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Reality Hunger

"A literary battle cry for the creation of a new genre, one that doesn't draw distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, originality and plagiarism, memoir and fabrication, scripted and unscripted. . . . David Shields [is] brilliant, thoughtful, and yes, original."

—Cathy Alter, *The Atlantic*

"*Reality Hunger* urgently and succinctly addresses matters that have been in the air, have relentlessly gathered momentum, and have just been waiting for someone to link them together. . . . [It] heralds what will be the dominant modes in years and decades to come."

—Luc Sante, *The New York Times Book Review*

"David Shields draws on a wide range of references—literary, historical, personal even—to discuss the art of the manifesto and to construct a *poetic* that is also an account . . . of his own mental life. . . . Most importantly, Shields knows how to provide argument without appealing to ideal or opposition. Reality is the future between reader and author, and the author of *Reality Hunger* is a future that is also a reality. It is the aesthetic experience he is after."

—Tim Parks, *The New York Review of Books*

"Good manifestos propagate their own ideas to a limited degree, but they also serve to spark a wider discussion of the ideas they promote. . . . After the opening call to action, a variety of minds turn their attention to the same problem. For the human ideal of a better world, Shields's *Reality Hunger* has just the immodest ambition and exhorter's zeal to bring about this happy scenario."

—Sam Sacks, *The Wall Street Journal*



Synopsis

With this landmark book, David Shields fast-forwards the discussion of the central artistic issues of our time. Who owns ideas? How clear is the distinction between fiction and nonfiction? Has the velocity of digital culture rendered traditional modes obsolete? Exploring these and related questions, Shields orchestrates a chorus of voices, past and present, to reframe debates about the veracity of memoir and the relevance of the novel. He argues that our culture is obsessed with a reality, precisely because we experience hardly any, and urgently calls for new forms that embody and convey the fractured nature of contemporary experience. From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

1. Despite this book's praise for collage and appropriation, cutting passages from the jacket copy and/or Shields' own description of the book, then pasting as a five-star review, isn't valuable in any way. 2. Speaking of the jacket copy, by writing a negative review of this book it seems I will be "defending the status quo." Always useful to caricature your opponents in advance. And I thought the status quo totally depressed me ... 3. What is this "conventional literary novel" Shields keeps

talking about? Yeah, I also have no desire to read Olive Kittredge, but my lack of interest in the latest celebrity memoir hardly discredits the genre of memoir as a whole. Is Shields reading Hemon, Javier Marias, Percival Everett, Kathryn Davis? For someone who persuasively writes of the novel as a hybrid genre and wants to stake out an indefinite space for his own work, Shields really likes drawing lines in the sand.⁴ When Shields does admire a fiction writer (i.e. Bernhard, Coetzee, Sebald) he pretends the writer is a sort of essayist in disguise. This is bizarre. All of the above writers create imaginary characters and involve them in invented narratives. Photos in Sebald do not make him a documentarian. The reason their books do not seem like fiction is that they are incredibly well executed, that is to say artistic. Fiction that does not seem like fiction is simply good fiction. Shields can't admit that the magic is working.⁵ How can a book about reality-based forms of art and writing not mention historical fiction even once? Is it because historical fiction sounds staid and proves that Shields' ideas aren't as new and exciting as they want to be? Anybody remember postmodernism, by the way?⁶

This book is much more than an intriguing manifesto about art and reality. Most of the laudatory reviews on and the breathless notices on the book jacket miss the fact that lurking in the background of *Reality Hunger* is a character/narrator/trickster named David Shields. His praise or derision of various works of art is energized by a wistful sadness about most present moments, about life. This character -and, presumably, the writer who is telling us about him-- hungers desperately for wisdom because he wants to feel better, he wants to feel real, he wants to feel. Usually insightful riffs and joyfully plagiarized quotes about fiction, non-fiction, music, TV, movies and the visual arts are a cry from a wounded heart. When it comes to reality T.V., he tells us, "the success of the genre reflects our lust for emotional meaning. We really do want to feel, even if that means indulging in someone else's joy or woe. We have a thirst for reality (other people's reality, edited) even as we suffer a surfeit of reality (our own-boring/painful)." I found myself rooting for this character (as well as David Shields, the writer) to figure everything out, to come up with a coherent aesthetic. Full disclosure: I hung around with the writer 30 years ago and I want him to be happy, and he clearly needs a coherent aesthetic to make him happy. I am not sure that he came up with one, alas, although the attempt is scintillating and heroic. For one thing, the same David Shields who takes great pleasure in garnering pearls of wisdom and lessons about life from Proust or Kafka also enjoys two songs mixed together by Kanye West, the buzz that surrounded James Frey's book and Tina Fey's impression of Sarah Palin.

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