



self-reflexive, it begins “to stink” (xiv).

This is where we begin to see the clear boundary between the lyric essays of the anthology and the disciplines of literary journalism. While the essays are often intriguing and sometimes illuminating, the focus of most pieces is squarely on the authorial self, rather than the other—and here is where we find the defining margin between the license of creative nonfiction and the ethical demands and rigorous reporting of literary journalism.

Many of the stories are told from the first-person point of view—the hermit crab allows authors to play with memoir and self-expression under the cover of, and in conversation with, their chosen borrowed form. While most of these essays entertain, they also diverge sharply (to a journalism educator’s or scholar’s eye) from examples of literary journalism in which reporters actively investigate the events of their own lives. Journalism’s shining example is David Carr’s *The Night of the Gun*, in which Carr wraps fierce, fact-checked reportage into literary craft. No personal essay in this collection suggests anything like that degree of shoe-leather rereporting of personal experiences.

But, although that is a useful benchmark for literary journalism, that is not what these essays attempt to accomplish. When addressed solely as examples of the lyric essay and an imaginative springboard, this collection is a pleasure. “Grand Theft Auto” by Joey Franklin, which uses the structure of a police report to describe the theft of the author’s worthless car, is an example of the collection’s stronger work. There’s genuine humor and candor in this approach, particularly when the author hopes his car will not be found, but there is also a flight of imagination in which he conjures the thief’s point of view, placing the reader in both the protagonist and antagonist roles. Likewise, “Ok, Cupid” by Sarah McColl plays on the dating profile to present a clever and poignant view of a selected life story that a dating profile would never disclose.

This is not to say that a “found” form is always effective. As with all experiments, some are primarily useful because they fail, and several pieces in the anthology seem more hobbled by form than freed by it. “Rubik’s Cube, Six Twisted Paragraphs,” by Kathryn A. Kopple, is perhaps best described as six micro essays that all begin in the same place and end in completely different lines of thought, depending on how the idea is manipulated. The problem is that (unlike the Rubik’s puzzle) there is no ultimate solution to the jumble of thoughts about Kopple’s relationships and health. Likewise, “Solving My Way to Grandma” by Laurie Easter is more cute than charming, offering a crossword puzzle and clues as Easter anticipates life as a grandparent. It reads as a form experiment rather than a story that could not be told without cover, as these essays are presented. And Michael Martone’s essay in the form of an author bio is cleverly placed in the contributors’ section, but is nearly lost because of its location, and does no particular service either as a biography or an attempt to reveal a difficult truth.

But the question at hand is whether *The Shell Game*, which certainly belongs in the nonfiction tent, should be invited into the special section reserved for literary journalism. On the whole, no. That said, there are a few essays within the collection

that might find a place in a literary journalism course, in particular those essays that demonstrate both an interest in reportage and, less common in the lyric essay, an interest in the world beyond the author's tender self-examination.

In "Falling in Love with a Glass House," Jennifer Metsker eschews the typical approach of either a biography of the architect, in this case Mies van der Rohe, or a descriptive tour through his famous glass house (the first ever designed, but not the first built, due to his lollygagging). Rather, she writes her essay in the descriptive text associated with architectural plans, with sections like "Figure 1: Preliminary Plan of the Glass House," and "Figure 15: A Page from Edith's Memoir." The essay weaves the history of the transparent house with the history of its client and first occupant Edith Farnsworth, a "bitter love story between her and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe" (49), and Metsker's own disappointments in marriage. This, more than any other piece in the collection, feels inflected with a journalist's reflex to be decentered as a subject, and to structure a story around precise, carefully reported details.

And ultimately, this is where we find the hermit crab scrambling along the border between lyric essay and literary journalism. With a few exceptions, this collection feels placed far from Carr's rigor and firmly on the side of the bad-boy lyric essayist John D'Agata, who told *Electric Literature* in July 2016 that "we do the literary essay a disservice . . . when we expect from it the same kind of verifiability as we would from a medical textbook" (para. 19).

As long as the reader is not confused about the terms of engagement, the world of letters is enriched when some forms of creative nonfiction explore ideas, moods, or memories without a journalist's devotion to verification. The tent of nonfiction is large enough to be inclusive, unless authors actively falsify information (as D'Agata did in *The Lifespan of the Fact*, arguing, for example, that he had every right to change the name of the very real Boston Saloon to the "The Bucket of Blood").

But what we observe in this collection is that the hermit crab essay is designed to protect ideas that are fragile and defenseless without a borrowed form to wrap around themselves. If we extend the metaphor, narrative and literary journalism are more akin to turtles or tortoises—creations whose defense is part of the whole structure, inherently muscular and tough.

So, although *The Shell Game* is of interest as a literary work, and will be of particular use in creative writing and creative nonfiction classrooms, its primary use in a literary journalism course would be as a boundary line or contrast, rather than a path to follow.