

A reader knows in gut when writers go too far

Naomi Klein



With the controversy still raging over "The Divorce From Hell" in February's *Toronto Life*, comes another prominent Canadian article that obscures the boundary between journalism and diary entry.

The March issue of *Saturday Night* gives the inside scoop on well-known Canadian poet Irving Layton and songwriter Leonard Cohen. The story was written by Layton's son, David. The *Toronto Life* story documents the particularly messy divorce of Ben Gordon and Terry Nusyna. It was written by Gordon's girlfriend, Wendy Dennis.

Both writers used intense personal ties to their subjects to expose the kind of details an outside journalist could never access. To illustrate their articles, they dusted off family snapshots and got their quotations from offhand remarks at the breakfast table. Dennis even quoted a conversation between Gordon and his 6-year-old daughter as he was putting her to bed — she got the dialogue because she was "listening outside their bedroom door."

I can just imagine the self-exposed pitches magazine editors can look forward to as the talk-showing of serious journalism picks up speed: "I've got this great story — journals of quotes, drawers filled with letters and documents, albums stuffed with pictures. I mean I've got baby pictures. And nobody knows this story better than me. I am the story."

Every one of us, after all, has great access to ourselves and our loved ones.

Of course, personal memoir, family history and autobiography are respected forms of narrative. And, like the self-exposed, they make the private available for public consumption.

Much of fiction, for that matter, is thinly veiled autobiography — and all the relevant players know who they are.

It is an often-heard lament of great writers that they must, by their very nature as voyeurs and storytellers, betray the ones they love by exploiting them as characters. One place to draw

the line on insider trading of family secrets is between literature and journalism.

The articles by Dennis and Layton both appeared on the cover of general-interest news magazines, places where the normal rules of journalistic conflict of interest usually apply.

It's disconcerting to suddenly find that the journalist is so embroiled in the story that even a facade of objectivity, let alone impartiality, is blown to bits.

But the art/news distinction isn't as neat as it once was. Good magazines are highly literary, with many articles acting as stepping stones to books.

And ever since Hunter S. Thompson invented gonzo journalism in the '60s, magazine writers have regularly put themselves in their stories.

Then there is the whole genre of personal journalism practised at such magazines as *Harper's*, in which you can read Mary Gaitskill's conflicted memories of date rape and the saga of a recently laid-off top executive.

But these essays are deeply introspective and contemplative — it is the strength of the writing and insight that makes them compelling, not any kind of independent "news value."

The news, I think, we still prefer to get from someone who is not a direct player in the story — or at least someone we can convince ourselves is not.

Both Dennis' and Layton's articles, on the other hand, have a news quality: Layton wrote about celebrities — the people about whom, it seems, we can never get enough news — and the court fight Dennis wrote about falls clearly into the domain of public affairs.

On the other hand, both sto-

ries are also about deeply personal themes: the fabric of family and dissolving bonds.

The Layton story shows how famous men, while reaching to fulfil higher artistic destinies, leave holes in their earthly lives where families might have been.

And Dennis' article attempts to show how children and parents are victimized by mercenary divorce lawyers and incompetent social workers.

At the heart of the debate, I think, is this question: Does the personal connecting help illuminate, or does it obscure?

In the case of the Layton story, celebrity reportage by its very nature is a tabloid, nosy affair. Perhaps a son's affections for his father and godfather makes the act of dirt-dishing somewhat less prurient, more humane — or maybe it does just the opposite.

In the case of the divorce story, an argument could be made that one complete, intimately known side unveils more profound truths than two second-hand ones. The problem is, though, that not only is Dennis incapable of offering fair treatment to Gordon's ex-wife, but also that she often appears to be covering up for Gordon.

All the writer's proximity seems able to offer is an excess of detail and sympathy for one side and a complete impoverishment of those qualities for the other: the worst of both worlds.

To me, the answer will never lie in a fixed distinction between ethical and unethical writing. As a magazine editor, I wrote a letter supporting David Layton's project — but I still have mixed feelings about the finished product.

The answer is in each reader's gut. The reader knows the difference between honest expressions of what the writer has lived and the use of intimacy as currency. This knowledge is as real — and as personal — as the stories themselves.

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