articles, which he passed off as factual. Glass is back in the public eye because he just published a novel, presumably fiction, but who knows? To make a play on an old expression, "no bad deed goes unrewarded." I heard he just got a reporting assignment from *Rolling Stone*. But these are a couple of frustrated fiction writers — if you ask me — who should have supplemented their dubious talent by going to law school.

I had my own experience with journalistic fiction after I graduated from college and got a job as an editorial assistant at *Pittsburgh Magazine*. Like many young fiction writers whose ultimate goal is to write a novel, I assumed that work-

ing at a magazine would be a natural and obvious first step to becoming a real writer. What I didn't anticipate was that the pressure of writing in that context and meeting deadlines would be such that the last thing I wanted to do when I got home was write anything. Not even a grocery list.

My first writing assignment was a very minor one, a short profile on the young publisher of a start-up magazine featuring the local arts scene called *Portfolio*, which attempted to emulate Andy Warhol's magazine, *Interview*. I met the guy and was absolutely charmed by his worldly background and artful vision. I turned in a flattering little piece, feeling rather pleased with myself because it had been a cinch.

Several months later I was coordinating a fashion shoot and the model took me aside to ask me if I had written the profile, and when I said yes, expecting to be complimented on my journalistic genius, she looked at me in a manner to convey that I was a complete idiot. It turns out that the publisher, who had impressed me with tales of his jet-setting childhood had, in fact, been born and raised in a small mill town outside of Pittsburgh. The model knew this because she had gone to high school with him. It turned out that everything he had told me, including his own name, was a lie.

Pittsburgh Magazine did not have a budget that allowed for fact checkers. Like a newspaper, writers were expected to do their own fact checking. But no one had ever briefed me on this process and it never occurred to me that a person would lie about who he is and where he's from for a publication in his hometown. I was lucky my editor was a live-and-learn kind of guy who would give a kid a break.

I like to think of that piece as my first work of fiction to be published in a magazine. Except in this story, the character has apotheosized himself. I was just the scribe.

But I was not long for the nonfiction world as a writer anyway. I found it frustrating and mind-numbing to be telling the truth all the time. Because I have this compulsion, after all, to move facts and characters like chess pieces around the board. I see it as a game that is only as serious and honest as the players who are playing it. And this is not a job skill you want in a journalist.

Essentially, I write fiction to entertain myself, which has the added advantage of making it a whole lot easier to bear criticism. I want my characters to be so real that they make me laugh. I want them to tell me what they are going to do next. I want to miss them and think about them long after The End. I want to fix a love object forever in time, like The Grecian Urn. I want to solve and resolve and revenge something that eluded me in reality. In order to do this I have to be hanging out up there "on the hillside with Apollo," turning a "mess of facts" into beautiful lies.

So, yes, of course my novel is true. And that's a lie.



Bill Simone