

## Truth-Telling in the Unsettling Present

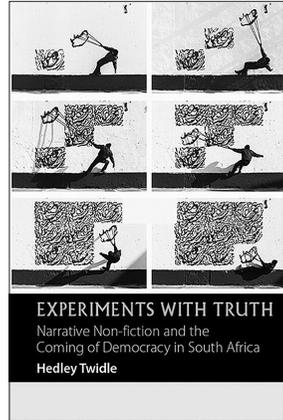
*Experiments with Truth: Narrative Non-fiction and the Coming of Democracy in South Africa* by Hedley Twidle. Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2019. Footnotes. Bibliography. Index. Hardback, 250 pp., USD\$99.

Reviewed by Anthea Garman, Rhodes University, South Africa

Hedley Twidle's *Experiments with Truth*, which he offers as the first book-length response to democratic South Africa's boom in nonfiction, is an intellectually ambitious and exciting work. Up until this point, those of us teaching, critiquing, and researching the country's recent prolific production of nonfiction texts have had to rely on a special issue of *Safundi: the Journal of South African and American Studies*, titled "Beyond Rivalry: Literature/History, Fiction/Non-fiction," edited by Rita Barnard (volume 13, numbers 1 and 2, 2012); as well as book reviews in the media and the occasional master's or doctoral thesis to aid our thinking. Twidle has written a challenging, multi-faceted, and dense work, which takes a new and surprising approach to the matter.

Twidle quickly dispenses with the fiction/nonfiction boundary and declares that he is going to work across the "modalities of truth-telling" (to lift his description of the intentions of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 4). He also declares his interest in compelling and risk-taking writing which has manifested itself—particularly in the post-apartheid period—in three genres of "non-fictive impulses": (1) literary journalism, testimonial narrative, and reportage; (2) the critical essay (which contains personal and political histories); and (3) life writing in its many forms and registers (3).

Twidle explains his method for the book (which is to read some surprising mixes of authors and texts against and with each other) as rooted in three "intellectual formations" (8). The first is literary studies, and it is in this section that he not only helpfully explicates the "non" in nonfiction but also states his disdain for the term (it's like talking about other clothes as "non-socks," he says) and his intention not to be caught up in the "problem of rivalry" (8) that the terms fiction and nonfiction set up between creativity and documentary. The second is historiographical, the writing on and archiving of the past. In particular, he is interested in how the ways of telling (and therefore the settled knowledge) of the colonial, apartheid past that South Africa has had, affects truth-telling today. This he returns to again as a refrain across the book, both because he is alert to the many ways denial of uncomfortable truth operates but because he is also conscious of the strong possibility that the past might also be "in-



appropriate, unpredictable or unusable” for the needs of the present (13). The third root is critical and postcolonial theory, which means that his sense of the present—its authors’ situations and its writings—is how unsettled, how fraught, how complex it is to come to terms with (often literally). Twidle pairs the non in nonfiction with the non in nonwhite and immediately shows how the use of the non is also a negation, an unwillingness to give up the normative, to let others speak their own truth from their own positions and in modes not easily recognizable.

Another strong rationale for writing this book is that Twidle is convinced of the amazing *encounter* (a word that runs through the book) readers can have with writing. This sense of the magic that can happen through encounter leads him to go back to some texts (like Sol Plaatje’s *Native Life in South Africa*, and the *Drum* writers), not for the purpose of finding an originary story for the nonfiction output and trajectory of this country’s recent writing, but to show that encounters with authors and their texts know neither time nor genre nor other boundary in their ability to startle and arrest. So the surprising texts he puts together in this book presumably have had that power of encounter for him, and across his chapters he shows how these texts encounter—and illuminate or cast shadows on each other. Also, behind that word’s positive use is the specter of colonial encounter, which haunts the South African past and present and therefore all its cultural outputs.

Having established that this book is not interested in an encyclopedic overview of the South African situation, and having also declared his politics (that the present is a tricky era in deed and word, that the past is not to be trusted as a source of help), Twidle then sets about testing other components beloved of the nonfiction theorist. It must be said that he makes no apology for rooting this work in the moment of writing—which is the disillusioned, frustrated, 25-years-after-the-demise-of-apartheid period, when almost every South African, black or white, sees no easy way out of a democracy that promised so much and delivered so little.

In chapter 2 he takes on the easy, simple, beautiful stories told of struggle and heroism against apartheid by choosing as his vehicle a protagonist Demetrios Tsafendas, the man who assassinated apartheid architect Hendrik Verwoerd. Tsafendas’s chroniclers have treated him as mad, as a drifter, as a person with no real intention or presence, who somehow perpetrated a murder. Yet this man struck a blow at the heart of the apartheid machine. Only recently are different stories emerging that give meaning to Tsafendas’s life and act. But they sit uneasily alongside stories such as Mandela’s soaring and lyrical autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. Twidle uses the telling of Tsafendas’s story to introduce meaninglessness as a trope in some of the stories of the past.

He then turns to the pivotal historical moment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (which functioned in the early years of the new democracy). Here he looks at the stories of confession, failure, betrayal, and recognition of wrong. He is particularly interested in the irresolution of the commission’s work, the aftereffects of living now with a sense of messy, unfinished business, and in this third chapter he probes stories that chronicle admissions of guilt and wrongdoing that never satisfy because either the confession is too shoddy and self-serving to be believed or too

well-crafted to be believed. He also takes on apartheid security agents' destruction of documents, which continues to bedevil the present by making all sorts of truth unknowable.

The best bits of the book are the ones where Twidle turns a sharp eye on techniques and tropes that have become commonplace in literature and literary journalism, such as the unreliable narrator. It's one thing for a reader to know that the narrator is signaling his or her unreliability, but what if that narrator is also unreliably unreliable, Twidle asks, giving examples of authors who are situated in compromising ways in relation to their stories and subjects. He spends a chapter focusing on the three early books of the much-awarded and feted Jonny Steinberg, which chronicle a farm murder in a rural area, the gang system in South Africa's jails, and the case of young men who will not test for HIV because of the stigma attached to the disease. Twidle shows that Steinberg's "I" position shifts from autobiographic to journalistic across his texts in a somewhat unstable and questionable way. He shows that Steinberg's *contracts* with his subjects, the individuals he makes the focus of his deep, sustained inquiries, are also unstable, often ending with the subject unhappy with the resulting text. He also unpacks the various kinds of evidence authors use to convince their readers of the value of the stories they are telling. While many authors are drawn to those complex spaces where great gaping holes in archival knowledge and memory are ripe for creative speculation, Twidle shows also just how these holes make truth-telling so risky a game. This may sound as though Twidle is judging bad storytelling by weighing it up against the checklist for good nonfiction. This is not the case. Twidle is emphasizing how the situation in South Africa, with its bizarre past and unsatisfying present, makes the apprehension of the truth difficult to render, and also for writers to claim to have rendered it. The result is the risky texts that are at once compelling and allow for an encounter, but which are also unstable and of this time of instability.

This unpacking of the intimate and terrible context-texts relationship of South Africa is the intellectual contribution of this book. Twidle has offered a way of seeing storytelling, truth-telling, and being here at this moment that has not been realized quite in this way before. The book culminates in a chapter that brings us into the #Feesmustfall, #Rhodesmustfall present, and speculates about how nonfiction is going to find its way into the future with a new generation of storytellers who have developed a brand of resistance to the present that is a powerful break with ways of telling that have become familiar for this genre. It is clear from this chapter that this unsettling present moment infects the whole book and drives the inquiry into the usefulness of the past, the positionalities of the authors who have reached the highest echelons of the nonfiction publishing industry, and the kinds of stories that to date have been told in a multiplicity of ways.

Twidle has called his book (after Gandhi) "experiments with truth," and it is clear that it is not just Twidle who is experimenting but all South African writers—fiction and nonfiction—who are trying to grasp for truth in a strange and challenging land.