

## Lyric Essay versus Literary Journalism

*The Shell Game: Writers Play with Borrowed Forms*

edited by Kim Adrian. Omaha, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. Illustrations. Notes. Paperback, 252 pp., USD\$24.95

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To begin with a statement of the obvious, nonfiction is not always journalism. Every now and then, a book comes along to refresh that bright line where it has become scuffed. *The Shell Game*, a collection of thirty essays that play with borrowed forms—the alphabet, an online dating ad, a product description, a children's game—is the latest survey of that border.

The title refers to hermit crab essays, a subspecies of lyric essay that Brenda Miller introduced in *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction* (McGraw Hill, 2004). Here, in her foreword to *The Shell Game*, Miller describes a 2001 trip to Desolation Sound, one of the most austere spots in the Pacific Northwest. Miller was seeking inspiration and noticed a soft, vulnerable hermit crab scuttling along the shore in search of a protective shell as it explored the world. The metaphor of borrowing a shell became shorthand for adapting an existing form to provide a structure, or cover, for the more vulnerable material within.

*The Shell Game* acts as a companion to *Tell It Slant*, providing examples of the hermit crab essay across a range of borrowed forms and subject matter. The selection of essays published over the past fifteen years in books, literary journals, magazines, and websites presents the broad range of the possibilities of the form. The authors themselves have found shelter in a range of places, from venerable publishing houses such as Knopf, to the twenty-first century's additions to publishing spaces, including the *Rumpus* and *Electric Literature*.

Kim Adrian's introduction demonstrates the potential and beauty of the hermit crab approach as she lays out the history of the metaphor using kingdom, phyla, species, etc., to identify the literary heritage and taxonomy of the hermit crab essay itself. Domain becomes Anima, Class becomes Litterae, Family is Lyrica, Diet is Omnivorous, etc. Adrian furthers the metaphor as she relates the types of stories in the anthology to crabs—some look funny, the charm of many resides in their imperfections, and they may take any form. But, in each case, the form is the vehicle to which meaning is married. Her introduction, as lyrical as it is, is often laugh-out-loud funny, especially when she acknowledges the risk of the form: When it becomes too

The image shows a screenshot of a book metadata form. The form fields are as follows:

- Title:** The Shell Game
- Author:** Edited and with an Introduction by Kim Adrian. A dropdown menu is open showing options: "Foreword by Brenda Miller", "Postscript by Chyenne Nimes", "Bibliography & borrow diary, Sep. 11 ad. selection provoking a brood", and "Writers Play with Borrowed Forms".
- Summary:** (Empty field)
- ISBN:** 978-0-8032-9670-3
- Genre:** Lyric Essays. A dropdown menu is open showing options: "Science Fiction", "Fantasy", and "Western". Below the menu is the text "Select a genre for this book:".
- Language:** (Empty dropdown menu)
- Submit:** (Submit button)

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.