

Heidelberg University English Department
Lecture Series: Another Place, Another Time

Authenticity Across Genres

Speakers: David Eisler and Annika Elstermann
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Annika Elstermann: Welcome to this episode of the Heidelberg University English Department's lecture series *Another Place, Another Time*. Today I'll be speaking with David Eisler, who completed his PHD in the Authority and Trust Programm at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies. His book, titled *Unburdened: Civil Military Relations, Cultural Authority and Contemporary American War Fiction* is going to be published with the University of Iowa Press next year. We'll use the topic of David's research on war fiction as a jumping-off point to discuss what authenticity might mean and what role it plays in different genres.

AE: So, in your PhD, you looked at literary fiction written about wars by soldiers and veterans and civilians alike and how over time the authorship of these texts has shifted. So, I suppose, authenticity already comes in very strongly here: What have you noticed in your research? How does authenticity and the author's connection to the subject matter play a role in these kinds of texts?

David Eisler: Yeah, that was one of the first things I kind of found throughout this process and it has changed over time as you mentioned. The idea that only soldiers have the authority to write authentic narratives about war wasn't really a thing, at least in the American literary field, prior to World War I. I mean, it kinda was a little bit with the Civil War, but that debate didn't really take on the same shape that we've come to know it until much afterward. I mean, we think about Civil War and the most 'authentic' – no one can see me doing the air quotes I just realized – the most "authentic" text from the Civil War, that keeps getting discussed is Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. But he was born six years after the war was over, so obviously, this wasn't an authenticity that was based on personal experience and yet, veterans of the Civil War later on was like "Wow, this guy really captured that feeling." Though there's clearly some kind of markers of authenticity that readers can ascribe to a text that aren't necessarily coming from the author. So, in my original research for my PhD, I found how this concept of authenticity really took form for the war fiction genre in the early 1920s after the publication of John Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers*. And Dos Passos was not the first military veteran to write about the war; There were a few others who had been overseas and could claim the authority of experience in order to lend their texts authenticity. The problem or the thing was, they weren't received that way. No one really cared that these were veterans. And when you look at the reviews of the novels that were published in the late nineteen-teens while the war was still going on, or even before Dos Passos: The reviews were like – Okay, maybe if a person served overseas it was something that was worth mentioning, but then they really focussed on the text, the aesthetic of the writing, the plot, the characters. . . That was the thing that they did, I mean there was a novel that Edith Wharton wrote which was described as a "clear-cut gem of war fiction" and it was focussed so much on what is actually happening in the text "while she writes beautifully about this" and, you know, really textual appreciation not looking for something like authenticity. After Dos Passos, he published *Three Soldiers* in 1921 and the tone of these reviews and that reception

really changed: "Ah, Dos Passos. He wrote something based on his experience." And so critics and the field of reception in general didn't really know, at least in my estimation, how to deal with this. This seemed very new. So they shifted their appraisal. They shifted the way that they thought about war literature and started writing about authenticity as their primary metric of aesthetic criteria. That was the thing. And you can see how this extended on for kind of the rest of the twentieth century—

AE: But then there's another shift? Kind of?

DE: Yeah, there's a couple of shifts. I mean, the way that this authenticity gets – let's call it 'baked into the text' – changed a lot over time. For example, Vietnam was a lot different: The writing that came out about Vietnam, mostly by veterans at the time, was mostly this very personal, very first-person oriented, very experiential, and the thing about it was it was combined with this rhetoric of trauma, individual trauma, that makes it almost unassailable for someone to talk about something as inauthentic if it's based on personal trauma. How do you tell someone that their personal trauma is inauthentic? It doesn't work. And so, the way war fiction was thought about after Vietnam was as these expressions of personal trauma. Even though we are still talking literary fiction, we're not talking about memoir here. We're talking about literary fiction. [AE: Yeah, I was–] There's a huge distinction there, obviously. The thing about it is if someone's writing a novel, then there's an expectation of fictionality, that's the whole point of a novel. Of course later we can talk about auto-fiction and how this line between fiction and non-fiction gets blurred in genre types. But the thing was that after Vietnam most of the writing that came out written by veterans was based on this type of rhetoric and that changed again in, at the – well now, essentially. I keep forgetting sometimes we're in the 21st century. And a long way into it, too. But yeah, nowadays we've seen the result of – one of the major results of my work was that non-veterans have written more about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan than veterans have. Or I should be careful when I say this, because it's important: Not that they've written more, more novels written by them have been published. Excuse the passive voice there, but I think it actually makes an important distinction, because we're talking about the field of production here. What do publishers care about when they're marketing a novel. And so we kind of get a sense of like, what's the indirect evidence that publishers maybe don't think that personal experience in war is as important to market a novel as authentic as they did before, whether it was after WWI or after Vietnam.

AE: Yeah. Small sidetrack here, but do you think that the increase of media reporting on these wars have anything to do with that? So, you have a lot of war on TV and somehow that seems to suggest to people that it's almost like having been there or something like that?

DE: Yeah, I think so! I think there has been an experiential baseline that maybe everybody shares. That wasn't the case of course before television broadcast these images. I mean, think about WWI or WWII: What people had to go on were the stories of those who were there and so that lent obviously a significant amount of authority to those who actually had seen the conflict and had experienced it. And so, you know, not to conflate the concepts of authority and authenticity, they are different. But the authority to write about something then leads to a narrative authenticity meaning I have the right to write about this in an authentic way, than somebody who doesn't have that experience can't. [AE: Yeah.] And that's different.

AE: It's— Yeah, I think it might be a misleading idea that having seen images of the thing is similar to having been there and I also think that the concept of authenticity already comes in very strongly there. Because in some way authenticity does imply that like you said before also the writing about trauma, how can you say that's not authentic? Authenticity does imply something very subjective, doesn't it? As opposed to authority.

DE: Yeah. I think authority comes from, let's say the source of the text. You know, there's the question of where does an author's authority – I mean the word shares a similar, I mean we can make some note about that – but authenticity can only be ascribed externally. I think the reader ascribes a sense of authenticity to a text, the author can't. I think that's maybe the sort of relationship that we're talking about here. It is a relational concept, because authority comes maybe internally, maybe we can talk about where the sources of authority come from but then – How authenticity is ascribed to a text is an interesting one as well but I think it's mostly— My hunch is it mostly is coming from the reader's... the way that a reader makes meaning of a text.

AE: You already hinted at this very briefly. I want to come back to this: The fiction, I mean, they are fictional novels that you looked at, they all are literary fiction, they are not memoirs. But would you say, in the reception, you said already, you investigated reviews as well. Is there an implication of autofiction there as well? That these military veterans are writing about their own experiences, rather than a completely fictional thing, because of course just because you are an authority in this area, just because you're a veteran, doesn't mean that the war story you write has to be autobiographical, or has to be in any way based in truth even.

DE: That's absolutely right and there are two great examples for this that come immediately to mind: the first is one of the most successful early novels written about the Iraq War called *The Yellow Birds* by an author named Kevin Powers, and he was a veteran of the war. And because his novel was kind of christened as the early new Tim O'Brien, Ernest Hemingway, like the successor of those, that's how it's shaped by the publishers as well as some of the blurbs on the book, and in almost every interview, Kevin Powers was asked "How much of this is your experience?" and Powers almost always came out to say "You know, it's not my experience. The essence of it is something that I've experienced, but the actual things that happen in the novel are fiction." And he was really keen on making this distinction saying: "Stop trying to read this novel as auto-fiction, read it as a novel, read it as fiction."

And there was an interesting contrast, to this text that was out later on – I forget what year it came out, 2018 maybe – It's a novel called *Cherry* by Nico Walker (that people may know, because it was later turned into a movie with Tom Holland on Apple TV+ or something) and *Cherry* is a fascinating story, because the author Nico Walker was in prison for armed robbery and was approached – Somebody did a profile on him and it was on BuzzFeed or something like that. And these editors at a major publisher (I think it was Random House) and these editors approached him and said: "Do you want to write a novel? Do you want to write a book?" And there's a lot of interesting things about this, because there are legal frameworks that say that a person that has been imprisoned cannot actually profit off of their crimes. Nico Walker was not allowed to write a memoir legally, I think there were questions about that. He writes a novel with the help of his publisher, with his editors, and it's all in the paratext, in the acknowledgements, how he says how the editors really helped shape whatever it was he was writing into the final piece. The thing about it is, it reads very similar to

Nico Walker's biography and yet the word "novel" appears on the front. And so we can say, we can ask ourselves the question: Is the word "novel" here a technicality? Or does that actually shape our reception of the text?

I would argue, it does shape our reception of the text. It gives it, I think, a higher degree of meaning than it would if it was just a memoir. That's what I think personally. It resonates in a different register. But to answer your original question. This is a case where every reviewer of this book was combing through it to try to match this 1:1-correspondence between Walker's personal biography and experiences and everything in the book. I would contend it doesn't matter how much of these two things are overlapping – and you can do the same thing with any war novelist – and it's not as important. And you could also do the same thing of any novelist, I think. The tendency today in literary fiction, is to assume novels are based on the personal experiences of the writers and when that clashes with the expectations, it becomes a little bit murky for readers, for people. And this happened with... I think with "Cat Person", you mentioned that earlier in the introduction: How there was this weird backlash after what came out after it was sort of, let's say, revealed that the author took sort of details, autobiographical details, but from someone else's life, not from her own. And it's like "How dare she?" but also "How dare she not?"

AE: Yeah, to some extent I think the question is: Do we want to prohibit authors from drawing inspiration from their real lives? Which I think in many cases, like, for instance, with those veteran authors, of course they're drawing inspiration from their real lives, otherwise you don't have that argument of authenticity at all. But in some cases people seem to think you don't have the right to write about this experience. I think this was also a criticism levelled against "Cat Person": That the people involved in this story somehow started to mix their reading of the story with their own identity and got confused about what parts of it were real and what weren't. Which I think, I mean that's a whole different topic. With the— I mean, you mentioned some of the paratextual elements before. I think this is also something that is interesting to discuss, because authenticity— I mean this is also associated with the author obviously. If we just had the text without the paratext, which I mean it doesn't work, but if that were the case, we couldn't really figure out if something were authentic. We could say "This reads as authentic" or it doesn't, but we wouldn't have any real world markers to say 'Aha, this is somebody who had a similar experience so they are speaking with authority and writing authentically here.' So would you think that authenticity is something that is transported through the publisher?

DE: Yeah, I mean so you're getting at the problem that we have here that we're dancing around is that neither of us have said what we think authenticity actually means and how we define it. And of course, that's one of those things where, I don't think that we can define it, I think it's a reaction. I think you have, as a reader, a gut feeling about a text and say either this is either authentic or it's not and maybe that's not even a conscious reaction, maybe there's different ways that you react to a text. Of course, I think the publisher plays a gigantic role in this and to steal again from my own stuff when it comes to war fiction: One of the earlier novels that was published about the war was a novel called *Sand Queen* by Helen Benedict and Helen Benedict was not a veteran of war. She had interviewed many female veterans for a non-fiction project that she did and you read her novel and it's clearly a polemic about how... about what a woman's experience is in the military circa 2011. It

did a lot of good for that reason, because it raised number of issues and it used the fictional text to explore a lot of problems that are in fact really important.

The thing was, that she wrote this novel and this was before many veterans had started to really publish novels about the war, that didn't start until 2012-2014, so she was kind of first. And one of the things that the publisher did was of course was in blurbs, right: Blurb was one way to convey some degree of authenticity to a text by having, let's say successful veteran authors write little sentences on the back of the book that 'this is one of the best war novels to come out of—'. You know that kind of thing. So they're lending their authority as veteran authors to the text, which then gives the text a degree of authenticity that maybe it would not have otherwise had. That's a debatable point because now we're asking this question: "Why is the text shaped as authentic," without even referring to the text itself. I think that's a problem, but one that is really endemic to this particular genre, I mean war fiction kind of has its own logic that makes it not a good example to talk about when you're talking about literary fiction more generally. I think we would ask these same questions; How would a publisher try to shape a text as authentic, when they're trying to sell it to a public. I guess, a good example of that is also Jeanine Cummins' *American Dirt* which was published earlier this year. I'm not sure if you know, or if people listening know the story of *American Dirt*. I think it was published in January 2021 and the whole thing was that there was a lot of controversy and I'm trying to remember . But the thing was that a woman wrote a story about sort of a Mexican immigrant experience coming across the border into the United States. The thing was it was selected as – I don't remember if it was, like, an Oprah Pick or something like that. . . No—

AE: It was one of the big book clubs.

DE: It was a book club, it was like a library in Texas and it was like a big one, a big deal. And then it got a lot of push-back as some people started to read it, and were like "Oh. Oh my. There are a lot of issues with this text." In that, this woman, it's not that she has no right to write about it, but the way she's writing about it, is so – let's say inauthentic. She's not really describing this experience, she's relying on stereotypes, she's relying on caricatures, She's relying on imagery that invokes the same stereotypes that Americans, white Americans in particular, have of Mexican immigrants and there was a gigantic – I say gigantic in literary terms, it's still very small – but there was a lot of backlash to this novel.

The publishers tried to shape it as: "This is the authentic immigrant story and what it's really like to be a Mexican immigrant trying to come across the border." And some of these takedown pieces that came out afterwards saying "This woman doesn't know what she's talking about" "This is terrible and here's reasons why." They resonated a little bit. The novel was still number one on the New York Times Bestseller. It still sold hundreds of thousands of copies, so. . . In the end, who was right? The publisher still sold this novel to the American people despite the voices of others who said "This is not authentic. If you want authentic writing about this experience you need to go to these places. Here are some Real people who know these issues." So, you know, it's an overall question of how much of that response was the publisher trying to push the book as authentic, as an authentic depiction of this particular experience vs. the publisher's marketing team saying 'this is the next big book' and that had its own machinery behind it, regardless of whether or not this book is considered authentic or not.

AE: Yeah, I think this was also part of the issue with the backlash against “Cat Person” earlier this year. That yes, it is a short story, it was fictional and it never pretended that it was different overtly at least. But there was this kind of strange implication, where she said she had similar encounters and then she’s a young woman writing this story, some of the biographical details also align with hers and then people assume. It helps the marketing, but it’s also interesting as to why that is so. Like why does the fact that somebody writes authentically make readers want to read more of this. So, why is something, why is – I don’t want to stick with the veterans for too long, because I know that you’re also working on other things – why is the perspective of somebody who has, let’s say, been in prison more authentic when writing about the prison experience, because it’s still one very subjective prison experience. It’s not a universal experience. [DE: Right.] I mean, for me that is part of authenticity and that’s what I said earlier. Authenticity is something very subjective. It also has to do with your subjective experience and kind of transmitting this very individual experience to other people and sharing it with them somehow.

DE: I think it’s an easy critical criteria, right? So, you have a person who writes a novel and on the surface level a lot of the details of this novel lineup with their biography that person in interviews will always deny it’s entirely based and they will always talk about how there’s a lot of fiction here and there’s invention. But somehow playing in that liminal space and “Yeah, a lot of this is true, but most of it’s fiction and I’m not gonna tell you which is which!” It maybe heightens the intrigue but again it becomes a very easy criteria of assessment, Say “Wow this is very authen—” Particularly when describing, let’s say, experiences are atypical, I mean, what does that even mean? But you see, you mentioned prison. Most people don’t go to prison and if somebody writes a novel of what it’s like to be in prison, then I, reader, am gonna go “Look at this novel” and say “Well, this novel might teach me something about what it feels like to be in prison” I mean, that is why maybe people who haven’t been in war, read novels about war. Or why someone who hasn’t ever had to worry about safety and security as a migrant, as a refugee, might read a story about being a refugee but you wanna know what it feels like.

AE: Yeah, it’s a question of empathy and looking into other people’s lives and worlds and so on.

DE: Yeah! You don’t wanna know how something is, you wanna know what it feels like and there’s a distinction between those two things that I think fiction and memoir are the perfect candidates for making that distinction. You know, fiction tells you what something feels like, memoir is supposed to tell you what something was like. And we don’t assess memoir in the same way as we do fiction. Memoir is like, there’s already you’re telling us that knowing this is true, this happened and of course, when memoir is exposed as being invented, that’s a big taboo in literature and that becomes a huge issue, whereas if somebody who wrote a memoir and then made things up just said “this is a novel” that’s a different— But of course memoir tends to sell better than novels, right? That’s one business argument, not cynical, but that’s just the truth. Non-Fiction does tend to sell on average I think better than fiction, so I think there’s pieces of that that are important—

AE: I think that’s kind of an interesting observation in regards to genre, because there are of course there are also literary genres that are or which subjectively might be located closer to non-fiction than some others. So for instance, historical fiction: So yes, we don’t expect people to have lived through that period of time necessarily to be able to write authentic historical fiction, however, there

is still the question of invention and how much can you really make up if it's a historical novel and also because – you said this before as well – that authenticity is kind of assigned by the reader, if somebody writes a historical novel, they are expected to be some kind of expert. They are expected to have researched the kind of details, for instance. Whereas – I don't know – if somebody writes a science fiction novel, nobody expects them to have travelled to a different planet, nobody expects everything to be completely scientifically accurate, actually there are people who read science fiction who always go like "Oh no, but the gravitational field of this is that." So the main story isn't usually about that – the science of it. It's far removed from – I would argue – It's far from the factual, while with a historical novel you could say "Oh no, but that coronation actually took place in this-and-this year and not in that year. It's wrong!" Even though both of them are fictional.

DE: I mean, if we talk classical – I'm making up genre terms here – classical historical fiction: So a novel that is set in a historical period that deals with maybe with real characters or maybe it deals with invented characters, but the timeline is supposed to be consistent, right? Historical events are referenced in these things and we have these kinds of markers of authenticity. Of course you bring up a great point, which is that a reader of a historical novel ascribes authenticity to that text in a completely different way than they do to a literary fiction novel. And the closest that I've come to – because I am wrestling with this question all the time of 'how do these markers of authenticity change across genres?' – One thing I've come up with is I think in a historical novel the markers of authenticity come from the details. Did the author get the details right? Did the author do the research as you mentioned in order to bring the time period alive. I mean some of these successful historical novels like the *Outlander* series or Hil— what's her name? Hilary Mantel [AE: *Wolf Hall*] Exactly. These are big, important pieces or what was the one that came out. . . *Hamnet*, right? About Shakespeare's son? There's a lot of invention in that but there's a lot of historical research that goes into it, right.

So, as a reader, I read these things not necessarily because I want to learn something about that time period, but because I am interested in that time period, let's say, to start with and I expect— My expectations of authenticity for a historical novel are that the details are right. This of course becomes much more complicated, when you start doing alternate historical fiction and then the authenticity comes maybe not through the details but through the consistency of action.

AE: But I think here we are already getting into this very murky area of – because this is up to the reader, so you're a critical reader and you say: "Well yes, but I know this is fiction." And you said this with a couple of different points so you don't go there to learn about history. You read a historical novel to maybe get a feel for the, for what the era might have been like or something like that. But of course there are other people as well who do read texts like these even if they are fiction, even if it says "novel" on the front and so on and take them as some kind of historical truth Or as this is exactly what is happening and I can think of a couple of different places where this can be problematic. I mean, of course one is, when you're writing about an experience like for instance having been to war or the immigrant experience or whatever and somebody reads this and does take it as, at least, mostly a memoir by somebody, then those 'facts' (in air quotes) stay in their minds and I— With historical fiction as well, I mean, of course, as soon as you are writing about characters and interactions; You are creating sympathies and directing them in certain ways, you're putting words in

certain people's mouths basically. This is a lot – we can go back to Shakespeare for this, for instance: A lot of propaganda against Richard III comes from Shakespeare. And then also in science fiction I think much of the drive, this idea of space, the final frontier and so on and space tourism that is being promoted right now comes from fiction. Of course it comes from fiction, I mean if we didn't have fiction about it, who would want to go to space? It's not exactly appealing, but now William Shatner has been to space and he'd been to space for decades—

DE: That's definitely a cultural crossover right there, right?

AE: I mean— and all of this is fiction. We don't know what being in space is like. Most of us don't know, but we've read books about this. We've seen movies and TV shows about it and so on and we have this image in our minds, which doesn't necessarily have anything to do with reality. So I think even in those genres which are definitely fiction and not non-fiction and not memoirs and not actually based in reality of course part of it always gets lodged in our brains somehow and I think with less critical readers the implication can also be that this is the truth, actually with the historical novel.

DE: I mean, you're getting at a question that's kind of at the heart of my own research interest, which is how do cultural productions – whether it's literature and fiction, television, film, whatever – shape the cultural imaginary; how do those images affect how individuals, like you say, maybe not necessarily discerning readers/viewers, how does it shape their views of certain professions, people, experiences, etc. all of those things kind of come into that. Because you're right, if the person imagines going to space, they're not imagining, you know, the science behind it, they're imagining all of these things they've seen on television, all of these things they've read in books, and the same thing could be said of war, or of refugees experiences, etc. and there's no normative judgement on this, I think that we tell each other stories in such a way that we want to share those experiences, we are trying to, I don't know, broaden the degree of empathy that we see across the culture by saying "these are experiences that are very different from yours, but you can still kind of get close to them if you imagine a little bit, if you watch this movie, if you read this novel, you can get kinda close", and I think that's an important distinction. And on top of that, though, I don't necessarily know that there's another way to do it and I don't know if there's— if authenticity now matters so much when we're talking about some of these other ways that the cultural imaginary is shaped. I don't know that it matters as much, although your point about the dangers of people kind of believing that a certain experience is emblematic of— a certain text is emblematic of an experience, is I think a good one, right? Because— I guess because I did so much war stuff that's kind of my, that's my fallback position here, but, you know, one of the things that I took out of my dissertation work was that if you read all of you wanna know what say you're someone that's never been to war, and you're fortunate like that and you're like: "I am curious what's it like to go to war", and you read all these novels, you think memoirs: "ah, I don't want that" – that's an individual experience, I want something more universal. So you go and you read the now sixty-plus novels about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the images you're gonna come away with are almost universally negative. And that's not necessarily true and I'm not suggesting that war is a good thing, of course that's not true, but the individual's experience of war is of course much more complicated than trauma. Not everyone who serves in the war is traumatized. Not every experience in war is traumatic. And yet, if you read these novels you will assume that everybody who goes to war comes back traumatised and becomes an alcoholic or a drug addict.

AE: Would you say this has to do with what you mentioned about Vietnam earlier as well – working through trauma by writing fiction or would you say that these are kind of implicit genre rules and publishers want novels about trauma?

DE: I think it's a bit of both, right? I mean, to extend this beyond the war-fiction genre, it's a similar problem in– not science fiction, but novels and cultural productions that deal with scientists, which is kind of the topic of my current research, and same thing has happened: If you are not a scientist, and most of us – well, we kinda are, in the German sense anyway – but most people aren't scientists and maybe there's just an average person who is interested in these kinds of things, or just happens to be a consumer of lots of cultural productions that deal with scientists as characters or have scientists as characters. Again, you're gonna come away with an image of scientists in these movies or in these books or in these television series that's kinda negative. It's— you know, you have the asocial scientist, you have the ones who are actively trying to destroy the world, you have the ones who are accidentally destroying the world or something similar to that, you have the ones who are screaming in the background saying "Don't do this!" and then they're still ineffectual because they can't stop the people from destroying the world you see kind of where I'm going with a lot of this and I think that, again, if an image is so prevalent within society that people tend to associate that fictionalised image with – and stereotypes – with the reality of that profession, that career choice of that person, of that class of people, then any images or any cultural productions that go against those images may be received as inauthentic, even though it's not really their fault. You might have a novel that tries to depict a scientist as being – I don't know, imagine James Bond as a scientist, that's the first place where my mind went, I don't know why – and of course James Bond is surrounded by scientists in a lot of these movies – but imagine somebody as cool as— Idris Elba! Let's make him a scientist or something. You don't associate the image of Idris Elba with scientists, right? But there probably is a scientist out there who is as, you know, attractive and suave and awesome as Idris Elba or Daniel Craig or something like that. They probably do exist! [AE: Yeah.] And the point is if that would come out, it will probably be received as inauthentic because it goes against these conventions. So I think you're really onto something about how the conventions of these genres shape your expectations of authenticity in such a way that deviating from them is met with resistance rather than acceptance.

AE: So, I think in our quest of finding out what authenticity means for us at least, I think we got two separate things, essentially, and one of them is kind of this subjective authenticity – am I an authentic person, does the way I present myself to others, for instance, reflect what's inside of me and so on, and then, on the other hand, perceived an designed authenticity: somebody reads this book and they have all of these genre conventions in the back of their minds and they say: "Oh but this doesn't fit what I think a scientist should be or what I think a soldier's experience is, then I perceive this as being inauthentic." I think that's very interesting, because, of course, an author has zero control over what people will assume as authentic or not [DE: Yeah, right] and then you can add some paratextual framework to that and kind of try to guide the readers into some direction by saying: "But that is actually authentic because this person has this and this and that experience" but in the end, it's entirely up to the readers to decide what they find to be authentic or not, right?

DE: I mean, yes, and maybe we should throw a wrench into this discussion and ask ourselves: Is authenticity even a metric that we should care about, when it comes to our aesthetic judgement of

fiction, or of literature more generally? I can see why we think about it, because it's, like I said, it's kind of an easy concept to grasp, it's an easy thing to come to a very snap judgement about and see a text and you read the paratext, and you read the text maybe, and then you say: "Yeah, that was authentic or that was inauthentic" and maybe somebody else comes out and says: "No, this is inauthentic following very factual reasons" and you go, well okay, it still read pretty authentically to me. So, I don't know if by injecting this criteria into our assessment of literature, if we're doing ourselves a disservice. Maybe, I don't know if there's any easier way to talk about these things, I still think the question of authenticity is important, because it gets at a lot of issues that are related to it, like identity and access to the industry. You know, we didn't actually use the words cultural appropriation yet but this is kind of—

AE: The kind of thing that was at heart of the *American Dirt*, the accusation that was levelled against the author.

DE: Yeah, and, I mean, by definition you can say that cultural appropriation is inauthentic, right? Isn't that one step that we can probably agree – how could something appropriated be authentic. I would be willing to hear counterarguments to that, but I think that's an easy step one. Of course, when we talk appropriation, we have to make a distinction between, a) fiction writers write to come up with the story and to invent the story, and the structural issues that are associated with the literary field that deny access to the means of publication to a lot of people who have, let's say even more authentic perspectives, who have the experiences that are being sold as authentic in some of these texts.

AE: I also briefly mentioned this in the introduction: there is a risk, also, if we put too high a premium on authenticity, there's a risk of saying every person is only allowed to share, or to have their own experience and to write about their own experience and their life and so on and I think that limits the possibilities of fiction writing, imagining, not just while reading but also while writing different worlds. I mean, then we couldn't have science fiction and fantasy because—

DE: Yeah, but again, you know, science fiction and fantasy operate according to completely different rules and I would argue that the concept of authenticity still exists in those genres, but even in a different way compared to literary fiction, autofiction, historical fiction, all of those things. I think that the way that we ascribe authenticity to a science fiction text is completely different and one that I am still working through. I think it goes beyond again technical details of hard science fiction and more gets at this feeling of "does it feel true?" you know? And that's a difficult question in the wake of postmodernism. Like does it feel true, what does that even mean, what is truth, who's/whose truth? It raises a different degree and set of questions, right?

AE: I'd also like to stick with science fiction for a moment here: I think there's something interesting there as well, because science fiction isn't, in the most cases primarily I think, about technology, even though, of course, what kind of binds the genre together is that it's in the future and has something to do with science and technology. But most science fiction novels aren't actually about technical descriptions, so, there are— I know that you've read books by Andy Weir, for instance [DE agrees] and I think this is a case – maybe you could say a few words about that – where you have details that give a sense of 'this feels real', or 'this is true', but of course it's not, because nobody is stuck

on Mars, for instance. Can you maybe say a few words about how in these books this feeling of authenticity is transmitted?

DE: Yeah! So, like you said, there's the degree of technical details, which, of course, because Andy Weir is kind of a master of this; I don't think anybody else is doing the degree of, let's say technical wizardry that happens in his fiction and to the point where his most recent novel, *Project Hail Mary*, he even has the main character say a few things like 'All right, I'm gonna do some math now.' And then he kinda does it in the text. I know that sounds like it could be off-putting but I actually found it quite compelling. It was pretty interesting.

The thing is, in novels like *The Martian* or *Project Hail Mary*, where you've got invented scenarios that still feel pretty authentic. I mean you have a degree of suspension of disbelief that comes with all imaginative works where if an author says: "Just believe this and stick with me from there." Then everything that follows that belief, that initial suspension of disbelief, should feel logical. And that's what happens in *The Martian*. I mean, *The Martian* to almost a degree unparalleled than any other novel I've read: It's the consequences of when things go wrong. So, how would a person act? What would a person do? I mean these feelings of humanity, or what I think really imbue the text with authenticity but not in the same authenticity, like I don't expect Andy Weir has been to Mars and space. It doesn't matter, right? But when he does— In *Project Hail Mary*, the premise of the sun is being consumed by this being or thing that he calls "Astrophage" and it's actually an alien life form, that is reducing the amount of energy that the sun is able to transmit to the earth. So, the earth is going to be— So, he does these kinds of calculations of this in the book. And things are going bad, catastrophic, cataclysmic very quickly. In a timescale that's even faster than what climate change would currently be suggesting. And then he for a series of events has this character go out into space and try to solve the problem. That's part of what happens. And so you— At every stage, I mean, his fiction is kind of animated and we're so far away from literary fiction when we're talking about Andy Weir. I mean, this is still good reading but this is more popular fiction. You know, you're not reading this for its stylistic prose, you're reading this for the story.

And at every point, every interval in the story you ask yourself: Are the events that are happening logical consequences of what we've seen so far? Are the characters acting consistently? Is the world that's been created consistent so far? And you could make similar arguments for N.K.Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy and *The Fifth Season*, etc. where this is all taking place in— It's the same world, it's the earth, but it's a completely different world in that it's set several thousand years into the future and nothing that we recognize as earth is taking place in the story. And yet you ask yourself: Are the characters doing the kinds of things that I imagine people would be doing? Even with these invented elements that come into the science fiction genre? I don't know, I think... I'm not sure that's enough for authenticity. I don't know that that's really the point. But then again, it gets back to this question of characters: Are the experiences that I'm observing while reading these texts – Do they feel authentic to me? Do they seem like they would work? And that's what you were saying, you know, science fiction is not really about technology, it's about people who happened to be part of that. I don't know, what is your take on that?

AE: I think, I mean, I'm completely with you with the suspension of disbelief. I think, with all of these questions of authenticity and so on, I'm still between the two kinds of authenticity I think. [DE:

Yeah.] And I think one area is: Does this feel authentically to me, like how people would behave in this kind of situation – which to me applies exactly the same kind of the same to science fiction fantasy as it would to any other kind of genre, and I don't think we really make distinctions there – because more or less, all fiction reading that we do is ultimately about people and humans and so on. That is what keeps us interested. So is this to me – Does this seem like authentic human behaviour. But then of course there's the other side to it and that is this question of author-authenticity that we mentioned earlier: So would I expect a higher degree of scientific authority and scientific accuracy and so on by a novel written by somebody who I know is an astrophysicist? I'm not sure, I don't know if I knew – and this is again, like paratextual questions – but if I knew from the back cover that the person who wrote this is an astrophysicist, so that this is somebody who has been to the ISS and so on, I'm sure I would pay attention to different things than I would in, say a [Robert. A.] Heinlein novel, and something like that. So, I don't know, it's— I think with science fiction it's more a mix of things—

DE: I mean, isn't it great that you get away from the expectation of autobiography in science fiction? I mean, that's what I think about the genre that makes it so compelling is that you don't expect, as we've already mentioned, that an author has done these things. But they've done the work, right? They've done the work to make these details stand out and I think that's kind of where there's a parallel between science fiction and historical fiction: Where there's— there are certain details that are important to the plot and to the story that need to be accurate. Otherwise, if they just do a handwave and say – If that handwave feels, like, not real enough then that kind of diminishes the story's resonance.

AE: Yeah and I think it's— I mean, it does change how we read things, it does change, or potentially change how we read things. Because like you said in the beginning with some texts, people can sit down and go through and say: "Oh and this matches the author's biography and this matches an experience that they had and yes, this person also went to college here" or whatever. Which in terms of literary criticism, literary analysis is completely limiting. This very author-centric analysis and in many cases of science fiction, this is something we can't really do, because of course we can't really trace the author's biography in line with what happens – in I suppose a lot of genre fiction applies to – and so the author kind of takes more of a backseat in science fiction.

DE: Well, there's different places of this, right? Because you raise the question of 'Would I be more inclined to read a science fiction text as authentic based on the background of the author and a good case study of this is probably Michael Crichton when he did *The Andromeda Strain*, right? And he's a medical doctor, I mean he knows these things and so yeah, there's a lot of details that come to that. But the question is are those details only available to him because of his education or are those details available to anybody who'd put in the time and the effort to learn them. I think there's a distin, because we both read this article about the neuro-scientist that wrote a collection of essays that has the word "pandemic" in the title and—

AE: And this is recently.

DE: This is recently, yeah, this article just came out and the article was musing, this author was thinking like 'Do I have the authority to write about the pandemic, even though I'm a neuro-scientist

and not, you know, and ICU [Intensive Care Unit] nurse or I'm not a medical doctor in the same sense. I don't treat COVID patients, I've seen them— I'm a different—' So, he's asking himself: 'Do I even have the authority to write about this authentically?' I don't know, what is your take on that, 'cause it's a similar question?

AE: I mean, the question here is, well the author is asking themselves the question: Is there a risk of assigned authority? That somebody is going to see "Dr this-and-this" and then is going to see "pandemic" in the title and they are going to assume that 'I am a virologist or an infectious disease expert and that this is now going to be an expert text on the pandemic' or whatever. And I think, I understand, where this is coming from, but I also think if this is a real risk, then we've reached a point where we have to start kind of close-controlling the other way, because if we don't trust readers to make that distinction and to also kind of look at the inside of the book to see what it is actually about, because this wasn't a person who was without having the necessary authority actually writing about the development of the newest COVID strain or whatever. This was a collection of essays, so if we don't trust readers to put in that effort to actually look at the book, look at the author and figure out for themselves what level of authenticity and also authenticity in what area and authority in what area this person has, I think we have a problem.

DE: I mean, maybe this gets back to what I was saying earlier that we should stop using authenticity as a variable to access literature. Maybe it's not the right way. Maybe we have to come up with different ways to think about how we respond to literature that doesn't require us to ask the question, such an intangible question: Is the thing that I'm reading authentic? And authenticity isn't limited to literature only of course and there's a lot of different places where this goes into. I don't know, I think it's such a difficult issue, because no one really knows what it means, because it's such a subjective experience and to try to say 'Your experience is not authentic' or 'Your version of that experience is not authentic'...

AE: Or 'Your expression of that is not authentic'.

DE: Or even 'Your interpretation of something as authentic is wrong'. I mean for me to come and say: "Ah, that thing you really liked and you said was so great now is wrong for the following reasons". I mean that's very, like, twitter-esque, right?

AE: Yeah, but at the same time, you mentioned now that we should move away from authenticity as kind of an aesthetic judgement of literature. These two things also seem to go together in some ways, because there were some of the cases likely, including the *Bad Art Friend* story, where the reaction was kind of: 'It's okay to do this sort of thing – including appropriation – it's okay to appropriate as long as what you do with it, the novel, the short story, whatever, you write is good.' Which, I don't know. I find this problematic. I don't know what your take on this is. If it's good enough, then it's fine when it's inauthentic.

DE: Yeah, that's so tricky, right? And we are talking about that New Yorker article that was— That actually read the *Bad Art Friend* short story and tried to critique it according to literary criteria, not just to this question of appropriation. And you're right the author of that article made the comment that, you know, it needs to be good. I don't think it needs to be good. I'm probably with you, and I'm thinking out loud when it comes to this; I think that when you move into the realm of art and

creation and creativity, that the judgement of that should be based on whether or not it's good or bad. What I'm trying to say is that accusing a piece of being inauthentic or being, say, immoral almost, for taking details from someone else's life and transforming them into fiction is only allowed if that fiction is good. That seems problematic to me as well. I think that it's either all or nothing. Either you can use details from other people's lives, which many authors admit to doing all the time and you can use them and transform them into your fiction or you could add them into your fiction or you can't do that at all. And of course that position seems kind of absurd: To take the 'Write what you know'-mantra to its absurdist conclusion is that you can only write your own experience or you can't write anything else. And of course, I don't know that anybody really agrees with that. I would be interested to hear if someone could make that argument, it's almost like the extreme argument that the only fiction that is moral comes from – and I'm injecting something like morality into this that we haven't really touched but it seems relevant as a category – if the only fiction that is moral is based on what you can claim authentic experience to. . . Geez, I don't know where we'd go from there. That's kind of defeating the entire purpose of fiction writing.

AE: Yes, and it also implies that we all live entirely inside our own heads all of the time.

DE: Well, I mean don't we all?

AE: [laughs] Well, yes. So— This is a slightly different argument. But I think, there's a question, or there's a difference between living inside your head and only looking inwards and only having your own experience and thinking about what the inside of other people's heads might look like. And if somebody in your vicinity does something that you find strange, the thought experiment of why would a person do that is not in itself so unethical that it should have to be justified. I also don't think that aesthetic criteria, I think the aesthetic criteria and the ethical question in these cases of appropriation should be kept separate, 'cause it's all so subjective.

DE: Yeah. Well, you in the introduction, you know, you quote from Benjamin's *The Storyteller*. And that was written kind of as the critique of the novel as just dumping information to the reader as opposed to a storytelling, which is more conveyance of feeling. And I think that the genre – and genre very largely in literature these days – has shifted away from that where there is this understanding that the novel has an empathetic function that reading novels can make you more empathetic or more receptive to the idea of experiencing or imagining the experiences of others. I think that's been scientifically proven. Or at least it's been researched to some degree. So, if you take that away, then I don't know what literature has to offer anymore. I think the whole purpose of it, what makes it so interesting, what makes it such a great tool – and not just a tool, but it makes it a great form of expression and art – is that you can really experience another life in its entirety. In a way that no other medium really allows you to do. It opens up the world to possibilities that I think would be otherwise unavailable. We cut all that out if we say the only fiction that people can write has to be based on their experience, 'cause then I just have to read everybody's novel in order to understand everybody else's experience but then, even then, I still wanna in the end understand myself.

AE: Would you say that books have the right to be inauthentic and still be a good read first of all and secondly have the potential to foster empathy and so on, even if they are essentially inauthentic to the author's experience?

DE: Yes and yes. [Both laugh.] I'm not sure how much elaboration I can even do on that, I mean, yeah, absolutely. I'm struggling right now to come up with a good example, I'm sure when we finish talking I will have one for a good read that still gets hammered as inauthentic. Yeah, okay, even—I give a nod to Sebastian Tants[-Boestad] on this one: I read *Typee*, [Herman] Melville's *Typee*, which was marketed as a true story, but there was a lot of clear invention in there and although that invention is kind of damaging to some extent because we get this idea of like island people as cannibals and savages, from not just this novel but a lot of the adventure memoirs from that time. It's still a fun read. It's a good book, it's interesting and it's— despite its flaws. Maybe we can look at something that's inauthentic and say: 'That's a flaw in the text, but the text itself is still pretty good and here are some redeeming qualities that it has.

AE: So, does maybe the conflict of something being inauthentic— Does— would you say that potentially comes mainly from the paratext? We've discussed a couple of examples, for that before, but if the paratext claims authenticity, but the text is itself not necessarily authentic, and people read it as something that is authentic, in that kind of dissonance, does that create a problem?

DE: Maybe, yeah, that's a good point. I mean, you could ask yourself the question "would a novel like *American Dirt* had the backlash that it did if they hadn't marketed it in such a way that said this is the real, you know, story— also, I mean, the title already tells you a lot about what it's trying to do. It's trying to be **the** novel about the Mexican immigrant experience, not even Mexican, I don't know if it was only Mexican or also Central American, but this, obviously, we're lumping all these people into one group, which is I think maybe already not fair to the real experience but if it hadn't been marketed that way, would the backlash have been so loud? I don't know. I mean that's a good point and I don't know if it's just the paratext that shapes the ascription of authenticity to the text, those are good points. I think they probably do set some things up for discussion, by invoking that concept of authenticity in the marketing of a novel, you open yourself up to that kind of flank attack that comes out of: this is inauthentic. If it's not claimed to be authentic and there's no assumption that it is, then maybe that's no longer something that comes across in the reception of a text.

AE: I think it is interesting how there are these genre lines there – we have been talking about genre a lot here – kind of, you don't expect crime novelists to— [DE: To commit crimes crimes] —to have been criminals, to have been detectives, to have been policemen or anything like that. I'm sure there are some, but it's not the norm and the bestseller crime novelists aren't the ones who have been to prison or whatever. They do their research and so on, but they are authors and they write books, it's not their experience and similarly Young Adult fiction is for the most part not written by teenagers. It's also for the most part not even written by people who in their work have a lot to do with teenagers and so on, it's written by grownups. And yet, for something like war fiction my mind instantly goes to the the veteran author.

DE: And most people do, most people do the same thing, even though that's no longer the case and that was one of the starting observations for my original research is that even people that are well-read and well-acquainted with the literary field immediately assume that all war fiction is written by veterans, when that's absolutely not the case. And it has never been the case, but it's just, you know, the veteran-authored novels get the most attention.

AE: Even, I think, there's a dimension of this to romance fiction— [DE: I was wondering when you were going to go there, I was just thinking that too, funnily enough!] – there's this cultural image of the romance novelist that people have, as like the thirty-something year old woman, who sits in her cottage, with a hot mug of tea and writing her romance novels, and maybe she's perpetually unhappily in love or whatever. And then when it turns out that like a seventy year old man is writing a series of Mills and Boon novels, people are surprised at this and find it amusing, which— I mean, why wouldn't he be writing these novels? [DE: Sure.] I mean, I think this does go into different genres where we expect people to be a certain way and then in other genres there are no expectations whatsoever about the author's own experience in relation and the relation to what they write.

DE: I wonder if you could categorise this in such a way that brings out a taxonomy about what's the relationship between the authors, biography and the textual content. Does that influence to any degree as a major variable the ascription of authenticity to the text. There's a great anecdote from— John Irving is one of my favourite American authors. There's a novel he wrote, one of the first major literary novels that I read as a teenager and it really got me into reading fiction, it's called *The World According to Garp*. There's a scene in the novel— I mean, this novel came out many years ago so it's not really a spoiler – but the character is super autobiographical. That's kind of the thing about Irving's fiction, most of his protagonists are writers that are very similar to John Irving. And he plays with this in other novels too, but he has a scene in *The World According to Garp* where the main character's young son, who is only about four years old is killed in a freak accident. And it's poignant, moving, it's emotional, it's beautiful, it's heart wrenching, it's everything you would expect a good novelist to do. Irving, apparently – I'll have to confirm all this for you, I think it's a real story – but he apparently received a letter from a reader who said "Thank you so much for writing this, you clearly know the pain of losing a child and you've captured it so beautifully in this novel and I just thank you for doing that." And Irving wrote back and was like "Ah, no, I made it up, it's what I do, I'm a writer, I imagined what it would feel like and I wrote it down." And apparently this person – this must have been a correspondence – and the person wrote back saying "How dare you write about an experience you didn't have and put it into a novel like this?". This really gets at the heart of the matter, because we're asking 'Does this author have the right to imagine something that's horrible?' and Irving has said multiple times that he writes from the place of imagination: what are his fears, what are his worries, what are his concerns? Of course, losing a child, if you're a parent, is one of the worst things you can imagine, perhaps the worst. So, by confronting that in fiction not only does he do something as an author for himself, but he's able to write about these experiences authentically, because he captures the emotion. It's not about knowing the experience, it's not about knowing, it's about imagining it. And I think that's where it goes to, I think that's where you kind of draw a line and say "There is something about capturing that emotion that really feels authentic."

AE: Yeah, so this authenticity that does not originate in the kind of inward looking "I have taken my soul, picked it apart, and I'm presenting it to you now", but on the recipient's end. This, like you said just now, this **feels** authentic. It isn't authentic in the sense of he's writing about his life and his experience, but it feels authentic. And maybe that is also an interesting point to drift towards the end on now: this question between authenticity and the extremely subjective "write only what you know" and the ability to get into other people's heads both when coming up with the story, but also when telling the story; to be able to put something into people's heads. Where maybe— we've

mentioned *The Storyteller* that Walter Benjamin has published, now does go hand in hand with that as well. You need to abstract a bit from your own experience, you need to make it a bit broader and make it resonate a bit differently to make it resonate with other people as well. And if you don't give something the room to do that, if you are only telling your very very subjective, individual, very authentic experience, then maybe that is too limiting, even, or it could be too limiting.

DE: Yeah. I think that we still need to make the distinction between the theoretical question of what an author is allowed to write about. You know, what an author should be able to imagine and the very real problem of people who can imagine things from their own— don't have to imagine, it's their real life, not being able to break into the industry. I think that's an important distinction that we kind of have to keep in mind here, because it's not just about saying— I think it's not particularly controversial for us to say – I don't imagine that it is – that a writer should be able to write about whatever he or she wants to. But then you have these questions about white authors writing about, you know, Black experiences. And immediately that brings up some like "oh, okay, that's touchy, why would you do that?". And we don't really question when people write from the perspective of another gender anymore. I think that's kind of— I don't know if that was ever a problem, but it certainly doesn't seem that if a man writes from the perspective of a woman, or vice versa, that's not really an issue. But if a cisgendered novel writes a novel from the perspective of a trans person— Now we're getting into this kind of uncomfortable territory of "can a person do that?" Maybe we start to bring up, I mean, we look at these cases, these specific cases of where the author's biography is very different from the background of the characters, but more importantly, if the author's coming from a position of privilege and power and saying "I can write about whatever I want", whereas the person who's not privileged, who's not in the majority, who is in a minority, who says "I want to write about something else." You know? Now we start to see where the contours of this debate become much more difficult, much less clear. So I think knowing and acknowledging the fact that the publishing industry is in fact overwhelmingly white and it's much more difficult— despite what you might— see if you read, you know, what novels are coming out there it's very easy to be like "oh jeez" you know, the white majority of novel publishing is really decreasing, it's not. It's actually not decreasing that much, it's still overwhelmingly white. When you keep these issues in mind and you ask yourself, you know, can a Black person, or can a Latino or something like that write a story that they want to and get published, you know, are they gonna get the same marketing budget that Jeanine Cummins got for *American Dirt*? Probably not. So, I think maybe the way to really bring this to a conclusion, or bring this to a place where we can have a much more, let's say, fruitful debate, is to imagine these really difficult cases and start to think about the consequences of those.

AE: I have another difficult case for you.

DE: Please!

AE: If you say, as you have done a couple of times now, that we might stop using authenticity in the sense of author's experience and is that— does that align with what is in the novel — as kind of a marker, or a part of the judgement. . . Don't we run the risk of distorting reality to some extent, which I'm not fixed on this yet, because of course fiction does that. But let's go back to the topic of war fiction, so if we take the matter of authenticity out of that and we don't pay attention to the experience of the author, and whether this is somebody who has experience with this and so on, what

they write, like you said before, still influences how we think of these things as, like, me, somebody who hasn't experienced war, all of my images of war come either from the news, or they come from movies and books. And if we take this question of authenticity over a narrative out of – this kind of devil's advocacy now –but don't we run the risk of reproducing media images and clichés and so on, because the people who write these things are writing from images that they already have in their minds and just reproducing those images.

DE: It seems to me that we need to clarify— it should be an important project to clarify what we mean by authenticity across these different genres, and how that term functions. I think you're onto something by suggesting that by removing authenticity entirely we run a number of risks when it comes to misrepresentation of experience. I think that is probably accurate. So maybe it's not removing authenticity entirely, but not relying on it so much as the first go-to criteria when it comes to an aesthetic judgement about a text? I think it's so easy to grasp and it's so easy to grab hold of and say "Is this text authentic or not?". And then we stop, we stop thinking about it afterward. But maybe if we go further and we say "Okay— we have one of those little diagrams with the boxes and the arrows – and say "Okay, is this text authentic?" If yes, cool, then we need to figure out what boxes come after that. If the answer is no, the text is not authentic, does it have redeeming qualities otherwise? You know, yes, no—

AE: Ah, you're running the risk of the aesthetic judgement then! If the text is not authentic, is it good?

DE: Yeah, is it good? Yeah, I think that's important and it's still— a lot of this comes back to these concepts of— you know, Viet Thanh Nguyen calls this "Narrative Scarcity" where it's this, who can tell these stories is based to some extent on who is allowed to tell them, and that's a structural issue but then when we focus— I think it obscures a certain degree of complexity by saying 'let's only focus on the text', right? That's like the same thing, that's the literary equivalent of saying, let's only focus on merit, when it comes to promotions, only the best people will be promoted, will be selected, only the candidates who are really qualified will be picked, without acknowledging the fact that our criteria for who a good candidate is is so formed by structural issues that have put people in positions where they're not able to compete at the same level. And I think texts have the same issue. I think that's the part of this project that really needs to be extended: All right, is it authentic? Maybe it's question one. All right, what's the rest of that? I don't know yet, but I think it's an important thing to try to figure out.

AE: I'm also still sticking with the argument that I think texts can be authentic without having much to do with the author's own experience.

DE: Yes, agreed, absolutely. A text can be authentic and also bad.

AE: [laughing] Yeah, and I think a text can be... I think as long as the author's somebody who has the capacity for empathy, that I think has a lot to do with it as well. How authentic it is and how authentic it feels as well for the reader.

AE: All right, thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

DE: Thanks so much for having me!

AE: And thank you all very much for listening. Next week, I'll be speaking with Dieter Schulz about Edgar Allan Poe and the Gothic tradition.