

Saying “Religion” Out Loud

Radiant Truths: Essential Dispatches, Reports, Confessions, and Other Essays.
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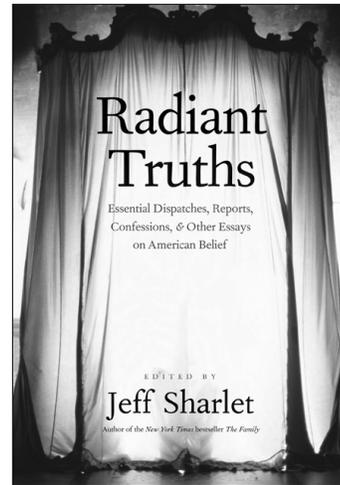
“The evidence of things not seen.” (Heb. 11:1, King James).

Jeff Sharlet, who the *Washington Post*'s Michael Washburn called “one of the shrewdest commentators on religion’s unexplored realms,” takes up the topic of “things unseen” (10) in his latest endeavor, an anthology of literary journalism that documents the vast landscape of American religion. As in the past, he does not disappoint.

In *Radiant Truths: Essential Dispatches, Reports, Confessions, and Other Essays*, Sharlet offers readers an eclectic mix of American religious experience through his collection of voices, “a cacophony choir” (9) of some of the nation’s finest literary journalists, from the well known to the lesser so. His roughly chronological treatment blends the words of Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, and Mark Twain—gods of the nineteenth-century American literary tradition—with those of their twentieth-century counterparts, experts of narrative nonfiction such as Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, Gary Wills, and Ellen Willis. Alongside these seminal authors, he introduces us to a new generation of “mutant journalists,” as he is prone to calling practitioners (Sharlet maintains a blog called *Mutant Journalism*), including Francine Prose, who shares the experience of shedding tears at the sight of Whitman’s words in Zuccotti Park during a protest of the Occupy Wall Street Movement.

A clever practitioner of the craft of literary reportage, Sharlet ends his anthology with the words of Prose to circle back to his entry point, Whitman’s *Specimen Days* (1863/1882). “A neat enough trick, but don’t let it fool you,” Sharlet warns in his introduction (3). A close read of the text will reveal that Prose’s untitled lines are offered as a means of hope for a brighter tomorrow—as a cloth to wipe away the tears spilled from Matthew Teague’s story of the innocent bloodshed of five Amish schoolgirls in “The Aftermath.”

Along the way, Sharlet offers readers narratives of the nation’s varied religious traditions and rituals. His anthology mirrors a patchwork quilt united by the editor’s woven thread of time, place, and voice. For instance, one can trace the strands of religious pilgrimage from Mark Twain’s *Innocents Abroad* (1869) to Ellen Willis’s *Truth and Consequences* (1977). Both narrators walk away from their journey to Jeru-



saalem unsatisfied, longing for something that they cannot yet find—whether it is an authentic experience or the willingness to endure the pain and sacrifice of servitude in pursuit of religious ecstasy. Willis’s plain prose and feminist overtones, as Sharlet acknowledges in his apt commentary, echoes the work of Meridel Le Sueur.

Sharlet offers a vision of politics as religion in Le Sueur’s “I Was Marching” (1934) and in an excerpt of Norman Mailer’s *Armies of the Night* (1968), and religion as politics in Barbara Grizzuti Harrison’s “Arguing with the Pope” (1994). Likewise, he explores the relationship between science and religion through Anne Fadiman’s “The Sacrifice” (1997).

Sharlet’s anthology is equal parts east and west, pagan and Christian, orthodox and fundamentalist. Within his text, he even manages to pay tribute to his mentor, Michael Lesy, who taught him at Hampshire College in the early 1990s, by including “Shochets” (1987). That narrative is of course a mentor tribute of its own, a eulogy for cultural historian Warren Susman as much as it is an exploration of ritual slaughters and the act of dying a good death.

“The stories collected here,” Sharlet tells readers in his introduction, fittingly entitled “This Mutant Genre,” “are about what happens when we say ‘religion’ out loud.” Harkening unto Sharlet’s own words, readers should not let the chronology fool them. “Periodization and demographic representation aren’t my concern here,” he writes. “This book is an anthology. A selection. Which is to say, as believers and unbelievers so often do, it’s personal” (3).

And, perhaps no one is better prepared to tell this admittedly personal story than Sharlet, a master of literary reportage. “Over the years,” he tells readers, “I’ve written about churches, temples, and Buddhist centers, reported on exorcisms (individual and group), prayer cells and prayer rallies, squinted at my notebook among thousands of teens thrilling violently to the Book of Judges. There were quieter moments too: kitchen table Shabbat takeout chicken with the last Yiddish writer . . . whiskey with Mormons; tea before a shrine to an anarchist martyr’s slingshot” (2).

Of course, any good reader of literary journalism already realizes this. Sharlet’s first book, *Killing the Buddha* (2004), written with Peter Manseau, was described by *Publishers Weekly* as “perhaps the most original and insightful spiritual writing to come out of America since Jack Kerouac first hit the road.” A careful scholar of literary journalism, however, was undoubtedly already aware of Sharlet and Manseau before the volume hit his or her local newsstands through *KillingtheBuddha.com*, an award-winning online literary magazine about religion and culture launched in 2000. Fans of the duo will be pleased that Sharlet included an excerpt from *Killing the Buddha*: “Heartland, Kansas,” the story of the participant observers’ jaunt with pagan witches deep in the forests of the Midwest.

Since that time, Sharlet has remained busy. From 2003 to 2009 he was a research scholar at New York University’s Center for Religion and Media. Now Mellon Assistant Professor of English at Dartmouth, he continues to serve as contributing editor for *Harper’s*, *Rolling Stone*, and many other magazines. The bestselling author and journalist, according to the *Post’s* Washburn, “belongs in the tradition of long-form, narrative nonfiction best exemplified by Joan Didion, John McPhee [and] Norman Mailer.”

A scholar of literary journalism quickly learns to expect the unexpected from Sharlet. He begins his anthology like a good historian, by reclaiming the lost lines from Marianne Moore's *Poetry* (1919). "Imaginary gardens with real toads in them," the paradox of Moore's work, Sharlet contends, "is at the heart of literary journalism, the practice of using fictional techniques to write factual stories" (1).

From there, he provides insight into the brand of literary journalism that he practices, participant-observation, and how he came to the investigation at hand. "I'm most interested in the subset of religion known as believe," he acknowledges. "So with as clear-as-can-be-disclaimers—'Look, I don't really share your beliefs . . . '—I've often joined in. . . . I've called down the moon with half-naked witches and laid hands—spiritually speaking, of course, on whoever asked me to do so, even knowing that my touch was most likely profane" (2). In doing so, Sharlet offers readers a deconstruction of religion and reality that is rooted in social constructionism and seminal works from literary journalism studies.

For Sharlet, it was necessary to embrace the mutant genre—despite or perhaps *because of* its inherent imperfections—to tell his story of how our individual and collective identities are rooted in a uniquely American brand of belief:

That "failure," literary journalism's only essential truth—the impossibility of perfect representation of reality, visible and otherwise—makes it uniquely suited for the subject of American religion, so often struggling to be one or the other, pious or democratic, communal or individual, rooted or transcendent. The story of this struggle is that of the selections I've made: American religion, a history in pieces" (15).

As Sharlet points out, literary journalism is often defined by a list of devices that it employs, but Sharlet's anthology offers scholars of literary journalism something more akin to the mash-up that he describes in his introduction, a blend of art and the who-what-where-when-why. *Radiant Truths* belongs on the shelves of scholars of literature, journalism, history, and American culture and should be cherished by all aficionados of literary journalism.
