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Searching for Truth, Searching for Feeling

Zamara Tomko

An object such as the novel has a peculiar ability to form the opinions and perceptions of not only readers of the present, but any reader henceforth from when the novel is published. The words cannot be taken back; the words cannot be unwritten. Simply, the words are out there, and anyone who chooses to can be influenced by its sovereignty. This is simultaneously an inspiring and concerning brilliance of the written word. Perhaps if the novel went by any other name it would be: 'opinion former' as they create these perceptions of reality that last generations. This quality evokes two major ideas. One: the fictional novel can account for emotions better than nonfiction can. This evocation calls forth empathy from the readers and concern for actual historical events. Two: the contraposition of the previous idea is that these perceptions easily create a false idea of the reality of historical events based on the influence of only the author's perspective.

At the beginning of this year, specifically around the time of the first quarantine, a quote circulated around news articles and Twitter feeds. The quote in question states, "I don't know how to explain to you that you should care about other people." Originally expressed by Huffington Post author Kayla Chadwick in 2017, it remains relevant. It can be hard to care about other people; when a person can remove themselves from a situation physically, often empathy easily follows suit. A textbook's dry and factual descriptions or statistics never fail to inform, but it removes one from the situation, the historical event, and there is a space left for the pathos that fills these breaks in the narrative. Hans Fallada's novel *Every Man Dies Alone* is set in World War II Berlin, a city characterized at the time by destruction and disarray. Bombing was a major issue for the citizens of Berlin, the British pre-war assurance to only bomb military-related targets was soon forgotten (Beck 2). If one were to open a textbook about living in Berlin during World War II perhaps one might find a statistic like the following: over the course of the war, the city was hit with over two million small stick bombs alone (Beck 3). It then might be observed that one cannot conceivably understand the concept of two million of anything, let alone two million bombs or the destruction that followed. This is where facts fail to inform. How does one conceptualize the loss this brings? Ironically, it can be easier to look more intimately at only a few stories to understand this. This is exactly what Fallada can accomplish in his novel that other methods of information often cannot. In one section he describes the aftermath of a bombing:

. . . she stopped in bewilderment. The house had been bombed overnight; there was nothing but rubble. People hurried past it, some purposely averting their eyes, unwilling to see the devastation or afraid of being unable to conceal their anger . . . people told each other the British didn't want to hurt working people, they just wanted to bomb the rich people out west . . . Her dressmaker hadn't been rich, but she had been bombed just the same. (Fallada 215)

In only a few lines, a being has been created, destroyed, and mourned. Although fictional, the dressmaker's life was modeled by one of the many lives actually afflicted by the bombings in Berlin, and this time, one pays attention to not only the facts but the suffering alongside it; all of a sudden, the reader can care. This passage is only one example of many in Fallada's novel; he is constantly bringing these dry facts of life in Nazi Berlin alive. These opinions and emotions expressed with the backdrop of disorder in civilian life cannot be captured from facts or figures. The coalition of purpose from reality and empathy from fiction presents a compelling case for awareness and interest in historical events.

This humanizing of internal and external struggle leads to the questioning of reality within fiction. Fiction is always a simplification of real life in some way. This is perhaps a bold statement, but the simplification is a necessity of the story. Fallada's novel centers around the operation of the Gestapo in civilian lives. The Gestapo in actuality had many different classifications of informants and had methods of tracking their reliability (Hall 254). Its complex system and procedure of using informers, who almost always were reliable people, also meant a middle-man usually recruited them (Hall 258). Fallada uses the concept of informers, particularly with the character Borkhausen, but also more informally with other minor characters. Of course, he is simplifying this process of Gestapo informants for the purpose of his book; for example, Eschereich recruits his own informants, Borkhausen cannot be classified as either an official or unofficial informant based on their definitions, and Borkhausen has no personal file built in the Gestapo that would be used to confirm reliability and performance. It is obvious Borkhausen is not reliable which, in reality, even unofficial informants were. But, this twisting of reality is necessary for the plot of the novel. Fallada certainly did not portray Borkhausen to the extent of the actual complexity of the organization of the Gestapo informants, but simplification, while maintaining truth, does not contain the whole truth. This is not always entirely important, especially when there is a larger message or story to be heard, but what does this complexity tell us about or add to their society? What can we learn from this complexity of reality compared to the simplifications? What assumptions or stereotypes are made by people because of these simplifications, and how do they affect our perception of various groups?

These questions are all motivated by one general quandary: what is truth? What can be proven as fact is so often shaped by our perception of reality. When that reality is simplified, for example, within a novel, everything becomes a fact, and rarely is there ever an exception. Of course, within that reality, within the novel, that perhaps is okay, but the novel is not a singular entity; it exists within our reality. It is a creation of our reality, and ours is often much more complex than the contents of a fictional novel. An author is under no obligation to give the full truth of complexity in their reality, and the reader is under no obligation to seek out the full truth.

Nevertheless, facts are often hard to prove, the next best thing; however, is perhaps compiling a multitude of perspectives for oneself. Now, it seems, the pitfall of simplification is really the danger of a single perspective. Determining what is and is not reality is difficult to do with that single perspective. Fallada, for example, lived through the events of World War II in Germany, but as a single person with one perspective on the whole of the Third Reich, there are bound to be inaccuracies. In fact, up until the twenty-first century, there was no actual complete study on paid informants working for the Gestapo (Hall 248). The reality of a time can be missing for so long, and until then, we are simply yielding only our perception of truth.

Fallada's depiction of the antagonists in the novel also speaks to a particular perspective. The characters depicted as 'evildoers' like the Persicke men, the Obergruppenführer, Borkhausen, and Enno Kluge are all written in a way that leaves little room for exemption or redemption of their behavior. With the exception of Eschereich, they never change and barely, if ever, think about changing throughout the whole novel. Because this is fiction, the goal is not necessarily to inform unlike scholarly sources; there is some other goal that shapes the story and often makes it stray from the truth. However, of course, again emerges this danger of the influential power of a novel. We see that, in reality, there was all this misinformation and

changes each individual went through every day in Germany. Friedrich Kellner makes his observations in his diary during the war on a fervent Nazi woman: "practical National Socialism has its dark side. Only with experience do they get smart. The Nazi wife is finally having her eyes opened wide. Not just here: in all of Germany" (Kellner 117). His remarks on misinformation:

An air battle over the North Sea provided an opportunity to report thirty-four of forty-four English bombers were shot down, and merely two German planes were hit. The English, however, say they shot down twelve German Messerschmitts and lost seven of their own airplanes. The prize question: Which is the truth? (Kellner 56)

also point to this internal struggle that many of the people of Germany experienced during the war. But, there is none of this internal struggle seen in the characters previously mentioned, all of whom were on some morally wrong viewpoint. It is crucial to recognize the hidden meaning behind this. The only 'bad guy' (Escherich) to switch sides either morally or explicitly, kills himself. Although he changed, he does not live any longer than that realization as atonement for the actions he already committed. The author's opinions, while perhaps valid, are coming through and affecting the general perception of real Germans at the time. Now one might say, well the author wrote it, of course, his voice and opinions should come through, and they should in a fictional novel, but that does not mean we cannot acknowledge the dangers of that. Since Fallada's novel has no reference to this internal struggle within a particular type of character, he can easily create this false reality even if it is just to be able to tell the story he wants to tell. Due to the influence a novel can have, this ultimately leads to gross generalizations of certain groups and falsifies the reality of the past, and in determining the influence one fictional novel has, well, perhaps we should think more personally; we determine our own realities after all.

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