



The Death of the Author

Gilbert Adair

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What, I thought, was to prevent me from *truly* killing the author?

Part murder mystery and all jet-black satire, and based on a real life scandal, this edgy novella tells the story of Léopold Sfax, world-renowned as the creator of "The Theory"—a bizarre literary theory that grew from an intellectual folly to a dominant school of criticism that enslaved college campuses across the country.

However, The Theory, which holds that the text of any piece of writing tells us all that we need to know about its author (as if the author himself is "dead") takes on extra perversity when the revered—or is it feared?—Sfax is found to have once written something that seems...well, murderously revealing.

In the hands of Gilbert Adair, it's a dexterously wrought and hysterically devilish look at academic cultishness. It's also a taut metaphysical murder mystery that confounds the reader's expectations on almost every page and reserves its most stunning surprise—the ultimate whodunit twist—for the very last page.

The Contemporary Art of the Novella series is designed to highlight work by major authors from around the world. In most instances, as with Imre Kertész, it showcases work never before published; in others, books are reprised that should never have gone out of print. It is intended that the series feature many well-known authors and some exciting new discoveries. And as with the original series, The Art of the Novella, each book is a beautifully packaged and inexpensive volume meant to celebrate the form and its practitioners.

The Death of the Author Details

Date : Published June 1st 2008 by Melville House (first published August 20th 1992)

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From Reader Review The Death of the Author for online ebook

Josh says

Witty, gem-like, and totally insufferable. A perfect example of the temptations of the novella form, in which, as James Salter said, perfection is unfortunately possible. The prose of this book congeals quickly into a surface so hard that I occasionally wanted to knock on it (the way you want, but are also kind of afraid, to knock on a particularly life-like mannequin). Also mysteriously dated-feeling, both in ambition and details. For example, I kept grinning every time the professor narrator referred to his "Apple Mac." Why was I paying attention to this, I wondered? Am I complete techno-snob, or is this book's cool as ice sheen (cooler than its narrator even, who's pretty cool) making me look for excuses to hate it? Kind of like Nabokov, if Nabokov was just 20% more disciplined and about 30% less adventurous. So, let's call this book a kind of half "Despair."

MJ Nicholls says

My self-appointed biographer Graham Golden approached me last night, casually "warning" me that his biography had found a publisher (Nonentity Books), and that collusion was "within my best interests." I ignored his impertinent message and sat down at my Toshiba to type the forty-eight words you have read (as of the word "read"), and the following confession.

As a reviewer, I have encased my fair share of skeletons, and it is Golden's intention to expose my moments of weakness to reduce my standing in the GR ratings by at least two or three career-flattening places. I would like to recount them here, and ask my millions of followers to look beyond these and focus on the work I have produced since then. When I left university in 2008, I became friends with a group of neo-nazi book reviewers, whose purpose was to promote *Mein Kampf* on popular reviewing sites. I created over a hundred accounts, and wrote numerous reviews in praise of Hitler's incoherent rant, signing off each review with an all-caps promotion of neo-nazi activities the world over, usually HEIL HITLER AND PRAISE THE FATHERS WHEREVER THEY LAND. I was paid over one hundred pounds per review, so saw no harm in spreading idiotic propaganda if my identity remained a secret. I was then approached by pro-Bush reviewers, and to my eternal shame, I wrote five-star reviews of Republican books such as *Gorgeous George: Intimate Portraits*, a collection of photographs of Dubya holding his chin and appearing as pensive as his simian melon would permit, and *Damned if I Do*, a 900-page moral treatise defending each of Dubya's moral transgressions, using a waffling logic drawing on quotes from Machiavelli, Rand, and Al Capp. It was only when I encountered the reviews of Manny Rayner did I realise the error of my ways, and abandoned my fascist activities. Since then, I have penned no propagandist reviews and devoted myself to the promotion of exemplary world literature using the extremely digestible capsule format.

When Golden's biography is released, I hope you will be strong enough to ignore his exaggerations and see beyond his desperate intentions (to increase his own ratings and garner 1000 more likes on his *Oliver Twist* review).

Thurston Hunger says

Does the bloodlessness of academia bother you? If so, perhaps this short read is worth killing a couple of hours, forensic testing turns up traces of blood in the print, is it yours?

Feels a little bit like a joke that people enjoy explaining more than experiencing. Or maybe I'm less clever by half, I did have to slog through some of the first half, but that's probably because I've spent more of my life outside classrooms than ever before.

Glad enough I stuck with it, and honestly I suspect the author could have made it more hermetic, with more nods to the Barthes essay (which I've not read I should admit). In the end I probably would have dug it more if I just stumbled upon it, as opposed to having it relatively high on my to-read list for quite a while.

Nice read for college English/Rhetoric students on a long weekend?

Vincent says

I love the Art of the Novella series, and here's another reason why. Compact in a way that benefits the story-- I can't imagine reading 600 pages of this prose-- and as ambiguous as all get, there's a satisfying feeling to this book, especially in the manner in which Adair gets the reader to consider how a selection of prose, which he uses three times at three different moments, has no real definite meaning, a shout-out to the title, yet, as the author caused the reader to realize this, contains a specific meaning wholly attributable to authorial intent. Sorry, my head's fuzzy...

Ronald Morton says

A perfectly executed, deceptively compact work of theory fiction.

Seriously, there really aren't any wasted words here. Everything about this is just so well put together, and Adair's writing and word choices are truly fantastic. It's obvious from the first page that you're really in for something special, as the words just have this lovely flow to them that is very enjoyable to parse. It's not a breezy read – you really shouldn't expect to skim through it, the book wants your full attention, but it is a fun read, and is one that rewards the diligent reader.

And it's goddamn smart as well. That's always a big plus. I love books like this that work on a number of different levels: as theory, as fiction, as multi-layered game and intellectual exercise. What contributes to the death of the author? There are probably four or five solid answers in this tiny little book.

Anyone who enjoys structuralist theory – or really just modern literary theory - should pick this up. And, truthfully, anyone passingly interested in what the hell structuralist theory is should as well. You won't regret it. It's a great read, it's pretty damn funny, and you'll probably even learn something.

Get on it.

Tosh says

This book is a strange combination of an enjoyable read and so-what in the end. It maybe my mood! But nevertheless this is a great series put out by Melville Books. Beautifully designed, and perfect for the bathtub (where i do a lot of my major reading).

Adair is a writer that is interesting, but somehow never caught my full attention for some reason. There is a pretense in "The Death of the Author" that is funny, but it is sort of a hollow laugh.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

Adair Devil in an Aporetic Cul-de-Sac

Roland Barthes published the essay *"The Death of the Author"* in 1967:

"To give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing."

A living autocratic author kills the text. The role of a reader is to resurrect the text, to liberate it from "interpretive tyranny", whether it is dictated by the author, academics or other readers.

Needless to say, the theory was opposed in America. Even Camille Paglia wrote stridently:

"Most pernicious of French imports [into American academia] is the notion that there is no person behind a text. Is there anything more affected, aggressive, and relentlessly concrete than a Parisian intellectual behind his/her turgid text? The Parisian is a provincial when he pretends to speak for the universe."

One such import is Adair's fictional Professor Leo Sfax, the originator of *"The Theory"*. Another real one is the Belgian critic, **Paul de Man**, upon whose life Sfax is based.

Both had a secret past of collaboration with the German occupation of France and Belgium respectively. Both died before they were found out. But ultimately, they were found out. Well, de Man was. But was Sfax?

Adair's novel *"The Death of the Author"* purports to be written by Sfax. It sits, apparently, perhaps even now, on his Apple Mac. It documents his quest to kill the Author, himself, apparently, in order to hide his secret.

It discloses a motive for suicide. It also discloses a motive for a murder by one of the characters in the novel (or is it a work of non-fiction?)

Is it an attempt to incriminate an innocent character? Is it simply trying to preserve the reputation of the Author? ***Did a conniving fictional character make it all up?*** If so, was it the Author character or another character?

Was it Astrid, his biographer and a specialist in the Gender of Omniscience, or Ralph, her jealous boyfriend?

Is the Author alive and trapped in this work of fiction?

What is death anyway? *Is death just a literary or linguistic predicament?* Can a linguistic construct die? If the Author is dead, then long live their book and all the characters who sail within. Is this a mendacious and mischievous and meaningless book? Of course (view spoiler).

Is it a great read? You bet!

VERSE:

Either/Awe

I say Yeats, you say Yeets,
You say Kates, I say Keats.
Either/Or,
Neither/Gnaw.
Let's call this thing Karloff,
Lest it be called Carl Orff.
So if you go your way,
Most likely, I'll go mine.

The Rebirth of Theory

Now that God's dead,
The Author's next.
Theory, it's said,
Don't be perplexed,
Will fill your head
Like Moby Text.

Astrid's Legs

I gazed, while her legs,
Crossed sheer and scissory,
Fought my misery.

Astrid's Proposition

Dear Professor
Leo Sfax,
I have here a
Proposition.
I hope it's not
Ridiculous.
I'm sure you

Won't reject it,
When you see me
Knickerless.
It might advance
My career,
If I could write
Your bio,
So would you please
Collaborate?
If you'll agree,
I'll guarantee
That it will be
Swastikaless.

Review of "Love and Death on Long Island"

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Giles de'Ath, the narrator of "Love and Death", is referred to as a disciple of Professor Leo Sfax.

Nicolas Chinardet says

You never really know what you are going to be reading about when you open one of Adair's books. You can however be sure that you're in for a treat. And "this mendacious and mischievous and meaningless book" does not disappoint. An thought-provoquing and entertaining reflection on writing and fiction disguised as a piece of crime fiction. The writing is superb, as ever. Great fun.

Helen says

I really want to read this book. I read a review by a friend (listed as the recommendator), and was interested. But I fear I might not be able to record my reading progress or my final thoughts here on Goodreads because:

1)I'm afraid I'm not crafty enough with words to completely avoid using the a-word which is, as you know, an anathema as of September 20th. It would not be in accordance with new policies. Yet, given the subject matter, it seems nearly impossible to not mention it in the review or the comments below it. Or quotes. The GRand Inquisitor Qaramada has not yet issued any official proclamation about them, but it has been noted that some examples that might harm The Holy Spirit Of The Consumer Community (praise Him!) have been executed for their crimes.

2)I'm afraid that this book might be removed from Goodreads because it contains threatening content. I daresay that the title is already much more threatening and likely to hurt the feelings of poor creators of literature than "BBA" which, as we know, is a mortal sin. And just look at the tagline:

"What, I thought, was to prevent me from truly killing the author?"

Blasphemy!

(view spoiler)

Greg says

This book might be a great summer reading book for people who hate the books that are called beach reading. Or maybe a great book for people who hate the beach, most likely because they are kind of pale, and probably find the idea of sitting in the sand and having the sun beat down on you as a form of torture and not as an enjoyable way to spend the day. Who decided anyway that summer / beach books should be the most moronic and low grade type of fiction there is anyway? Are people supposed to get dumber when the heat rises? Or is it that one would have so little to do while sitting on the beach that one would actually enjoy having a half-baked plot that would be barely tolerable watching it in a ninety minute movie turn be dragged out for a few hundred pages, and take up more than ninety minutes of one's time.

Digression over.

This book is for people who think they are very smart because they have wasted a good portion of their lives reading people like Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard and Barthes and would now find it amusing to read a satire of French Theory, complete with *Murder!!!!* I for one found it quite amusing, and would much rather read it again than sit in the sand for even one minute in the sun.

Bennard says

There is so much to unpack from this novella that I need to think about my rating because my rating fluctuates between a three star or a five star.

Scribble Orca says

UPDATE: Verbivorous Festschrift Volume Two: Gilbert Adair features a delightful meeting of contributor minds and material - the debonair Adair - and from the contribution concerning this work of his, a small extract:

"Gilbert Adair's *Death of the Author* has long been regarded as one of his masterpieces. What readers and critics have either disdained or ignored, through a seeming lack of perspicacity or a willful avoidance and misconstrual of textual hints and contrivances, in a manner reflecting the very subject matter and the protagonist around whom the story develops, such that the void of comment represents the absence suggesting presence, is the actuality of this novella being a mistresspeace, a homage to the one woman he truly admired, and dare it be said, loved. . ."

"It's a skilful and savage performance, with twists which one shouldn't reveal. And the central idea, that killing the Author is harder than it looks, has to be simply true. What has happened is that He is now unmasked, cavorting on the page along with the other characters; not an omniscient, anonymous figure, but a lying, local and irresponsible 'I'." - Lorna Sage, Independent on Sunday

Bloody. Brilliant. Beautiful.

The most fun you'll have on a Sunday snorting at a fictionalised account of the theory* behind *le nouveau roman*, deconstructionism, (a few other isms including the dirty little secret that is anti-Semitism), the literary establishment and iconic ivories, the making and unmaking of reputations, replete (naturally) with the requisite blonde bombshell. All coated in exquisitely delightful (or tongue-in-cheek curlicued) prose served up on a genre whodunnit platter. Top nosh.

*The homagous nod to Barthes doesn't mean *au faitness* with the last seventy odd years of litcrit is *de rigueur* - A Dare's text is *embonpoint* with all manner and meander of punnilicious fun and wry readerly games.

Rafal says

An odd tale that was written in a way I found rather intriguing. The book begins in media res and goes on for about 3 pages. Then the narrator jumps back to childhood, covers a facet of his life, reaches the beginning of the book, and the 3 pages repeat, and he jumps back again and covers a different facet of his life. This happens several times and it give you a better and better understanding of the book's opening.

the plot is fairly straightforward. A murder mystery in a small town. But the reoslution relies on a clever meta narrative that involves some questions of validity on the part of the narrator, and even pulls the reader and Adair himself into the scuffle. This could almost read like an excessive for a writing class if the story wasn't fairly compelling.

The writing is slightly conceited and occasional confusing, but the characters are pleasant and the story actually manages to move along as a pretty clipped pace. An odd introduction to the author and it makes me wonder if all his other works rely on some sort of clever writing trick.

Matt says

This is a smart, tightly wound little book. The story starts out as a pseudo-memoir of a man who lives through Vichy France and travels to America to become one of the most famous literary theorists in all of the Anglophone world. The story is a barely veiled description of Paul De Man. In it, the author (I mean Adair), picks up the familiar refrain that De Man's post war work in Deconstruction (labeled by Adair as simply "the Theory") was meant to so dissociate sign from meaning and action from consequence that it would serve to exculpate him from his sycophantic collaboration with the Nazi press during German occupation. I was a little bit huffy about seeing Adair so unreflectively repeat this monolithic attack on both Deconstruction and De Man (especially after reading Jonathan Culler's thoughtful treatment of De Man's work and his life in a chapter of *_Framing the Sign_*), but this is fiction, so I accepted it and read on. Surprisingly, the book becomes a murder mystery (well not really surprising since the first words of the jacket cover advertise this),

and the story ends with several delightful twists within the last 25 or so pages.

To call the book postmodern would be a bit of a stretch. It's a fairly straightforward narrative with one fun little periodic refrain that throws some of the chronology into interesting relief. But Adair does show a grasp of the key concepts of deconstruction (the misrepresentation of which often accompanies the biographical exegesis of De Man's work with the incriminating activities of his early life, which I describe above). This is not only refreshing but serves as an important element of the plot, but to say any more would give the whole thing away!

Steffi says

Dieses schmale Buch, das in erster Linie eine ironische Auseinandersetzung mit moderner Literaturtheorie liefert, sich aber zum Ende hin noch zur Kriminalgeschichte mausert, ist höchst unterhaltsam geschrieben. Im Mittelpunkt steht der französisch-stämmige Literaturtheoretiker Sfax, der sich in den 40er Jahren schuldig machte im besetzten Frankreich (unter Pseudonym) nazifreundliche Artikel zu schreiben. Nach dem Krieg wanderte er in die USA aus und wurde dort ein anerkannter Professor, der in seinen Theorien französische Ideen aufnahm, den Autor für tot erklärte und Texten jegliche Intention absprach. Die Anklänge an Roland Barthes Theorie und Paul de Mans Biografie sind nur zu deutlich. Adair nutzt diesen Plot, um die Unzuverlässigkeit des Autors auf allen Ebenen zu karikieren – denn wie kann man dem Werk des Professor Sfax Vertrauen entgegenbringen, wenn man dem Autor nicht trauen kann? Wie kann man dem Ich-Erzähler Sfax über den Weg trauen, wenn der Autor unzuverlässig und seine vermeintliche Intention bedeutungslos ist? Und was taugt eine Theorie, die lediglich ersonnen wurde, um sich von eigenen Missetaten (dem Verfassen von Nazischund) zu distanzieren? Und was passiert, wenn man diese Theorie auf andere Bereiche (wie von Strukturalisten und Postmodernisten immer wieder gerne betrieben) überträgt, zum Beispiel auf einen Mord (wenn es keinen Autor gibt, auch keinen Mörder; wenn es keine Intention gibt auch kein Motiv?). Wenn man Werken – und weitergedacht jedem menschlichen Wirken – eine Intention abspricht, wie amoralisch ist das? Adair führt uns also die Absurdität solcher Ideen vor und amüsiert dabei so sehr, dass man fast schon dankbar sein muss für die Existenz dieser Theorien.

Das Buch hat mir Lust gemacht, mal wieder etwas von Roland Barthes zu lesen und mich auch mit Paul De Mans Leben zu befassen (zumindest was seine literarische Bearbeitung angeht, hier lässt sich auf Lars Gustaffsons *Die Sache mit dem Hund* und Wolfram Fleischhauers *Der gestohlene Abend* zurückgreifen). Auch Adairs *Wenn die Postmoderne zweimal klingelt* : Variationen ohne Thema, eine Sammlung von Essays werde ich mir zu Gemüte führen – also viele Anregungen für die weitere Lektüre.

Dennoch – an der ein oder anderen Stelle ist der Roman bei aller Kürze doch etwas langatmig geraten und daher nicht ganz so gut wie Blindband.
