What a story does

GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS

Janet Malcolm

FORTY-ONE FALSE STARTS Essays on artists and writers 320pp. Granta. £20. 978 1 84708 846 8 US: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$27. 978 0 374 15769 2

here has always been a great resistance to the work of Janet Malcolm. Behind the placid, measured, artful prose is a great destabilizing force. The basic point to which she returns in all of her work that we read books, and events, and people, not in the way they are intended, or in the way of some distantly omniscient observer, but in the idiosyncratic, conditioned, inventive way that we must - is not something for which she is easily forgiven. The biggest flap about this came as a response to The Journalist and the Murderer (1990), her account of a for ourselves. The second camp could be plaufraud suit brought by the convicted murderer Jeffrey MacDonald against a journalist, Joe Wolfe left out because, though they, too, bor-McGinniss, who had consistently misrepre- rowed the techniques of fiction, they wrote guilt as a way to gain access and compliance. such as A. J. Liebling and St Clair McKelway In the two decades since that book's appear- or, to choose the two that seem to have had ance, despite the general acknowledgement that it is a masterpiece, Malcolm is still begrudged her frontal attack on our defences. Just this past year, the filmmaker Errol Morris couldn't help but bash her, in his own book about the alleged MacDonald murders, A Wilderness of Error, for a passage in which Malcolm writes, on receipt of a mountain of trial documents,

I know I cannot learn anything about MacDonald's guilt or innocence from this material. It is like looking for proof or disproof of the existence of God in a flower – it all depends on how you read the evidence. If you start out with a presumption of his guilt, you read the documents one way, and another way if you presume his innocence. The material does not "speak for itself".

Morris's canards about journalism and the "relativity of truth" are reminders that Malcolm's work is never done: he represents one more defender of the fantasy that there are such things as facts that speak for themselves - a story that itself dictates the way it ought to be told, a story that has silenced its competing versions. It's not that Malcolm doesn't think it matters if MacDonald killed his wife or not; of course she knows it matters. It's that it's not actually material to the story she is interested in telling, which isn't about the the problem.

the idea that there is no material that speaks ing. Along with Ian Frazier, Jamaica Kincaid for itself, one might propose that, in postwar and George W. S. Trow, Malcolm belongs to ceedings. The latter strain is about an unholy whose anthology The New Journalism (1973) of the New Journalism was petering out. Malcreated a small canon of writers who were colm, never given to expressionist preening, united by very little except for the fact that did not go in for the strategies of Norman almost none of them wrote for the New Mailer or Joan Didion. Nor did she go in for according to New Yorker apocrypha is the tive everybody pays obeisance to. Malcolm, one piece William Shawn claimed to regret by contrast, is for grown-ups. material", we are only ever speaking for our-

selves, well then we might as well just speak sibly described as all of the scenic writers that



murder itself but about the ramifications of the greatest influence on Malcolm herself, the fraud trial. Morris thinks that because a Joseph Mitchell and Hannah Arendt. These murder happened, Malcolm has to care about writers believed that just because there is an it, or she is ignoring the plea of the fact. Mal- "I" that is speaking for the material doesn't colm thinks that the very idea of "something mean that they have to abjure a consensus the journalist has to care about" is precisely idea of accuracy – not the pointless transcendental kind, but the familiar sort that can be Among journalists who have assimilated more or less assured by strenuous fact-check-American media, there have been two camps. the generation of great New Yorker writers The first is represented by Tom Wolfe, who came of age around the time the legacy Yorker. (The exception was an excerpt from the self-righteous truth-mongering of Errol Truman Capote's In Cold Blood, which Morris, who demands that there be one narra-

having published.) A commonality among a Her new collection, Forty-One False few of these so-called New Journalists was Starts, is an assortment of previously uncola turn inward; if, when we speak "for the lected pieces. About a third of the volume comprises critical essays, on J. D. Salinger

and Edith Wharton and the writer Gene Stratton-Porter, of primary interest only to the Malcolm completist. Another third is taken up by her later writings on photographers and their practice, her first subject for the New Yorker. What she has to say about photography hasn't changed much since her columns from the 1970s: it is a medium made wonderful and problematic by the fact that it appears to be documentary and is in fact fictive. Photographs do not represent; they communicate. In a lovely piece about Irving Penn's nudes, for example, she writes that "photography, which might have been expected to arrive on the scene as a kind of rescue mission of the body, bent on restoring it to its sented his true feelings about MacDonald's for the New Yorker. These included writers native naked state, in fact only perpetuated bowdlerizations of art". The writing about photography lays the basis for her overarching idea about journalism itself: it's always a form of expressionism cowering behind a naively realist front. The final third of the new volume are two of her best profiles, one of the former Editor-in-Chief of Artforum magazine Ingrid Sischy, and one of the painter David Salle, and the book is basically a (welcome) excuse to get this classic work back into circulation.

This is in part because her writing about art-making - Forty-One False Starts is subtitled Essays on artists and writers - is slightly different in temperament from her other work. When the entirety of Malcolm's work is no longer seen as a discrete series of tight, judicious and shrewd stories, but as a monumental, sprawling, reckless epic, it will be clear that over the course of her career she has drawn up sides. On one side - in the trilogy of Psychoanalysis: The impossible profession (1980), In the Freud Archives (1983), and The Journalist and the Murderer, and then in their companion pieces, The Crime of Sheila McGough (1999) and Iphigenia in Forest Hills (2011) – she takes up, in order, psychoanalysis, journalism and the law. On the other side - beginning with the early photography essays in Diana and Nikon (1980), moving through the Sischy and Salle pieces in this collection and then into her later books on Chekhov and Gertrude Stein - she writes about art. Both sides are about relationships of what she once called "unholy power". The difference is that the former strain is about an unholy power unevenly distributed between a professional - an analyst, a reporter, an attorney - and a lay person - a patient, a source, a client – with great ego-investment in the propower distributed between a professional an artist – and herself.

In the psychoanalysis book, her first monograph after a decade of photography criticism, Malcolm announces that her great trope is going to be Freud's idea of the transference:

the phenomenon of transference - how we all invent each other according to early blueprints - was Freud's most original and radical discovery. The idea of infant sexuality and of the Oedipus complex can be accepted with a good deal more equanimity than the idea that the most precious and inviolable of entities - personal relations - is actually a messy jangle of

misapprehensions, at best an uneasy truce between solitary fantasy systems.

What's at stake is exactly what Morris is worried about: to what extent might we call our interactions "real"? Can we ever see and thus tell stories about - other people as they "are"? Or are we doomed to "grope around for each other through a dense thicket of absent others"?

The answer Malcolm gives over the course of her career is that we can sidestep this unanswerable question by asking not about what a story is, but what a story does, not about truth, but about consequences. We shouldn't ask, "Am I seeing this thing clearly?" but "What narrative aim do I serve?" This means admitting that photography isn't an exercise in objectivity, but an art, and that journalism isn't a matter of "stenography", as Morris would like it to be, but of storytelling. She is interested in psychoanalysis and the law because they are both transferential relationships that have clear enough objectives to render the "problem" of transference ultimately moot: a therapist tries to make you more functional and flexible, less committed to bad old patterns, and a lawyer tries to get you off. The trouble with journalism is that the objectives, and thus the balance of that unholy power, are less clear. In response to Joan Didion's oft-repeated platitude that "we tell ourselves stories in order to live", Malcolm asks: which stories? to whom? And why? Who is entertained by these stories, who enlightened, who enriched, and who

Malcolm is famous for saying that, by way of reportorial self-defence, "the more pompous talk about freedom of speech and 'the public's right to know'; the least talented talk about Art; the seemliest murmur about having to earn a living". "Seemly" is her favourite word of praise, and in all of her works we meet characters who justify their decisions, when all else fails, by appeals to economic need; in that case, at least the objective is clear. The journalist has the temerity to make his or her version of events the public one, the one with the best odds at distribution and posterity. But, given our anxieties about what we can ever really know about another person, how can we ever have any confidence that the journalist's account deserves to become official? The best we can do is make sure the journalist is playing by the rules. It's a sociological solution, not an epistemological one, but it works fine for our purposes. It's why Malcolm had to get sued for In the Freud Archives: she had to show that

THE EDWIN MELLEN PRESS

The Use of Imaginary, Historical, and Actual Maps in Literature

> Dr. John Wyatt 978-0-7734-4547-1

Publish your scholarly book with Mellen peer reviewed / no subsidies

www.mellenpress.com

misinterpreted Malcolm's point as the idea that a journalist's story is always a distortion, but that's precisely wrong: it's that the very idea of distortion begs the question.

The premiss behind her writing about art is that artists are those best in control of their be able to hold their own against the rivalrous tic subjects, who prattle on vainly and vulnerably in the hope that somebody else might dash and prolific "auto-fictionalizer" freed tell their story for them, artists don't need her from having to wrestle with her own tensomebody else to give a definitive account. In other words, they are accustomed to treating themselves like other people. This is what's going on in the title essay, "41 False Starts", a 1994 profile of the painter David Salle. Salle, along with Julian Schnabel and Jean-Michel Basquiat, was one of the young New York painters of the 1980s who brought a new vividness - and new money - to an art scene quietened by post-minimalism and conceptualism. "To write about the painter David Salle is to be forced into a kind of parody of his melancholy art of fragments, quotations, absences – an art that refuses to be any one thing or to find any one thing more interesting, beautiful, or sobering than another." This comes in the fortieth of the forty-one sections that comprise the essay, each one a possible opening to a different sort of magazine profile of the artist. Malcolm has

dency to undermine the stories to which her non-artist subjects cling so tenaciously.

Salle has given many – dozens of – interviews. But he is remarkably free of the soul-sickness that afflicts so many celebrities, who grow overly interested in the persona bestowed on them by journalism. Salle cultivates the public persona, but with the detachment of someone working in someone else's garden. He gives good value - journalists come away satisfied but he does not give himself away.

Throughout the piece, Salle is protean and elusive; the minute Malcolm pins him down, he reinvents himself. Ultimately what emerges from the piece is a thrilling stalemate, a rendering of precisely that reinvention.

The heart of Forty-One False Starts, though, and arguably the heart of Malcolm's epic, is "A Girl of the Zeitgeist", a 1986 profile of Ingrid Sischy, who was then the young

her version of events would withstand final come to this strategy – the most formally Editor of the recently reconceived and often (which is to say, legal) scrutiny. People have inventive thing she has done, though it never inscrutably hip Artforum. It's not a piece we have seen Sischy ministering like a night feels gimmicky - because of what Salle him- about an artist, like Salle, but about a woman nurse to her writers, serenely being abused in self is like: Salle, whose work is all quota- who seemed, from the outside, to be at the public by Richard Serra, and hanging out at tion, mimicry and collage, orders his life as very centre of the milieu that made Salle and the Palladium, we understand that Krauss's an ongoing performance of disorder. One can Schnabel rich and famous: the piece touches tell that Malcolm had particular fun with the on the transformations of that art world; the piece, because it allowed her simultaneously controversy about the public role of art in the with Krauss because Krauss was the sort of own stories. In other words, knowing what to indulge her drive for order (for the accu- wake of the hearings that removed a Richard they know about story-making, they ought to rate narrative) and for disorder (the acknowl- Serra sculpture from a Lower Manhattan that Malcolm expected Sischy to be. edgement that any one of a number of accu- plaza; and the conflict over Western projecjournalistic interloper; unlike most journalis- rate stories exist about any given mess). But, tion in a MoMA show which lazily juxta- isn't the unreliability of an auto-fictionalizer more than anything, writing about such a slap- posed modernist and tribal objects. At just but her own. In the final scene, there's an over seventy-five pages, it was presumably almost audible click as a new door is opened too short to be published as its own book, but in her oeuvre, the way the post-Freudian dishad it been, it would surely be seen now as covery that you could work with the counterone of her major works.

> Malcolm has always seen rooms as psychothe piece with one of her finest perform-

one of the most beautiful living places in New York. Its beauty has a dark, forceful, willful character. Each piece of furniture and every object of use or decoration has evidently had to pass a severe test before being admitted into this disdainfully interesting room - a long, mildly begloomed rectangle with tall windows at either end, a sachlich white kitchen area in the center, a study, and a sleeping balcony But perhaps even stronger than the room's aura of commanding originality is its sense of absences, its evocation of all the things that have been excluded, have been found wanting, have failed to capture the interest of Rosalind Krauss - which are most of the things in the world, the things of "good taste" and fashion and consumerism, the things we see in stores and in one another's houses. No one can leave this loft without feeling a little rebuked; one's own house suddenly seems cluttered, inchoate, banal. Similarly, Rosalind uncharitable - makes one's own "niceness" seem somehow dreary and antagonistic.

Of course, by the end of the piece, in which exclusivity and hauteur is just a foil for the profound decency of Sischy. Malcolm begins person - showily and dramatically herself -

This is a piece in which Malcolm's quarry transference - the feelings that the patient evokes in the analyst, the way the analyst logical stages, full of props, and she opens understands herself to have invented the patient - allowed for a new confidence in treatment. Sischy tells Malcolm a story about Rosalind Krauss's loft, on Greene Street, is a fancy lunch at which she is seated beside a politician who only pays attention to her once he overhears her job title. "Now, a year later", Malcolm writes of the story,

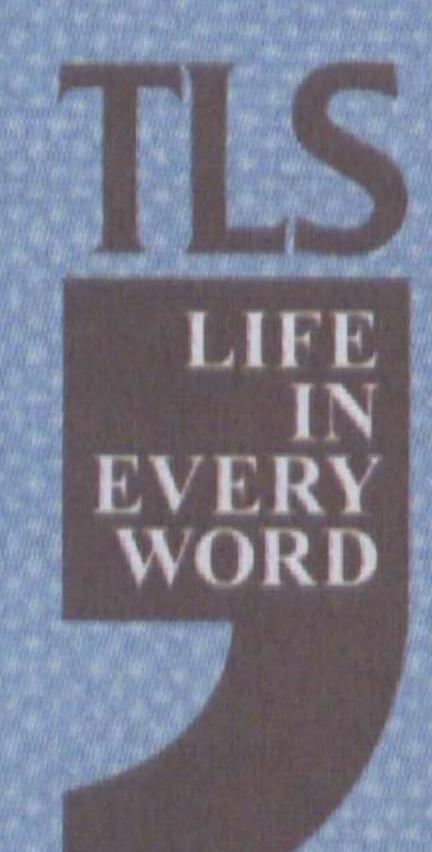
I obscurely felt it to have another dimension besides its overt one: it is a covert commentary on Sischy and me. I had formed the idea of writing about her after seeing Artforum change from a journal of lifeless opacity into a magazine of such wild and assertive contemporaneity that one could only imagine its editor to be some sort of strikingly modern type, some astonishing new female sensibility loosed into the world. And into my house had walked a pleasant, intelligent, unassuming, responsible, ethical young woman who had not a trace of the theatrical qualities I had confidently expected and from whom, like the politician at the lunch, I had turned away disappointed.

But, of course, Malcolm turned back. She neither pretended that she had no needs or expectations, nor overstated their import-Krauss's personality - she is quick, sharp, ance; she neither clung to them nor disacross, tense, bracingly derisive, fearlessly vowed them; she worked with and through them, and found new flexibility in the story that was never anything but hers to tell.



SAVE OVER 38% WHEN YOUTAKE OUT A DIRECT DEBIT SUBSCRIPTION FOR JUST #23 A QUARTER AND HAVE THE MOST CRITICAL LITERARY REWIEWERN (ORIGINAL DE LA VIOLETTE DE HONOUR DOOR ENERGY WEEK

TO CLAIM CALL 01858 438 781 AND OUGHE HELAOR VISIO SUBSCRIPTION.CO.UK/TLS/TLHA



Available on direct debit orders only while stocks last. UK residents only.

Psychic Hotel, Spiritual Community, Cassadaga, FL

It's eighty outside but the sun is winter-low in the window. I watch mediums bumble around their cottages like degenerate Mennonites. Some of them seemed to be faking it this morning at the Message Service. "Who knows a casually-dressed man?" I still hoped one of my few dead would show.

Now, Traci (she does Spiritual Counseling, Fairies, and Tarot) is telling me about crystals and laying out my cards. She calls me darlin'. She has a heart tattoo on her heart. Do I know why I'm here today? I don't. Traci seems disappointed, and checks the time on her iPhone. "I want to be more spiritual?" I offer. "I've never seen a ghost?"

and she describes the spirit who came in with me, who sounds like my old neighbor, Mrs. Longo, who was nice, and did die. In fact, Traci is often right: You grew up with someone judgmental. You dislike when people lie. You're in love with The King of Pentacles. You've got a lot on your chest.

SARAH TRUDGEON

Lewis-Kraus, Gideon. "What a story does." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 5759/5760, 23 Aug. 2013, p. 7+. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200570354/TLSH?u=columbiau&sid=bookmark-TLSH&xid=ac1cc7f0. Accessed 1 July 2021.