

Truthful Fiction

Introduction: *The Art Lover* by Carole Maso is not written in the traditional novel form. It is an interweaving of three different but related stories presented in a series of titled segments. The story is told chronologically, the sections of the book divided by seasons, but the background information is presented in bits and pieces throughout the course of the novel, causing the tale to unfold slowly. Maso made these and other unconventional decisions in both writing and style, and each creates a specific effect. Together, they serve the purpose of guiding the reader to specific ideas and interpretations. In my fictional response to *The Art Lover*, I explore Maso's stylistic choices and their various meanings.

A Few Seconds

The air is cool as it streams in the sunroof you have left open though you turned on the heat. I imagine it kissing your face lightly as you drive along. Right hand light on the steering wheel, left hand holding a cigarette. When you smoke at home, you pull your left leg up to your chest and lean forward as if about to divulge some earthly secret. A deep breath in and a long exhale out. It's comforting, you say, that moment after the burn, and it feels like life can do nothing but work out. Were you thinking that as you drove in your car that night? As you came to the intersection? There were no cars. There must have been no cars. You are not a reckless person. "I am alive," you tell me. I would like to keep you that way, but I think you'd laugh if I said that. Laugh and kiss me on the forehead as if I were a child.

The sun is an hour below the horizon. I am only fifteen minutes further away. Perhaps that is why you did what you did. Maybe you wanted it to be fourteen or the unlucky thirteen. But you do not drive fast, carefully maintaining a speed at two miles per hour over the speed limit. So why did you go through the light that flashed out at you STOP? Not a warning or a suggestion, but a bold command. You could not tell me the reason when you finally arrived, flush in the face, looking alive, dropping the rest of your cigarette onto the driveway and casually crushing the red embers out with your foot. "Hello," I think you said.

The Basic Elements: I started my fictional response to *The Art Lover* by mimicking a few of the more obvious stylistic elements. Like Maso, I wrote in first person, even when describing events that were experienced by characters other than the first-person narrator, even when describing events experienced by others only in the imagination of the narrator. I also chose to have my narrator address an absent party as in *The Art Lover* when Caroline speaks to Max or when Carole speaks to Gary.

I also played with verb tense, as Maso does, using present tense to describe the majority of scenes. This stylistic choice serves as a way of putting the reader in the scene, allowing a certain closeness to the characters, to their thoughts and feelings. But not only does it put the reader in the moment being described, the use of present tense serves as a representation of how the character speaking is in the moment. When Caroline is describing her encounter with Max in the section titled *The Night of Pity and Self-Loathing*, she does not conclude by saying "I love you too, Max," I whispered back" but with the phrase "I whisper back" (190), instead. This is representative of her closeness to the moment. I used the same tense in my fictional response ("The air is cool...") attempting to do the same thing. The events that are described in this first section are in the past relative to the time of the reflection of the narrator but are still in present

tense. I experimented with this stylistic choice at the end of this first section by switching back to past tense in order to stand out, to indicate to the reader that the narrator is, at this point, stepping back away from the moment and from the emotion contained within remembering it.

At the Pool

In the summer, I like to write at the pool. I watch people, imagine stories for them, and put those stories into my own to create works of fiction. The people I watch are strangers, but familiar, each in his or her own way. A son, a daughter, a sister, a brother. Mothers and fathers and grandparents. Friends. Lovers.

I write about the blue of the water, the shine off of the slide, the sound the diving board makes when boys cannonball off of it and into the water. I write about the curve of a hand on a waist, a mother's worried frown as she watches her children go off alone. I write about a girl who eats French fries and licks the salt off her fingers when no one is looking. I write about the warmth of the sun on my skin and what it looks like as it dances off the water. I write about what it would be like if I weren't here writing, if I were here with you.

Stories Within Stories: This second segment of my fictional response is how I decided to incorporate the idea of stories within stories. I do not offer any specific excerpts from my author-character's stories but instead chose to show a few specific details along with an idea of what the larger plot is about but also to show that many aspects of my character's writing come from experiences she herself has had. The same connections are evident among the stories in Maso's work as well. "Categorizing helps," Caroline says, "Especially when thinking of things that are gone" (41), and then a few sections later the reader sees Alison categorizing the trees and the plants by the cottage. Caroline clearly has missed her mother ever since her death and then, later, Alison expresses the thought "that she had been missing her [own] mother her whole life" (232). In the section *More Winter*, Carole writes that Gary said "1986 was going to be the breakthrough year," and the same line is repeated in a section when Caroline discusses having visited Steven in the hospital. The elements of one author's life and written about in her writing. My character-author writes about things she has seen, things she has experienced just as I have done in writing her story. She is sitting at the pool observing, but most of her observations are really things that I have seen and when I wrote about them, I was remembering specific instances in my own life. I have simply allowed her to use them.

If the specific details weren't enough to show the obvious connection between the stories, there are larger plot ideas and devices that function in the same way, perhaps a bit more obviously. Carole had a friend die of AIDS, just as Caroline is watching a friend fight his own battle with AIDS. Caroline is dealing with the loss of her father, just as Alison has lost her own father figure. There are also greater questions of faith that are presented in all three of the stories; Caroline and Alison both question God directly—most notably in Alison's question and answer sections when Alison asks the questions "Why is this happening?" and "Why did you make us?" (99)—and Carole says in her section that miracles are only "Things [she thinks she] used to believe" (200).

The Reaction

Why did you do it?

“I don’t know. But it was frightening, exhilarating. My stomach dropped. My heartbeat seemed to slow to half its usual pulse before racing to twice its normal speed, as if to catch up. I sped underneath glowing red, and I felt alive.”

Your words, not mine. How I hated when you spoke in ways I wished I could.

Story Arc: This third section of mine relates back to the first section about the man running the red light. This section is short, as are many of the section in Maso’s book, but it still accomplishes a few important things. First, it allows a non-narrator character to speak while still keeping the focus on the narrator and her reflection on the situation. It also plays with the linear arc of the story. There is no doubt that Maso’s book is chronological since each section is a different season and they are told in order, but different aspects of the plot are withheld from the reader and revealed at later points through moments of characters reflecting on something in the past. This allows the story to keep its linear arc while still causing the story to unfold slowly, to maintain a degree of suspense, to allow things to be revealed as the author wishes them. It would have been possible for me to incorporate this section into the first one, but I feel that it loses something if placed there—mainly, the added sense of character that the reader gets from having read the second section. I think much of Maso’s book functions on the same level, though mainly in Caroline’s story. Things like her mother’s death and depression are hinted at, but not revealed all at once at the beginning the of novel.

Criticism

We were sitting on my couch the first time I showed you my writing. I took out a piece of the novel I was working on, a scene of mostly dialogue between my two main characters that took place on a couch. I watched your eyes travel back and forth and down the page and I held my breath. My writing has always been personal. I don’t like to show it around. But you expressed interest, and though it had only been a few weeks, I was already having a hard time denying you anything.

You finished and looked up at me. I exhaled softly so that you would not notice my apprehension. You smiled.

“You need to work on your dialogue.”

“Oh?” I didn’t know what to say. I know I have many weakness as a writer, I just never expected you to see them, to lay them out in the open. I always try to find something good to say about someone’s writing before moving to the things they can improve. I have to believe that if we have weaknesses, we also have strengths, even if sometimes they are hard to see. I wondered: did you not mention mine or did you not find them worthy of mention?

“Your men and women characters sound the same. There isn’t a gender difference.” You paused. “He speaks with too much emotion.”

But that’s how I want him to be.

That’s how I wanted you to be.

Truth and Lies: *The Art Lover* is a novel and not a memoir, but it still raises questions of what is true versus what is not. The section *More Winter* features a narrator that has not been seen yet in the book, a narrator named Carole. This raises the obvious suspicion that it is the Carole on the cover and that it is a true story about something in her life. It details her friend Gary’s struggle with AIDS and her own struggles dealing with his illness and eventual death. The reader is left to

determine whether or not the Carole in the story is the same as the Carole on the cover of the book. Personally, I think it is and would even without her dedication page that dedicates the book to one Gary Falk, whose artwork appears multiple times throughout the course of the book. This belief raises a further question, however, and that is why the author would decide to include her story in the pages of a fictional work. The above is my final section of fictional response to *The Art Lover*, and I feel that it offers a very possible answer to the question of why Maso would write her own story alongside Caroline's and that of the Massachusetts family.

I intended to write a fully fictional response to *The Art Lover*, but the story told in the above four sections is not, in fact, wholly fictional. The first three sections feature characters doing things I have not done. True, they all draw from my life, such as the things my author-narrator chooses to write about while at the pool. In the first section, the description of the character smoking a cigarette and his reticence to speeding are both traits of a man I know. The same man that I found myself writing about in the final section. Except in *Criticism* my character is not merely inspired by this man I know; he has become him. This fourth section is my life, not that of my characters.

The way I wrote this, however, it is not as obvious as Maso including herself as a named character if it is discernable at all. I feel, though, that it is possible that Maso included the section *More Winter* for the same reasons I included *Criticism*: because she couldn't keep it out. I did not intend to put this section in, but I looked back over what I had written and found that I had. It fits, I believe, as does Maso's inclusion. Both sections deal with the same topics as the rest of the stories, offering almost a means of validation: I am writing about this because I know this. Maso's choice may not have been an intended stylistic decision (as mine was not), but it works stylistically nonetheless, tying the stories together and giving the whole work another lens through which to be viewed—that of a story within a story within a story.

Conclusion: Though Maso makes some very unconventional decisions in her novel, they are not without purpose. She writes in a segmented style with multiple narrators. She uses the frame of a story within a story within a story and lets the story unfold slowly, with suspense, despite the linear organization of the larger sections. She includes herself as a character in a way that may cause the reader to believe that the things she is saying about herself are true. She also includes a few more-common stylistic elements such as first-person narration, present tense, and having one of her narrators constantly speak to an absent character. All of these decisions, however, serve a very specific purpose in the novel and, together, guide the reader through a very different experience than if she had not made these decisions. When I attempted to duplicate these choices—some faithfully (such as the segmented style, the first person narrator, and the idea of putting in pieces of my own experiences) and some slightly different (my less-blattant ways of including a section completely about myself and of showing stories within stories) so as to better fit in with the length constraints of my piece and with my style—I began to understand more completely what, exactly, these choices can do to writing (as well as to the reader's reading).