

Phillip Lopate
Photograph by Sally Gall

A Eminent Essayist Shows and Tells

To Show and to Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction

by Phillip Lopate. New York: Free Press, 2013. Paperback, 225 pp., \$16

Portrait Inside My Head: Essays

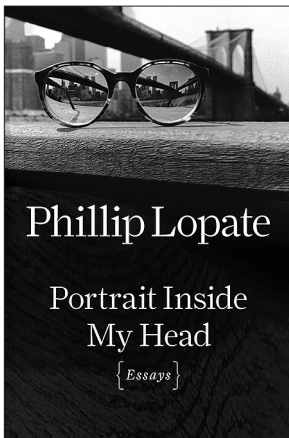
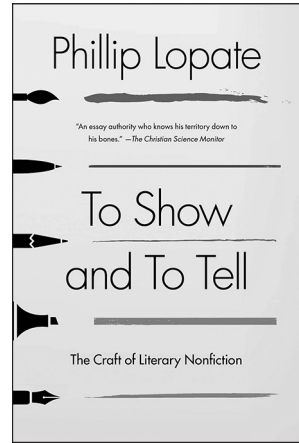
by Phillip Lopate. New York: Free Press 2013. Hardcover, 289 pp., \$26

Reviewed by Nancy L. Roberts, University at Albany, SUNY, United States

Phillip Lopate is one of our finest personal essayists, well known for his anthology *The Art of the Personal Essay* (1994). Now the director of the graduate nonfiction program at Columbia University has distilled the wisdom of his forty-some years spent as a writer and professor into an essential guide. He focuses particularly on the personal essay and memoir, but his insights could also apply to literary journalism. In fact, this slim work is loaded with insights that will help any student looking to master the genre, besides simply being an engaging read.

The chapter on research and personal writing, for example, succinctly offers some of this universal advice. “Good personal writing,” Lopate asserts, requires the writer “to go beyond the self’s quandaries, through research or contextualization, to bring back news of the larger world (25).” Research can help writers avoid endless “self-cannibalization” of their life stories: “[Y]ou may find your memory can only take you so far; you need to go back to the old neighborhood and walk around, or talk to old-timers, or read up on local history, or pore through genealogical archives, housing deeds, census records (116).” Furthermore, he writes, research can also pique a broader curiosity that “helps you break out of claustrophobic self-absorption and come to understand that you are not the only one who has passed down this road (116).”

Other chapters offer wisdom on the ethics of writing about others [“Never write to settle scores (84)”] and the importance of honoring fact [“Making things up, bending the facts, throws off my attempt to get as close as possible to the shape underlying experience or to the psychology that flows from the precisely real (81)], among other topics. Lopate’s tone throughout is that of a trusted teacher/confidant, with a distinctive



voice, wry sense of humor, and utmost honesty. *To Show and to Tell* is also enriched by Lopate's deep knowledge of literature. Indeed, the second half discusses at length several of his literary heroes: Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, James Baldwin, Edward Hoagland, and . . . Ralph Waldo Emerson. The choice of the latter may surprise some, but in the chapter entitled "How I Became an Emersonian," Lopate details convincingly how reading the Sage of Concord's 1,800-page *Selected Journals* made him a believer. He demonstrates how Emerson's journals "are the lost ark of American literature, the equivalent for literary nonfiction of *Moby Dick* in fiction or *Leaves of Grass* in poetry (164–65)." While some might disagree that Emerson is the "American Montaigne" (another of Lopate's heroes), the discussion inspires consideration of the role of writers' journals. Certainly they can be a repository of reflections that are "organic and improvisational" yet are still connected by a thrilling web of thought.

That seamless thread, linking seemingly disparate topics, is a hallmark of the sort of personal literary nonfiction writing (for example, essay and memoir) that Lopate particularly admires and practices so effectively himself. He cites Montaigne as the quintessential example of this sort of exploration, which when skillfully done can make an essay sing as "an open-ended adventure, an invitation to doubt and self-surprise" (107) rather than simply an argument that tries to persuade through a series of logical proofs. The same might be said for some of literary journalism's classic works, such as Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* or James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, although Lopate would disagree with the latter (see below).

A final, extensive bibliography forms a rough canon of exemplary works in literary nonfiction, such as classic autobiographies and memoirs (for example, Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, and Ulysses S. Grant's *Memoirs*). Later memoirs cited include Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*, Agnes Smedley's *Daughter of Earth*, and Mary McCarthy's *Memoirs of a Catholic Girlhood*. Among many essayists included are E.B. White, Virginia Woolf, and George Orwell. Loren Eiseley, Oliver Sacks, and John McPhee are found in the "nature, science, medicine, and the environment" category (apparently as examples of literary nonfiction writers). *To Show and to Tell* offers much for the aspiring writer of literary nonfiction as well as for anyone who enjoys reading the genre.

Lopate himself continues to demonstrate his mastery of the form in his fourth and newest collection of personal essays, *Portrait Inside My Head*. His style is consistently conversational and engaging as he traverses the varied terrain of his Brooklyn childhood, marriage and family life, sibling rivalry, reflections on Virginia Woolf's opinion that filmmakers should keep their hands off literature, why he is still a baseball fan after all these years, and many other topics. He invariably impresses with the wide range of his observations, keenly reported, original, and sometimes delightfully sardonic, as in his description of growing up:

. . . on the border of Bedford-Stuyvesant, a notoriously rough neighborhood over whose turf two mighty street gangs, the Bishops and the Chaplains, rumbled. . . . I would be shaken down by roving bands of kids when I strayed beyond the streets where I was recognized. . . . The curious thing was that sometimes they would let me pass, if I said the right thing, pressed the right button, sounded neither too fearful

nor too flippant, but sufficiently respectful; they would laugh and say, “We was just playing with you,” and let me by. Other times they took every penny I had. It didn’t have to be a violent encounter if you played it right: more like a loan to a neighbor you knew would never be paid back.

Getting robbed was a straightforward transaction, almost preferable to the teasing, ominous game of “What you lookin’ at” (24)?

In another selection, “James Agee: Nobility Overload,” Lopate candidly lays out a provocative, alternate view. The celebrated literary journalist, he writes, was:

a prime candidate for literary sainthood: handsome, tortured good looks, a cross between Montgomery Clift and Robert Ryan; body-punishing habits (alcohol, cigarettes, work jags, insomnia), a rebellious streak, many loves, obsession with integrity, and an early death. He belongs to that bruised, vulnerable, too-good-for-this-world post club of actors, writers, and rock stars whose authenticity was vouchsafed by premature passing (253).

Lopate’s beef with Agee centers around one of the main reasons for the writer’s canonization, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which he terms “one of the most unread and unreadable classics, which educated people would rather compliment than endure” (255). Lopate confesses that he only managed to get through it on the third try, because he was forced to do so by a reviewing assignment. But the book’s “thick fog of lyrical rhetoric, and its total lack of forward momentum” (255) were a hindrance. He has much more to say about *Famous Men*, ultimately finding more value in Agee’s film criticism and his “beautiful, heartbreaking novel” (254), *A Death in the Family*. Lopate’s is a fresh and witty take, enriched by his willingness to come clean and reveal his own prejudices and perspectives. In this essay and in the rest, including, of course, those that deal frankly with the details of his own marriages and fatherhood, he shows us the riches to be mined by reading appreciatively—and creating—literary nonfiction of this more personal vein. Together, *To Show and To Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction* and *Portrait Inside My Head: Essays* demonstrate that Phillip Lopate should be celebrated as one of “Those who can, teach!”
