The Art of Fact: Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction
(review)
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emergence of the detective figure in the 19th century (using Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*) provides an excellent historical and theoretical segue into the deconstructive readings in the essays by Christianson, Birns and Birns, and Farrell.

This collection provides uniformly excellent readings of the “canonical” texts of detective fiction. As noted in the afterword, it certainly delves into the political and gendered ideologies embedded in detective fiction, perhaps more thoroughly into politics than gender. The absence of an essay using feminist narrative theory to examine breakdowns, changes, or experiments in using forms other than the traditional phallocentric narrative structure seems a significant absence. Another important absence is any significant discussion of racial or postcolonial ideology in the genre. Perhaps the second best effect (after the revelations of the essays) of *Cunning Craft* is my desire for the quick appearance of a second volume that deals even more thoroughly with these two issues as well as other aspects of a genre more flexible and expansive than we ordinarily conceive.

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Despite the increasing number of writers who are turning to nonfiction, there have only been half a dozen or so books on contemporary nonfiction prose. Lounsberry attempts to contribute to this slim corpus by providing a taxonomy for dealing with the works of five writers: Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe, John McPhee, Joan Didion, and Norman Mailer. The major merit of *The Art of Fact* is its exhaustiveness. Lounsberry deals with all the nonfiction works of the five writers and also comments on thematic possibilities of works in progress. Compared with the more sophisticated formal analyses of John Hellman in *Fables of Fact* and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh in *The Mythopoeic Reality*, however, *The Art of Fact* fails to substantially add to our understanding of nonfiction prose.

Part of the problem here lies in the simplistic nature of the categorization offered. Lounsberry calls nonfiction writers “realtors” and identifies four characteristics of their works: “documentable subject matter” as opposed to “invented;” “exhaustive research;” the use of “scene” or recasting events in narrative form; and “fine writing: a literary prose style.” Obviously, any attempt to deal with the formal aspects of nonfiction prose on these grounds is apt to flounder. The author not only maintains questionable distinctions between reporting and narrating, popular and literary writing but also defines “fine writing” in a manner hardly useful for the stated purposes. Lounsberry’s association of “fine writing” with the use of assonance, alliteration, and metaphor, for instance, can do little to accomplish the purpose of separating “literary nonfiction from the glut of nonfiction written in pedestrian prose.”

There is potential in Lounsberry’s attempt to link contemporary literary nonfiction to early prose narrative forms like the “news/novels” of the seventeenth
and eighteenth centuries from which the novel emerged. Thus the most commendable chapter in the book is the one on Tom Wolfe in which the author demonstrates Wolfe's appropriation of the Puritan sermon and his effort to speak as a contemporary Jeremiah single out "specific cultural forms for individual attack." This kind of sustained cultural and formal analysis is, however, missing from most of the book. The attempt to read John McPhee as a contemporary version of Emerson, for instance, is hampered by the author's literal analysis of images. The reader does not gain much cultural insight by knowing that McPhee's interest in Emersonian circles is evident in his choice of writing about basketball and oranges.

The Art of Fact does not provide us with an aesthetics of literary nonfiction but with isolated moments of useful analysis. Readers will be quite interested in the sustained analysis of the rite of passage in The Armies of the Night, the creation of the Whitmanian persona in Advertisements for Myself, and the use of the Jeremiah voice by Wolfe but less so in image of light in Joan Didion's works or in the listing of fathers and sons in Gay Talese's works.

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OTHER BOOKS RECEIVED