

THE INDESTRUCTIBLE AUTHOR

by

Brad Phillips

A thesis presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Fine Arts in Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or produced by another party in fulfillment, partial or otherwise, of any other degree or diploma at another university or institute of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the text. This thesis was prepared by me specifically for the partial fulfillment of a Master of Fine Art Degree at the Ontario College of Art and Design University.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the porous boundary between fiction and autobiography through my short story collection *Essays & Fictions*, in which I play the role of an unreliable narrator. Although my work in painting and photography appears confessional and autobiographical, it has always been highly edited, constructed and performed; part of the intentional creation of a character or persona. In *Essays & Fictions* I explored this further by commingling fact and fiction without a disclaimer. Using the book as a case study I explore the tensions between author and narrator, between artistic control and reader projection, and between the appearance of authenticity and the instability of truth. Rather than seeking to resolve the discomfort of this tension, I argue for its creative potential, engaging with the themes of fraud, con-artistry, and fakery that have informed both my visual art and literary practices. In reference to Roland Barthes' proposal in "The Death of The Author"—that a text is best served by being severed from its author—I examine the ways in which readers seem hard-wired to connect an author to their text, and demonstrate that his proposal is haphazardly applied, and contrary to human nature. I further explore how shame—particularly around addiction—functions as a powerful force in shaping autofiction, and how readers can find meaning and connection in sentiment, through sincerity that is both performed and genuine.

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INTRODUCTION

In March of 2013, I moved back to Toronto after living in Vancouver for eleven years. I had just spent four months in a drug and alcohol treatment center, followed by eight more months in a halfway house. During my time in Vancouver I worked exclusively as a visual artist. I exhibited my work regularly around the world and was the subject of critical reviews and writing. In my final three years, however, my art career declined steeply, due directly to substance abuse issues that were further worsened by mental illness. In the weeks preceding my admission to rehab, I was flirting with homelessness.

I include this information because it is true, and because the following thesis focuses on the implications of my status as the ‘unreliable narrator’ in a book I published once I was back in Toronto. For the sake of this paper I want to be forthcoming, and not use literary subterfuge to avoid exposing myself. It feels important to lay this groundwork.

In 2014 I began to publish writing, first in art magazines and then more widely. In 2016, I received an advance to write a short story collection, and in 2017, I was given a scholarship to complete my master’s degree at OCADU. In my art practice, I had always used my own life as material. I made paintings of my wife and of myself, of books I was reading, scenes inside my home, and places I traveled to. Early in my career, I became aware that I had a tendency to editorialize. I found this interesting and explored it. With painting and photography, I was able to *appear* confessional, and my work seemed autobiographical. While the images I painted truly *were* from my life—and therefore self-disclosing—they were also highly edited, and sometimes constructed. I was interested in creating a character. The artwork I exhibited while living in

Vancouver depicted the life of a certain cliché straight white male who was moody, vaguely spiritual, well-read, and in love. While I *was* those things, I was also alcoholic, and struggled profoundly with mental illness. Back in Toronto—newly sober and preparing to publish a collection of short stories—I decided to focus on those aspects of my life, which I’d previously kept hidden. I wrote all of the stories in the collection—which would be titled *Essays & Fictions*—while at OCADU, as I learned about Roland Barthes and other theorists. The book contains eleven stories, all written either in the first person, or in the third person about a protagonist named Brad Phillips, who is an artist and a writer. While the themes in each story were familiar to me—addiction, trauma, mental illness—only one story was based in fact. The remaining ten stories were wholly fictional. When the book was published in 2019, the reaction was overwhelmingly positive. It became extremely popular, particularly on social media amongst people twenty years my junior. Something else happened which I hadn’t expected, but perhaps should have. Amongst ‘fans’ and in reviews and critical writing, people became focused on determining which stories were real and which were not. The material subject of the stories—while appreciated and discussed—took a back seat to discussions about me, Brad Phillips the author. I was forty-five that year, and had been exhibiting art for twenty years. I had a large, loyal fan base, who until that point knew nothing about me beyond what I depicted in paintings. Suddenly, countless strangers felt like they knew me. This created a number of interesting problems.

In his 1967 essay “The Death of the Author”, Roland Barthes dismantles the traditional notion of the author as the primary source of a text’s meaning. He argues that once a text is written, it ceases to belong to the writer and instead enters the realms of language and culture, and is assigned meaning through the reader’s interpretation. It’s an argument I support, which

allows for a multiplicity of meanings to exist, and imbues art and writing with more power than it inherently has. I always thought it was an easily actionable proposal, but once my book was published I saw how difficult—almost unnatural—it was for people to read my words without considering my biography. The difficulty seems to increase when a text is written in the first person, or when the writer appears to be making themselves vulnerable, or is from a marginalized group. Six years after the publication of my book I am uniquely qualified to explore the unworkability of Barthes' proposal, and the resulting repercussions.

Questions about authorship have become increasingly important in the preceding six years. Beyond the realm of text, all extant objects, subjects and narratives trace their source to an author. Donald Trump—the current author of the United States—has eroded public trust in the news media by branding unfavourable coverage as 'fake news'. When a single event involving Trump is reported on by two different outlets, its perceived truth hinges on its author. According to Trump, Fox news is accurate, while CNN is fiction. The geopolitical consequences of this suspicion around authorship are enormous, and already unfolding.

The aggressive ubiquity of social media, particularly Instagram, has created (enabled) a virtual space wherein questions of authorship are not only confusing, but positively and negatively manipulable. No image, avatar or caption can be verifiably true. The author is both dead and undead on this platform.

Barthes closes "The Death of the Author" by insisting that "the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author", implying that a text's vitality is derived not from its writer's authority but from the interpretative activity of its audience. This emphasis on the readers resonates strongly with my own writing practice, and relates to the ways in which *Essays & Fictions* was received. My book was designed to allow for—and in many ways

encouraged—the reader’s participation, creating opportunities for projection, misinterpretation and identification. It is animated by the tension between what I wrote and what readers made of it. In contrast, my work as a painter rarely involves this kind of ongoing negotiation with an audience. A painting may be looked at, but is less commonly read into, argued with, or identified with its maker in an autobiographical sense. Writing more directly enacts Barthes’ claim that meaning comes alive in the reader, not in the author’s intentions.

In this thesis I will use *Essays & Fictions* to explore the tensions between author and narrator, between fiction and truth, between artistic control and reader projection. I will also argue that rather than resolving the tension between fiction and autobiography, we should embrace it as a source of uncomfortable but rewarding creative possibility.

OH ROLAND!

Now I can be myself.

I'm not very familiar with academia. I barely finished high school, then attended art school sporadically for a few years at OCA, OCADU's predecessor. I am self-taught as a painter and as a writer. Like most people with liberal friends, I'd heard of Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, but I only learned about their work in depth when I enrolled in school in 2017. I can't say I understood *all* of their ideas, but I understood some—as opposed to Judith Butler and Jacques Lacan, of whom I understand absolutely nothing.

In “The Death of the Author,” Barthes states that “the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author.”¹ I've adhered to this statement long before I discovered it. Throughout my career as an artist, I've frustrated the galleries that represent me by refusing to provide artist's statements or to sign off on press releases when I've had exhibitions. I sometimes worry that this makes me seem difficult, or looks like I'm trying to be mysterious and withholding. J.D. Salinger and Cady Noland have similar attitudes, and it makes them seem like pretentious assholes. I do not like providing artist's statements or explaining/speaking about my work for just one, sincere reason: I never want to limit someone's experience with my work by imposing my intentions on them.

When asked in the documentary film *Instrument* about the perils of communicating one's intentions, Fugazi guitarist Ian MacKaye responds “If you don't say anything then people put it on you ... they say what you are. But go too far in the other direction and they say you're manipulating it.”²

¹ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image–Music–Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142–148.

² *Instrument*. Directed by Jem Cohen (Washington, DC: Dischord Records, 1999).

I agree with MacKaye, and would always prefer to have people “put it on” me than accuse me of manipulation. As someone who has loved both art and writing from a very young age, I’ve always found that the magic lies in my imaginative response to images and texts, and that the less I know about their authors the better. I love the paintings of Henri Matisse, which on their surface are not radically different from the paintings of Pablo Picasso—they both abstract their figures, paint loosely and use non-local colour. But I dislike Picasso’s paintings immensely. I attribute this disparity to the fact that I know Matisse to have been a mostly pleasant, unobjectionable man, whereas Picasso is known to have been a notorious egomaniac and a cruel misogynist.

So when I learned about Roland Barthes’ belief that art is maximally effective when its maker is excluded from consideration, it made sense to me. But then I discovered that he might have been kidding. I also learned that other people aren’t afforded the same luxuries that I am when it comes to not assisting their galleries in selling their work.

In *Roland Barthes Resurrection of the Author and Redemption of Biography*, J.C. Carlier (a pseudonym used by Professor Cedric Watts) states that “The most misunderstood essay in literary theory must be Roland Barthes’ ‘The Death of the Author’repeatedly critics and commentators have taken this satiric *jeu d’esprit* literally, and have credulously assumed that it is advocating the very thing that it is condemning.”³ He goes on to say that “the essay *The Death of the Author* is the litmus test of critical competence. Those who take it literally automatically fail that test. Those who take it ironically and recognize a work of fine satiric fiction are those who pass the test.”

³ J. C. Carlier, “Roland Barthes’s Resurrection of the Author and Redemption of Biography,” *Cambridge Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2000): 386–393.

Demonstrating that he passed the test himself, Carlier adds, “No wonder that Barthes signed the essay and claimed copyright: he thereby reasserted the traditional notion of authorship.”

Carlier’s argument suggests that Barthes’ essay isn’t to be taken as a literal mandate to erase the author, but rather as a sardonic, rhetorical gesture. That “The Death of the Author” is to be read with a knowing wink, not as a rigid decree but as a tool to destabilize the presumed power of the author while still acknowledging their presence as part of the interpretive process.

Feeling out of my depth, and insecure about whether or not I’d passed Barthes’ supposed litmus test of critical competence, I asked my wife Cristine what she thought. She sighed, then shook her head.

“I wish I could afford to be so whimsical about stuff like this.” she said, “When people see my work, then they see my name, there are only one of two readings. They either say ‘Oh! It’s made by a woman!’ or ‘*Oh*. It’s made by a woman.’ It’s impossible for my work to be read on its own merits. And the painful flipside is that I *need* my work to be connected to my identity. I’m not free enough yet as a woman and a person of colour to just be an artist, full stop.”

Cristine is a Puerto Rican/Cuban artist born in Miami. Her work addresses subjects related to her being both a woman, and a woman of colour. Were her identity unknown, as Barthes recommends (or doesn’t, according to Carlier), her work could not be read in its entirety. Her identity is a material component of her practice, and without naming herself as the author of her work, its full meaning would never be realized.

In *Talking Back*, bell hooks states, “It was in that world of woman talk...that was born in me the craving to speak, to have a voice, and not just any voice but one that could be identified as belonging to me.” and that, “For [women of color], true speaking is not solely an expression

of creative power, it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges the politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless.”⁴

For those who’ve been silenced, both socially and through the instruments of language and text, the option to be named is crucial. Naming can be political, empowering, self-defensive, or *the simple introduction of oneself to the world*.

Barthes’ proposal in “The Death of the Author” is appealing to all artists and writers, but only actionable to certain of them. Free from the traumatic reality of life spent on Earth by marginalized people, it’s a desirable way to prioritize the polysemic nature of art and writing. My goals as an artist are in line with Barthes proposal. I do not want to limit the audience’s interpretation of my work by telling them how that work should be read. It feels like manipulation, and detracts from the power artwork has to connect with viewers on their own terms. This is precisely why I ignore wall texts in galleries and museums. I like to think that I’m smart enough to decide for myself what something means. But the assumption that I can learn nothing from a wall text suggests that I’m arrogant, and armed with a certain privilege. And I most certainly am; as a middle-aged cis white male I assume my work will not be critiqued in any way contingent on my identity. While there is nothing inherently wrong in my desire to remain detached as an author, I’ve increasingly come to realize that my identity as an author is something I can turn on and off like a lightswitch, without suffering any adverse consequences. For others, Barthes’ proposal is a literal impossibility.

What I learned from Cristine—not in school—is that the rejection of authorship is a luxury only afforded those for whom authorship has never been a source of marginalization. Identity is only irrelevant to those who have not been silenced as a direct result of that identity.

⁴ hooks, bell, “Talking Back,” *Discourse* 8 (1986): 123–128, 1986, pp. 123–128, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44000276>.

OH BRAD!

From a very young age, I was led to believe that reality and truth were pliable materials—things one can shape and reassemble—rather than the fixed foundation of existence.

My father was afflicted with the same love of drugs and alcohol that saw me institutionalized in 2013. But while I’ve always made my living through legal means, my father occasionally chose a sketchier path. He sometimes dabbled in what is quaintly called *confidence art*, a field that involves manufacturing new personalities to separate people from their money. One day he might be a stockbroker, offering to sell you shares in something hot that was about to go public; another day a tennis coach, or a retired race car driver. My father taught me that it’s often advantageous to be someone other than yourself, and that lying isn’t just normal, but beneficial. Of course these things are not necessarily true—they’re directly opposed to prevailing norms and moral standards—but as a child, it was all I knew.

My father’s manipulation of reality was sometimes traumatizing. As a result, I was a frightened little boy, and lost myself in fantasy. In 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, people often say that their adult lives have been marred by their use of defense mechanisms developed in childhood to keep them safe. That a technique for survival which worked when they were kids is now *maladaptive*, and destructive. While this is also true for me, those same defense mechanisms have also helped me become a successful artist and writer.⁵

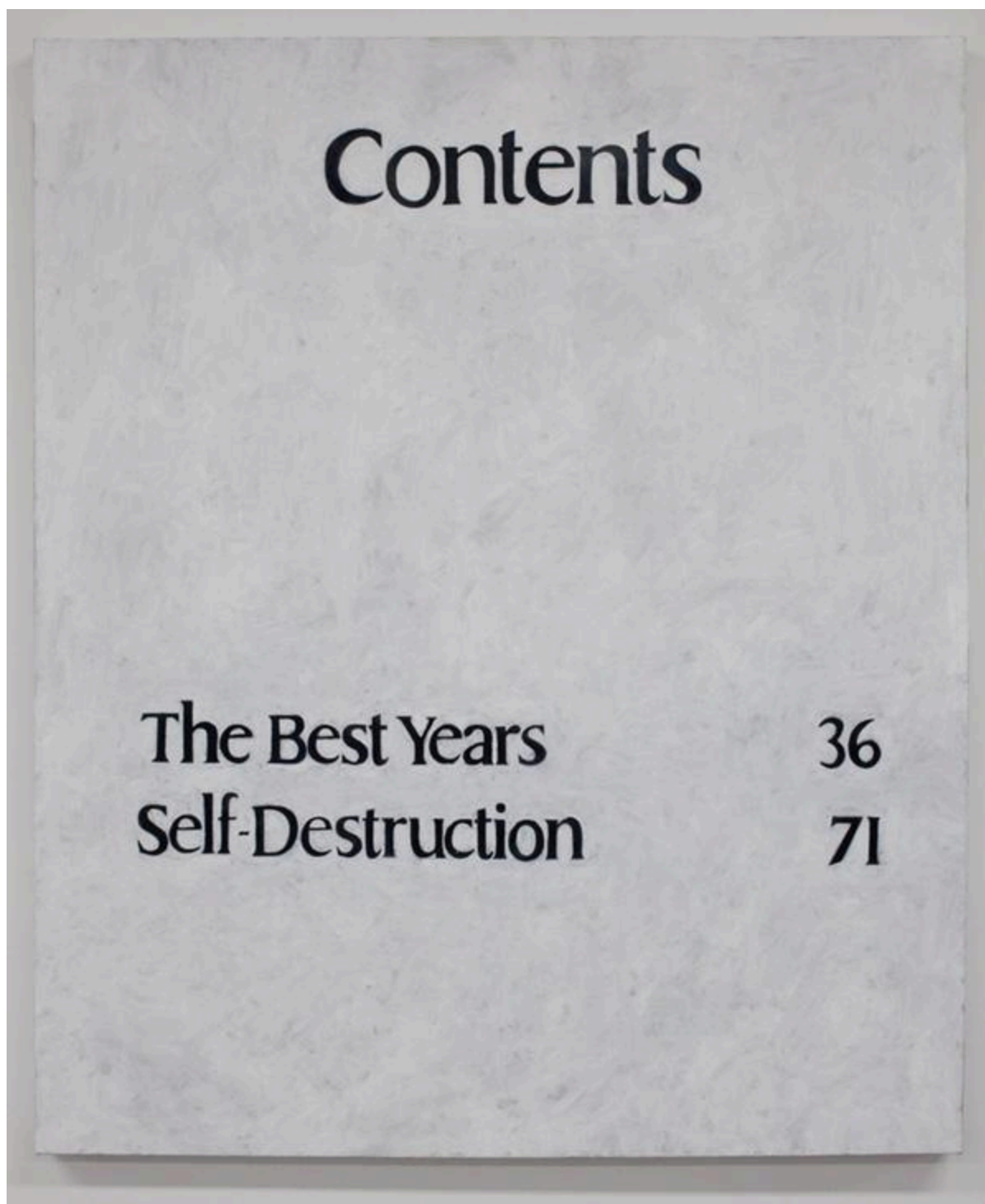
Prior to my return to Toronto, when I was interviewed about my artwork, I sometimes said that I viewed painting as a different way to write, to tell a story. I described myself as a

⁵ I remember but never have been able to find a certain interview with Marlon Brando, where he spoke about his disdain for acting, and the conflict he felt about despising the very thing that paid his rent. He attributed his problem to having had an abusive alcoholic mother, who was only mollified when Brando would perform little skits for her. He avoided being hit by performing, so as an adult, each time he was acting in a film or a play, he was reminded of his mother and the pain she brought him. I used to be able to calm my father down by showing him drawings I made. I’ve never really enjoyed painting. I only understood why when I read that interview with Marlon Brando.

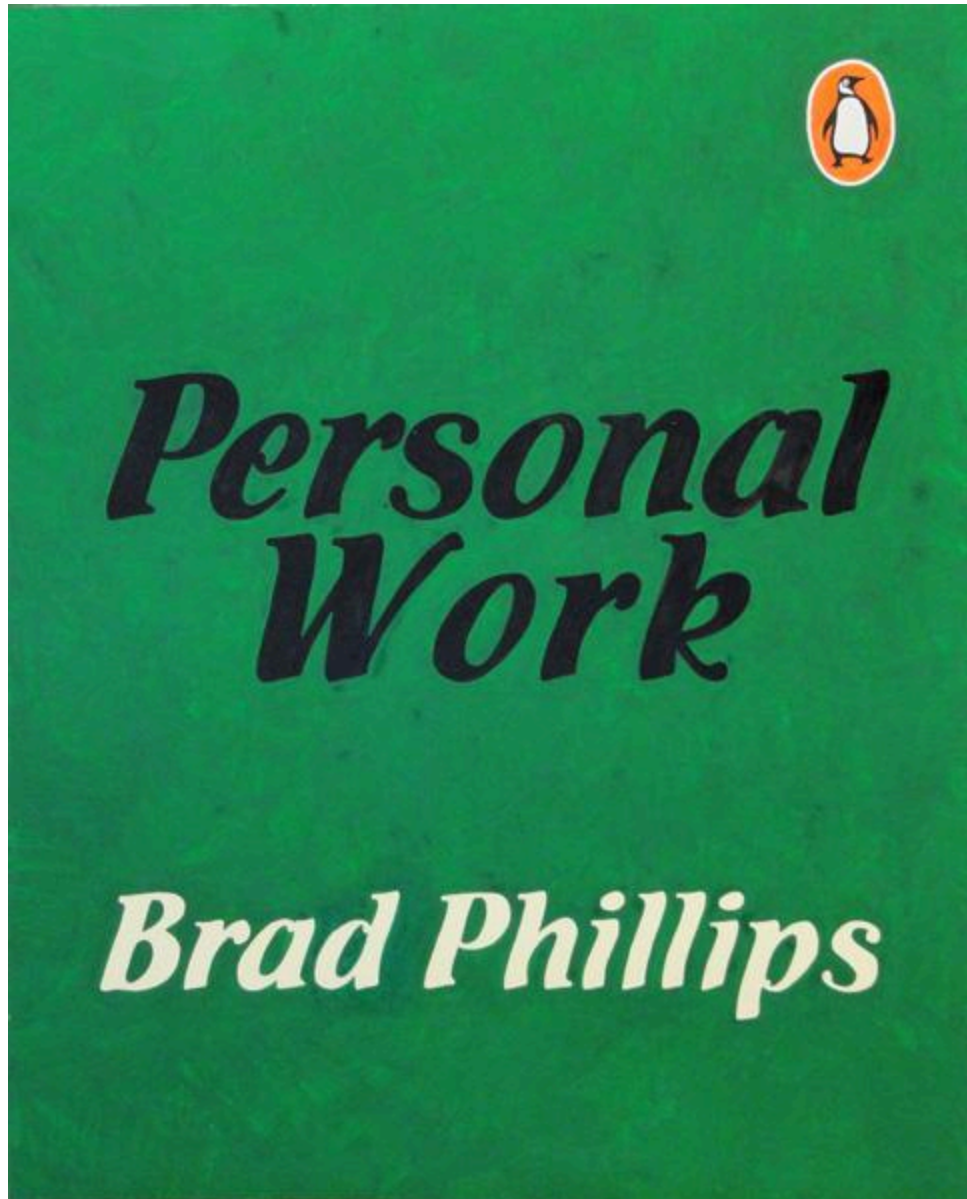
failed writer who'd never put pen to paper, and said my paintings were all scenes from one long novel that would be finished when I died. This was partly bullshit—a pat answer to give interviewers when I'd prefer not to speak about my work—but it was also partly true. These are paintings I made while living in Vancouver.



One Month of Reading in the Mirror, 40 x 30 inches, oil on canvas, 2007



Borrowed Biography (Lautrec), 30 x 24 inches, oil on canvas, 2010



Memoir Study, 14 x 11 inches, gouache on board, 2008



If I Had a Pseudonym, 42 x 31.5 inches, oil on canvas, 2008

One Month of Reading in the Mirror depicts every book I read in January of 2007—all short novels by Patricia Highsmith, whose stories often involve protagonists living on the moral or actual outskirts of society, and who sometimes lead double lives. They always have secrets. At this time I was myself living a double life, and I was full of secrets I longed to be free of.

In *Borrowed Biography (Lautrec)* I appropriated the title page from a catalogue about the painter Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, leaving out certain chapters so as to create a more dramatic, tragic image. I was myself plummeting from my ‘best years’ toward self-destruction. Beyond my wife, my doctor and my therapist, no one knew this. Looking back, I wanted help, but didn’t know how to ask for it. Instead, I made this painting.

Memoir Study hints at work that would follow. I harbored a secret desire to be a writer but had no experience, and even less confidence. Maybe I’d hoped to manifest something into existence. Ten years later I would publish a book. Maybe magic is real.

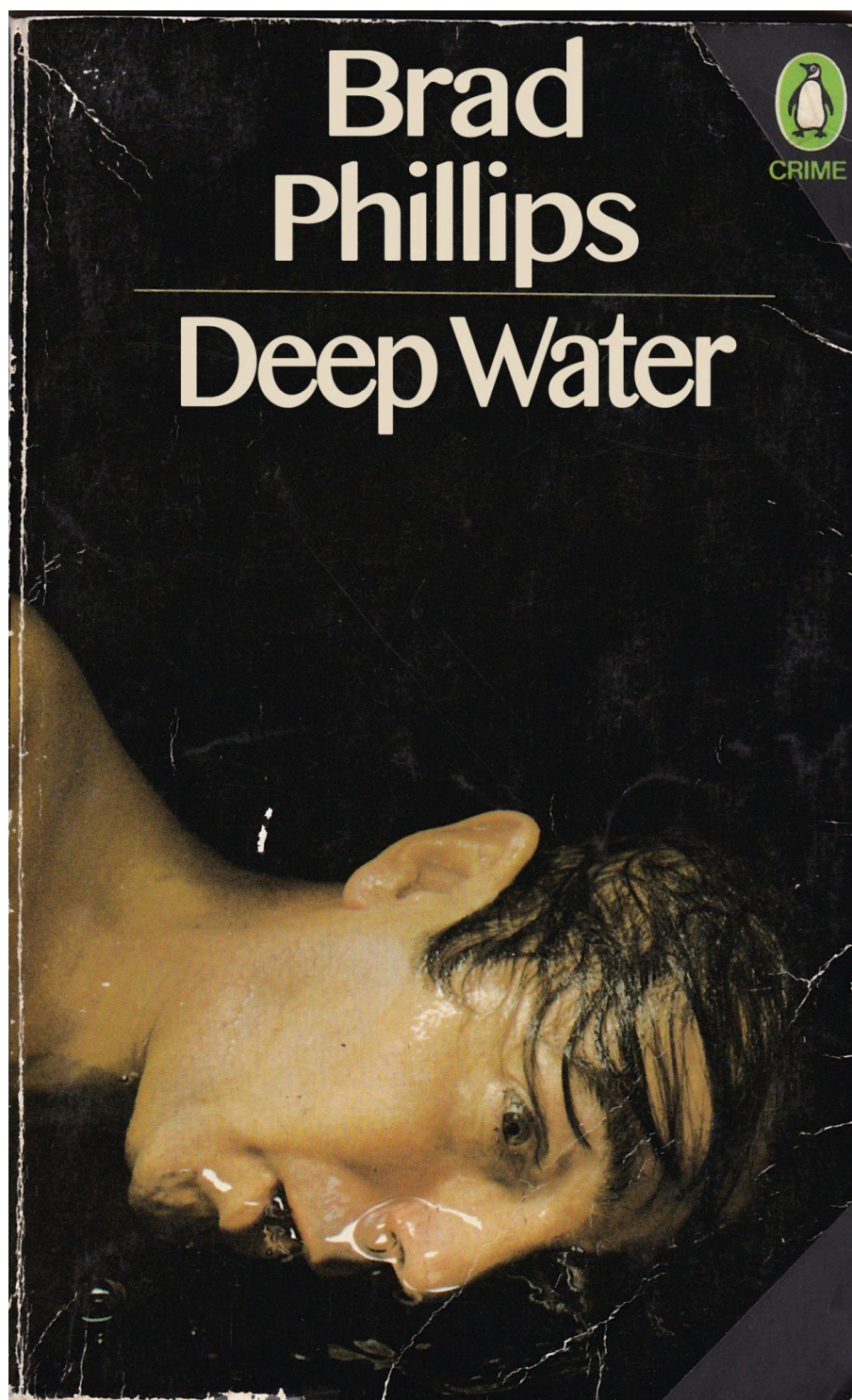
If I Had a Pseudonym depicts an abstract painting on an aluminum easel in my studio. It’s always felt torturous making highly realistic oil paintings, and I’ve sometimes been jealous of my friends who make abstract paintings. I romanticize their practice, imagining they have more fun in their studios, that they get to indulge their instincts in the moment and behave like ‘real painters.’ The closest I could get was to make this painting—which was laborious and unenjoyable—but with hindsight I see I was desperate to change. These last three paintings are the closest I came to becoming a new person until I returned to Toronto in 2013. Once back home, sober for the first time in twenty years, I actually felt like a new person. But I was not. Things *looked* different to me, but I was still the same.

BACK TO SCHOOL

I enrolled in OCADU in 2017, and soon began to write the stories in *Essays & Fictions*. I took a year off of painting, then while working on my book and considering this thesis, I made these photographs.



Get a Real Job, c-print, 22 x 24 inches, 2017



Deep Water, c-print, 9 x 12 inches, 2017



Creative Artists Agency
405 Lexington Ave, New York, NY 10174, USA
t - 212 277 9000 f - 212 277 9099

Dear Mr. Phillips,

I have recently been informed that for the previous three months you have been representing yourself as a 'talent agent' at our firm, Creative Artists Agency, based out of our New York office.

I'm certain you're aware, or would at least hope, that you do not work for our agency, and never have. Were you interested in employment opportunities at CAA, of which we offer many - including multiple internships - you could have followed very simple procedures outlined on our website which may have made that possible. However your rather audacious bypassing of these procedures and production of a seemingly legitimate business card which states you already work for us have, I'm sad to report, created a situation wherein employment at our firm is now an impossibility.

I also would like to point out, and I do hope you take this seriously, that what you are currently doing is not only unethical, but constitutes fraud and impersonation under New York state law. I am a lawyer, and my interests pertain only *to* the law. That being said, I ask that you now dispose of any remaining business cards and cease this impersonation. Our next letter will be less informal.

Interestingly however, is that your lack of malice, that you have not attempted to gain anything from this ruse, financially or otherwise, has a certain charm to it. Others here have seen the potential for a film or book, along the lines of Clifford Irving's fake autobiography of Howard Hughes. However this lies outside of my purview. I've been told however that if you had an idea to pitch, CAA would be interested in taking a look at it, as long as this current fraud ceases immediately.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey Freedman
General Counsel
CAA



Creative Artists Agency

Brad Phillips
Talent & Literary Agent

PO BOX 101093, DUNDAS DOVERCOURT, 1260 DUNDAS
TORONTO, ONTARIO
TELEPHONE 604-682-2451 - FACSIMILE 647-345-2803



Penguin Group USA Inc.
375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014, USA

Dear Mr. Phillips

It has come to our attention that you've been passing yourself off as an associate editor of Penguin Books. I have to say this is one of the most unusual letters I've ever found myself writing. It is important that you know that firstly, not only are you NOT an editor at Penguin, you are *also* not employed by Penguin or any of its subsidiaries whatsoever. Representing yourself and interacting with others under the pretence that this is likewise constitutes fraud under the law.

I confess to a certain amount of curiosity, as our investigators have discovered that you have not attempted to profit from this fraud, nor have you attempted to influence or manipulate others by presenting yourself as someone you are not. In some ways, it would make for a great book. However I've been told twice now by the legal department to not encourage you in any way.

For now let this be a non-confrontational request that you dispose of your business cards bearing our logo and stop representing yourself as an 'esteemed editor of contemporary fiction'. If you are to continue on in this fashion, I've been told our only recourse is to file a cease and desist order, which, considering the ostensible innocence of your fraud, I would be pained to see happen.

Sincerely yours,

Markus Dohle
CEO
Penguin Groups Random House



Penguin Group
Brad Phillips

Associate Editor

1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019
604-682-2451



Publisher's Lunch Confirms a Hoax, c-print, 8 x 10 inches, 2017

Get a Real Job refers both to my father and to the classic admonition to artists like myself, who in their thirties need to borrow money from their parents. In *Deep Water* I've exchanged my name for Patricia Highsmith's on the cover of one of her novels. *Deep Water* is also the title of a short story in my collection. If I wanted to be a writer of Highsmith's stature, the first step was paying homage.

The *Cease & Desist* letters were both written by me, as imagined responses from corporate suits who might have encountered one of my fake business cards. I had shown the *Get*

a Real Job print in my solo exhibition at James Fuentes Gallery in New York in 2017, and people had shared images of the business cards on Instagram and elsewhere. I thought it would be interesting to create fake cease and desist letters, and perpetuate the fraud, to see if I could continue to fool people. I posted the scans of the letters on my Instagram account, which at the time had around thirty-five thousand followers. I did not caption the posts, or offer any explanation. People began sharing the fake letters on Instagram and then on Twitter. Often. Within a few days *Publisher's Lunch*—a daily publishing industry newsletter—posted the tweet in the final image, informing everyone that the letter from Markus Dohle—and by extension my business card—were both fake. I printed the tweet, signed it, scanned it with my business card and posted it, closing the loop.

To this day I meet people who believe the cease and desist letters were real. This shocks me, but perhaps it shouldn't. I *did* write a convincing letter, and people *should* be able to trust that others are honest, and that things are what they seem. On a rare occasion someone will tell me that they knew the letters were fake. They'll point to certain clues I left behind, like Markus Dohle—the CEO of Penguin/Random House—suggesting that my business card fraud would make a great book, or Jeffrey Freedman—general counsel for Creative Artists Agency—seeing monetizable potential in my ruse and comparing me to Clifford Irving, hoax biographer of Howard Hughes. Rereading the letters again, I'm surprised nobody noticed how *badly* written they were.

In the eight years since I made these photographs I've become a better writer, and America has taken a dark turn. I see troubling parallels. Russia has twice interfered in America's presidential elections by flooding Facebook with fake news stories from ostensible newspapers like the *Chicago Chronicle* and the *New York Daily News*. Neither paper actually exists, but

when viewed on a phone or laptop, these stories contain all the same visual signifiers as articles from actual newspapers like the *New York Post* and the *Miami Herald*. For ordinary people, drowning in a sea of images while struggling under the crushing boot of capitalism, if it looks like a duck, it's probably a duck. Questioning these images—inquiring as to their validity—requires the same patient curiosity displayed by those who recognized my letters were fake. But patience and curiosity are both luxuries in the current climate, as people struggle to pay their bills and manage their anxiety in the face of increasing sociopolitical terror.

A person impersonating a cop might convince you to pull your car to the side of the road, but they won't be able to arrest you. Similarly, a person playing a successful billionaire on a television show like *The Apprentice* satisfies as entertainment, but it *seemed* unlikely they'd be able to parlay that role into a bid for the presidency.

My fake business cards never held any power, because it was clear I was being facetious. Obviously I couldn't be working as an artist while also working as a private investigator, a psychiatrist and an editor at Penguin Books. The cards functioned as one-liners; they were entertaining but shallow. The cease and desist letters had enormous power, and were able to sway people's beliefs. But that power evaporated the instant their authorship was revealed. This points to the uneven application of Barthes' proposal, as does the fact of Donald Trump's second presidency.

In the run-up to the 2024 presidential election, many things were revealed about Donald Trump one would think would disqualify him from leading the United States. He praised certain aspects of Hitler's rule. He was found liable for sexual abuse and defamation. He was connected to pedophilic money manager Jeffrey Epstein, and he said that he would act like a "dictator" on his first day of office. Each of those cultural moments were products of which he was the author.

He was not severed from his creations as Barthes' recommends, and defying common sense, today Trump is president yet again. Conversely, media figures like Kevin Spacey, Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby have been imprisoned, publicly shamed, or blacklisted from their professions. R. Kelly is in prison for sex crimes, and if someone played his music in a public space today, people would be shocked. The #metoo movement has helped to expose countless men in power, whose privilege allowed them to prey on their victims without consequence. Precisely because a product and its author are inextricably linked in the mind of an audience, these once powerful men have been labelled *persona non grata*. So-called cancel culture clearly proves that Barthes' proposal is unworkable. Donald Trump's second presidency proves that it's also confusing.

STORIES & PICTURES

In an interview with David Atwell, South African author and essayist J.M. Coetzee states that “all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it,”⁶ the implication being that an author writing a novel appropriates details from their own life to lend their fictional world verisimilitude. The obverse is also true. Anyone writing an autobiography is forced to rely on their own memories, and memories are always shaped by fantasy, regret, and the desire for a different outcome.

In Susan Sontag’s seminal 1974 essay collection *On Photography*, she examines not only the ways in which people abandon their critical faculties when presented with a photographic image (investing the same belief in what they *see* as readers of autobiographies do in what they *read*), but also how this infuses photography with a manipulative, propagandistic function. She claims that these tendencies are often unseen by both the viewer *and* the photographer. The memoirist embellishing their history may be as unaware of the fact as the reader who believes that what they’re being told is factual. “Photographs,” Sontag said, “furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it.”⁷ Just as the image in a photograph is accepted as a representation of reality, autobiographies and memoirs can be said to function as images of an author’s life. Sontag’s assertion parallels how readers assume autobiographical accounts are factual. She also claimed that “Photography is the reality; the real object is often experienced as a letdown.”⁸ This points to the way that readers tend to favour the constructed narrative of an autobiography over the—often mundane—complexity of

⁶ J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁷ Sontag, Susan, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).

⁸ *ibid*

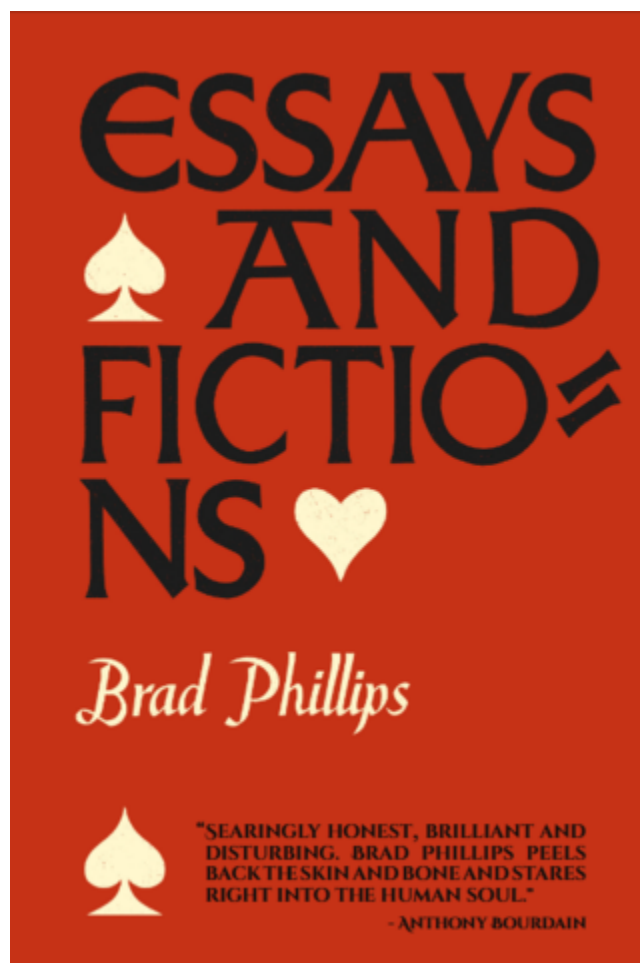
real life. It also helps to explain the betrayal they feel when an author is shown to have fabricated details in purportedly autobiographical accounts.

In 2003 James Frey published *A Million Little Pieces*, a book about his drug and alcohol addiction and subsequent recovery. Initially marketed as a memoir, Doubleday Books was forced to rebrand the book as a ‘semi-fictional novel’ when—after Oprah Winfrey recommended the book—it was discovered that many of Frey’s stories were fabricated. The hardships had not been quite so hard, and the drama not so dramatic. Readers—particularly Oprah—felt betrayed. For me, this is where things get interesting. As someone who has spent decades either enslaved to or in recovery from drugs and alcohol, I find Frey and his book *more* authentic with the awareness that he exaggerated his suffering, because real addicts are pathologically inclined to self-pity, grandiosity and dishonesty. In 2017 Anthony Bourdain—chef cum author—called *A Million Little Pieces* “such an obvious, transparent, steaming heap of falsehood from the first page that I was enraged that anyone on earth would believe a word. As a former addict, I found this fake redemption memoir to be morally repugnant.”⁹

And now worlds collide.

⁹ “By the Book: Anthony Bourdain.” *The New York Times*, November 22, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/22/books/review/anthony-bourdain-by-the-book.html>.

ESSAYS AND FICTIONS



I became friends with Anthony Bourdain in 2016 when he began dating my friend, the actor Asia Argento. He died by suicide on June 8, 2018, the same day his blurb was printed on the cover of *Essays & Fictions*. In *Boo-Hoo in Three Parts*—the final story in *Essays & Fictions*—I wrote in the first person about having discovered my father dead of a heroin overdose in his Toronto apartment in 1996. It was not a true story. My father died of an overdose in someone else’s apartment, and I hadn’t seen him in years. Anthony also died in a hotel room. On March 30, 2021 the owner of Tyrant Books—my publisher and best friend—Giancarlo DiTrapano died of a heroin overdose in a hotel room. The amount of death surrounding my book—real death—gives

it the appearance of being more authentic than Frey's book, but really it's just a coincidence. I don't know if Anthony believed that story about my dad, but he believed *me*. That I was like him. Not like Frey. I was authentic, while Frey was not. I don't agree. I just think one of us is a more convincing writer.

When I wrote the stories in *Essays & Fictions*, these issues around truth and fiction were on my mind, but they weren't my primary motivation. I was genuinely interested in writing about myself and my experiences, and thought that fiction was a more effective way to do so than autobiography, as I wouldn't be hamstrung by the mundanity of truth. When I submitted the manuscript to my publisher it was titled *Never Forget to Not Forgive*, which in hindsight is a heavy-handed, unsuccessful attempt at poetry. *Essays & Fictions* was my publisher Giancarlo's idea. And it's that title which seems to have driven much of the conversation which took place when the book was released. Never once when writing the book did I consider any of the stories to be essays. Maybe naively, I thought I was writing a classic short story collection. As proof that Barthes' proposal *can* sometimes work, many people—despite my intentions as an author—view my short stories as essays.

This is a review that was published in *The Paris Review* immediately after advance review copies of *Essays & Fictions* were distributed.

How can fiction and the personal essay operate as distinct categories when “honesty” and the “confessional” have become synonymous with quality prose? In Brad Phillips's first collection, *Essays and Fictions*, the distinction evaporates. The unassuming title ingeniously excuses us from ever considering what's fact or fib in these eleven pieces, which is the precise pleasure of the collection: everything, under the auspices of the

title, becomes true psychologically. And yet despite the immense pleasure I take in Phillips's writing, it's hard to "recommend" these essays in the conventional sense. They include things such as: a father accidentally hiring his estranged daughter as a prostitute; a sex addict with an opioid problem who can rarely orgasm; a man who murders a Salvation Army worker while his young daughters watch. It can be almost too much; Phillips's inner world makes *Last Exit to Brooklyn* look like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Then there's his organization. He can move from so many subject matters in a single essay that you've forgotten where he began, yet at the end he welds it all together in a single paragraph, like a psychoanalyst ending a session. Perhaps, like me, you've asked yourself how many more books we need that find their subject in sex, drugs, mental illness, and their role in shaping the author's experiences. But we needed one from Brad Phillips. If you want real grit and honesty in an essayist—as opposed to the self-aggrandizement that "creative nonfiction" culture has popularized—then preorder this book immediately. —**Ben Shields**¹⁰

What's interesting about this review is that the writer seems incapable of sticking to his own line of thinking. The book he was reviewing carries on its back cover a description reading "Brad Phillips' literary debut, *Essays & Fictions*, contains 11 variously styled yet equally powerful stories..." And yet despite asserting earlier in the review that "The unassuming title ingeniously excuses us from ever considering what's fact or fib in these eleven pieces..." by the end of the review he has called the stories 'essays' twice, and labels me an 'essayist'. I've always

¹⁰ "Staff Picks: Butt Fumbles, Bounty Hunters, and Black Market Auctions." *The Paris Review*, September 14, 2018, <https://theparisreview.org/blog/2018.09/14/staff-picks-butt-fumbles-bounty-hunters-and-black-market-auctions/>.

categorized essays as fact and stories as fiction. The impression I get is that Shields struggled to assign the fiction label to stories whose protagonist shares the same name as their author.

Maybe it's helpful to synopsise the stories. The story about the "addict with an opiate problem who can rarely orgasm"—*Suicidal Realism*—is based on my own experience. It was first published as a novella by Swimmer's Group in Toronto, and after fellow Canadian writer Sarah Nicole Prickett shared it with her friend Giancarlo DiTrapano, I was given the opportunity to publish *Essays & Fictions*. *Suicidal Realism* is the one wholly factual story in the book, and despite the fact that a character who shares my name commits murder in another story, I think it's the darkest. *Suicidal Realism* is an account of my life immediately following my return from Vancouver. Sober for the first time in twenty years, I became extremely depressed, and no longer sexually handicapped by the effects of opiates, I used sex to fill what people in 12-step meetings call my 'God-sized hole.' The story about "a father hiring his estranged daughter as a prostitute"—*The Barista, The Rooster & Me*—is based on the experience of my friend Jane, who was approached for a lapdance by her clueless father while working at a strip club in Vancouver. The remainder of the story is about the protagonist's desire to exact revenge on a neighbour who complains unreasonably about loud music. Beyond an anecdote about a man I knew in rehab killing his neighbour's rooster with a baseball bat, the story is fictional. *Ophelia* is a fictional account of a protagonist with my name having an uncanny experience at this therapist's office. *Unexpurgated Craigslist Ad* begins with, "the following is an unedited Craigslist ad I attempted to post in 2015. It was rejected..." It is an autobiographical account of my online relationship with a married Australian mother of two in 2001, but the overly long rejected Craigslist ad and the story of her having faked her own death are both fictional. *Proposal for a Medical Memoir* is a first person account of a man riddled with illnesses both physical and psychological. I have

some but not all of the illnesses he describes. I was interested in playing into the stereotype of the *poète maudit*. It is fiction. *Dumb Tide* is a story about a man with my name—dating a woman with my wife’s name—recreating on video a cliché scene from cop shows for obscure reasons. Fiction. *Nothing Personal* is a first person retelling of a lecture given by a supposed ‘sexologist’. Fiction. Each remaining story is fictional, then on pages 231 to 233, sandwiched between completely imagined stories, I describe with exacting realism the experience of being transitioned to Suboxone; a maintenance medication for treating so-called Opioid Use Disorder.

I never believed actors when they said they didn’t watch their movies, or read their press. Then I published a book, and within weeks of its release became embarrassed by it, and wished I could retract it. It might sound disingenuous, but writing this thesis is the first time I’ve opened *Essays & Fictions* since 2019. I find it overly dramatic, self-important, and corny. But looking at it again through the lens of this paper, I understand something that perhaps I didn’t understand before. The only certifiably true parts of the book are about my addiction to drugs, and the shame that I felt, and feel. I *was* considering my thesis and the ideas I was exposed to at OCADU when I wrote these stories, but it’s clear to me now that the driving force behind my conflation of autobiography and fiction was shame. It’s possible that I felt so ashamed of the content in *Suicidal Realism* that I commingled fact and fiction in the remaining ten stories so that readers could never know what was true. If people read that I killed a stranger—as a character named Brad Phillips does in *Deep Water*—surely they’d know I was kidding. Then later on when they read that I’m an alcoholic and addict who does bad things, they’d think I was kidding there too. Right? This seems to be what I was telling myself, if only unconsciously.

The following screenshots are excerpts from an article about my book that appeared in *Office Magazine* in March of 2019.¹¹

¹¹ “In Brad We Trust,” *Office Magazine*, March 29, 2019, <https://officemagazine.net/brad-we-trust>.

1) Trust Brad.



2) Don't Trust Brad.

But by the time I left the Airbnb, just after Brad's ego reformed from its dissolved state and he quickly summed up his take on Buddhist philosophy, I realized that there's actually a third road that lies somewhere between the two—a kind of epistemological Middle Way. Travel down this third road long enough and *Essays and Fictions* begins to seem like a deliberate misnomer, a kind of mischievous Zen koan in formal disguise. Keep your eyes peeled as you drive and you might even see a hitchhiker on the road's shoulder, —a tall, tattooed guy chugging orange Gatorade, the most honest liar you'll ever meet.

More specifically:

A) The question built right into the title of the book: Which parts are essay and which parts are fiction? More specifically:

i) Every chapter is treated the same, formatted the same, and toned the same. There are no identificatory labels and, no overt or subtle signaling of what is true and what isn't. And, as nearly every piece is written in the first person and our protagonist is named Brad, it becomes pretty easy to forget about the second half of the book's title and just assume the whole thing is autobiographical. But whenever we might begin to drift into the cozy slumber of reading Essays and Fictions as Brad Phillips' autobiography, an alarm of some sort usually goes off, alerting us to the fact that maybe we weren't supposed to be treating all the facts as factual. For example, at the end of one story that I had been reading as straight non-fiction, Brad commits a gruesome murder that I feel comfortable assuming never actually happened because:

a) Brad is walking the streets of a free man, and I imagine that if there was an unsolved murder in Canada, he wouldn't want to incriminate himself in a medium-wide distribution book.

b) Brad doesn't seem like the murder-y type.

c) Brad told me that he's never killed anyone and didn't follow up the statement with a wink or anything.

B) Quotes from a chapter titled, "Nothing Personal," that I consider the de facto keys to the book:

i) "All of my work, painting and writing and photography, is in some way about the manipulation of my image."

ii) "All my work is an attempt to spread disinformation about myself, so that nobody actually knows who I am, but everyone thinks they know a great deal about me."

iii) "I recently had to write a bio for an art exhibition. It said, 'Brad Phillips is an artist and writer, born in 1973 who lives and works in Kingston, Jamaica.' I was born in 1974 and I live in Deep River, Canada."

What makes Essays and Fictions not just a collection of essays and fictions but a small, successful piece of art in itself is that Brad reminds us over and over again not to take his word at face value—"Here is a made-up story, here is playing pretend,"—and yet, we constantly find ourselves doing it anyway. I expressed this sentiment to Brad toward the end of our afternoon together, thinking I'd finally found the intellectual nugget I'd been looking for, the potentially profound perspective on his work that would allow readers of his book to say, "Oh, I get it." Brad politely laughed and shrugged his shoulders.



2) Art

A) There are two kinds of people:

i) People like me, who like to read exhibition wall text before encountering art because, in order to enjoy the art, to get something out of the experience of the art, we must have a contextual foothold from which to build meaning. I explained this to Brad by saying:

a) I like thinking about art as much as I like consuming art, and, in order to do that, I need an intellectual point of entry.

b) I like concepts as much as I like the execution of concepts.

ii) People like Brad, who hate exhibition wall text and prefer to experience art on a more wordless, visceral level because their experience of art is destroyed the moment they are told how they are meant to experience it. Brad explained this to me by saying:

a) "I've had whatever success

I've had based entirely on my intuition. I don't know why I make the stuff I make. Later on, I can think about it, but if I have an idea, I just decide if it's good or bad, and then do it or not. My intentions are irrelevant. If this painting is funny to someone, and I didn't mean it to be funny, they're right. If they say this painting is bad, they're right. If they say it's good, they're right. I don't want to limit their experience because that would feel manipulative."

b) "I hate work that you look at and it has no effect on you, and then you have to read three pages about Deleuze, and you're like, 'Oh, I get it.' It's visual art. If it doesn't work when you look at it, it's a failure."

c) "A painting is a dumb painting on a wall, and you either like it or you don't and it doesn't matter why."

And the following is an excerpt of an interview in Vol. 1 Brooklyn that was published December 12, 2018 after advance review copies of *Essays & Fiction* were distributed.

"I've read that *Never Forget Not to Forgive* was the original title to your new book. Why did you decide on *Essays and Fictions* as the title? It seems like a very interesting choice, mostly because most of the stories read like essays, in fact they all read like essays, and yet there are obvious moments of fiction at play, like when Brad kills somebody in Italy. Yet, it also feels so real it's frightening at times. It kind of feels like a direct attack on the very notion of truth in essay form while also reading like the most truthful thing I've ever read. Is that something you were trying to get at? The idea

that “truth” is an impossible enterprise, when human ego is at play? And so by acknowledging that, “truth” comes into the picture organically?”¹²

These responses are interesting—and they do get close to understanding my thinking around *Essays & Fictions*—but unfortunately they represent the totality of critical writing that emerged in response to my book.

Roland Barthes proposed that for a text to be maximally effective it should be severed from its author. It’s a nice idea, and in theory I support it, but it seems to be applied haphazardly. It also seems to be in direct opposition to human nature. When I wrote my book it’s true that I was interested in confusing the reader, and in blurring fact and fiction. But my *primary* motivation was to write good literature and connect with people. I’m not overly familiar with academia, but I would think that if anyone was able to read my book with Barthes’ proposal in my mind, it would be the critics who reviewed it, most of whom I assume have master’s degrees. Instead it was the opposite. Almost unanimously, the press I received was focused not on the *content* of the book—which, being ‘big issues’ like trauma, sex and death, is ripe for analysis—but on the *function* of the book, and the urge to guess it created in its readers. Each piece of press focused on me and my relationship to what I wrote. If that were the only reaction *Essays & Fictions* elicited, I would label it a failure.

But that wasn’t the only reaction. It’s been six and half years since *Essays & Fictions* was published. At the risk of sounding self-aggrandizing, the book has become cultishly popular. It’s in its fifth printing. The royalty cheque I received in July came with recent sales figures. As of today the book has sold just over eight thousand copies. I had no way to know what my sales

¹² Troy James Weaver, “I’m Trying To Demonstrate in a Way That Autobiography is Impossible: An Interview with Brad Phillips,” *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, December 12, 2018, <https://www.vol1brooklyn.com/2018/12/12/im-trying-to-demonstrate-in-a-way-that-autobiography-is-impossible-an-interview-with-brad-phillips/>.

figures meant until last year, when I had lunch—ironically—with an editor at Penguin. She told me that only fourteen percent of all books sell over one thousand copies, and that only four percent sell over five thousand copies. My book was published by a small press, and had zero advertising and very few reviews, and none in large outlets. This editor was stunned by the sales of my book, which can only be attributed to word of mouth. I receive emails and direct messages on Instagram often from people who've read my book. They're sometimes very emotional. On my Instagram page I have [links to hundreds of images of my book being shared by readers](#), and I'll include some at the end of this paper. One rare benefit to social media is that you get to see what you created living out in the world. Not once has a message I've received from these people been about the issues of fact versus fiction that dominated the critical response. They only write to me to say they related to—or appreciate, or were moved by—the descriptions of mental illness, addiction, grief and isolation. People have told me they got sober because of my book, that they've gone to rehab, that they've felt less alone, have ignored impulses to suicide. They don't ask what's real and what's not. To them, the sentiment seems to be the thing. The stories don't describe events, they use events to describe states of mind. These readers understand something the critics did not, or that the critics were too distracted to see. Like Anthony Bourdain, they *believe* me. As an author, I matter to them only because I'm still alive. I'm connected with my text because I survived what it describes. They see that I've also gone through different things, and I was able to move past them. I've put my past to use, instead of having my past put me in a coffin. That means these readers can do the same. So in this way the book is a real success, and I've begrudgingly accepted that I'll always be tied to it, never severed from it as Barthes suggests, because it seems to help people feel less alone.

Before *Essays & Fictions* was published, I was a very private person, living in Vancouver making fairly conservative, non-confrontational paintings. I was not online the way everyone is forced to be today. I had a show once, sometimes twice a year, and the paintings I exhibited were the only windows into my life. They revealed very little about me.

I miss that time.

I sometimes regret having published *Essays & Fictions*, and not just because I'm embarrassed by the writing. I think I wish more than most people that Barthes' proposal was a workable one. I will forever be tied to the stories I wrote. I'll never be able to un-ring the bell. I think that in some ways it's had a deleterious effect on my career. It's human nature to want to avoid working with the mentally ill and drug addicted. How can a gallery that wants to represent me *really* trust that I'm sober? They can't. And of course, they couldn't have trusted that I was sober before, they just didn't know it. Not because I'm a writer, but because I'm an addict. Unlike biographers who do it to others, I aired my *own* dirty laundry. And not in my twilight years when my career was winding down, but in the middle of my life, when I need to be successful and earn a living. There is a flipside. I'm now viewed as an authority on certain depressing subjects. I have an essay about benzodiazepines coming out in *Harpers' Magazine*, and I wrote about addiction for *The Paris Review* last year. But it's unlikely at this point that someone will commission me to write about anything involving kids, or health, or spirituality. Instead of being the author who haunts a text, I've become an author haunted by the text he wrote.

The public reception to *Essays & Fictions* was both positive and negative in ways that mirror the erratic application of Barthes' 'death of the author' proposal. When I was perceived *not* as the author of my book, but instead as the protagonist the book described, readers felt

comforted, and turned to me for advice. They didn't want writing advice—they wanted advice about getting sober, or about living with trauma and mental illness. I didn't feel stigmatized by these interactions, and they caused me no harm. If anything they made me feel useful, and like the book had worked in one of the ways I'd intended it to. When I was perceived as the *author* of my book, I became a source of doubt, and suspicion. People weren't necessarily concerned with the truth of what I'd written—or what it implied about me morally—but rather with my unreliability, and apparent propensity for deception. I became a suspicious figure, one not to be trusted, and I've sometimes felt this negatively. For people who focused on the content, I was trustworthy precisely *because* I wrote about such taboo subjects, and did so convincingly. For people who focused on my ability to convincingly describe such things, I was not to be trusted simply because I'd done so. The book is a static thing. The stories do not change depending on who reads them. This schism in reactions speaks to the erratic ways in which Barthes' proposal is applied, and provides examples of what can and cannot happen when people do or do not sever a text from its author.

EPILOGUE

As a kid, I always loved books with epilogues. They allowed for the story I'd just been obsessed with to continue. A thesis paper usually ends with a *conclusion*.

This is a kind of epilogue. It's also a conclusion.

If I learned anything from writing *Essays & Fictions*, it was that I'm not comfortable being associated with the things I write. Addiction and mental illness are both exhausting and all-consuming. When you're enslaved to either, it feels like your whole life. People with substance abuse problems are more than people with substance abuse problems. This is often overlooked, and sometimes not even felt by the person who is struggling. I wrote everything I possibly could about these issues in my book. I feel very distant from them six years later, which to some extent is why I don't like discussing *Essays & Fictions*. The book—like any text—is always brand new the moment a reader picks it up. But there are other aspects to my personality and my experience, and I have a broad range of interests unrelated to trauma and addiction. I feel tied to what I created in ways that make me uncomfortable both as an author and as an addict in recovery.

Today my writing is very different—in part because I exhausted the subject matter in *Essays & Fictions*, in part because I'm racing toward fiction and fleeing the autobiographical. It dawned on me recently that one of the most beautiful things about writing is that you can make up anything you want—in hindsight, something obvious I should already have known. It's a cliché that everyone's first book is autobiographical. And to some extent it's true for me. I just happened to be forty-five when I wrote my first book, not twenty-six, or thirty-one. I don't have as much time to tell other stories as I would have had I focused on literature early on, instead of

art. The experience of writing *Essays & Fictions* taught me that I'm a good storyteller, and that I can craft a pretty sentence. It almost feels like a waste that I used these skills to write about my own mundane life. So today I'm finishing up a novel about a dysfunctional family in the Pacific Northwest. One brother frames another for the murder of their father, after the death of their sister by suicide. It's been exciting to write in the first person about a protagonist with a name other than my own, and to use the crime genre to discuss family dynamics, nostalgia, and loneliness. But both of the brothers—as well as their father—are alcoholics. And the protagonist—whose name is Johnny, not Brad—is a writer who's been struggling to finish his first novel after having written a successful autofictive book six years earlier.

So maybe I'm the one who can't sever himself from his text, and if so, who can blame a reader for having the same problem?

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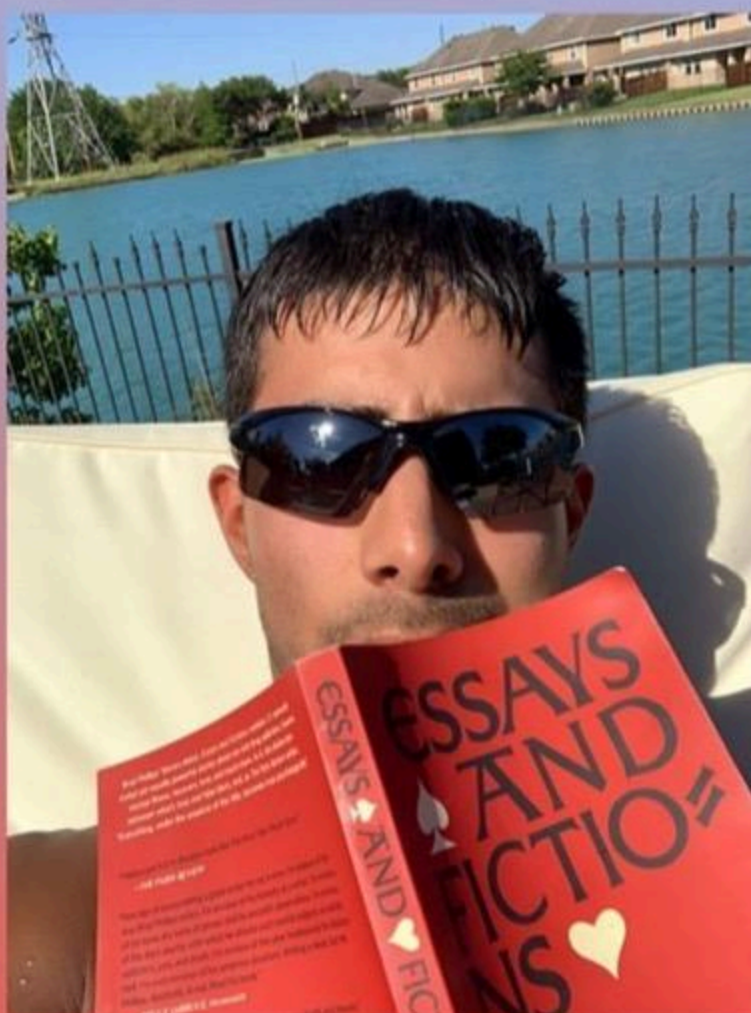
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Book May 3, 2020

americanidolseason7

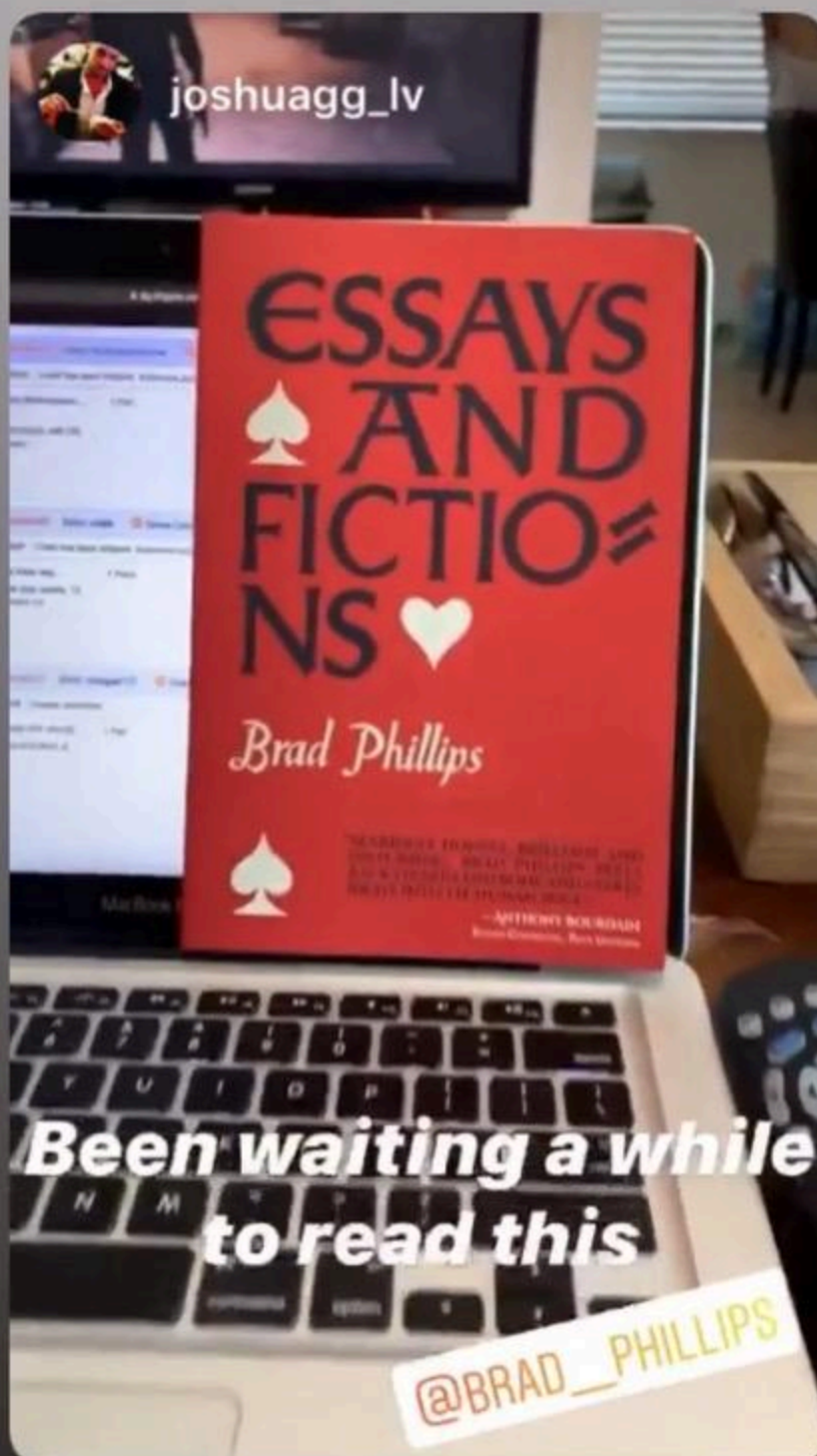
I've savored this book
for 2 months
@brad_phillips



9:18



Book May 8, 2020



**Been waiting a while
to read this**

@BRAD_PHILLIPS

9:19



Book September 11, 2022



@gabriel_rizzotti



11:20



book April 16, 2019



maandytorres

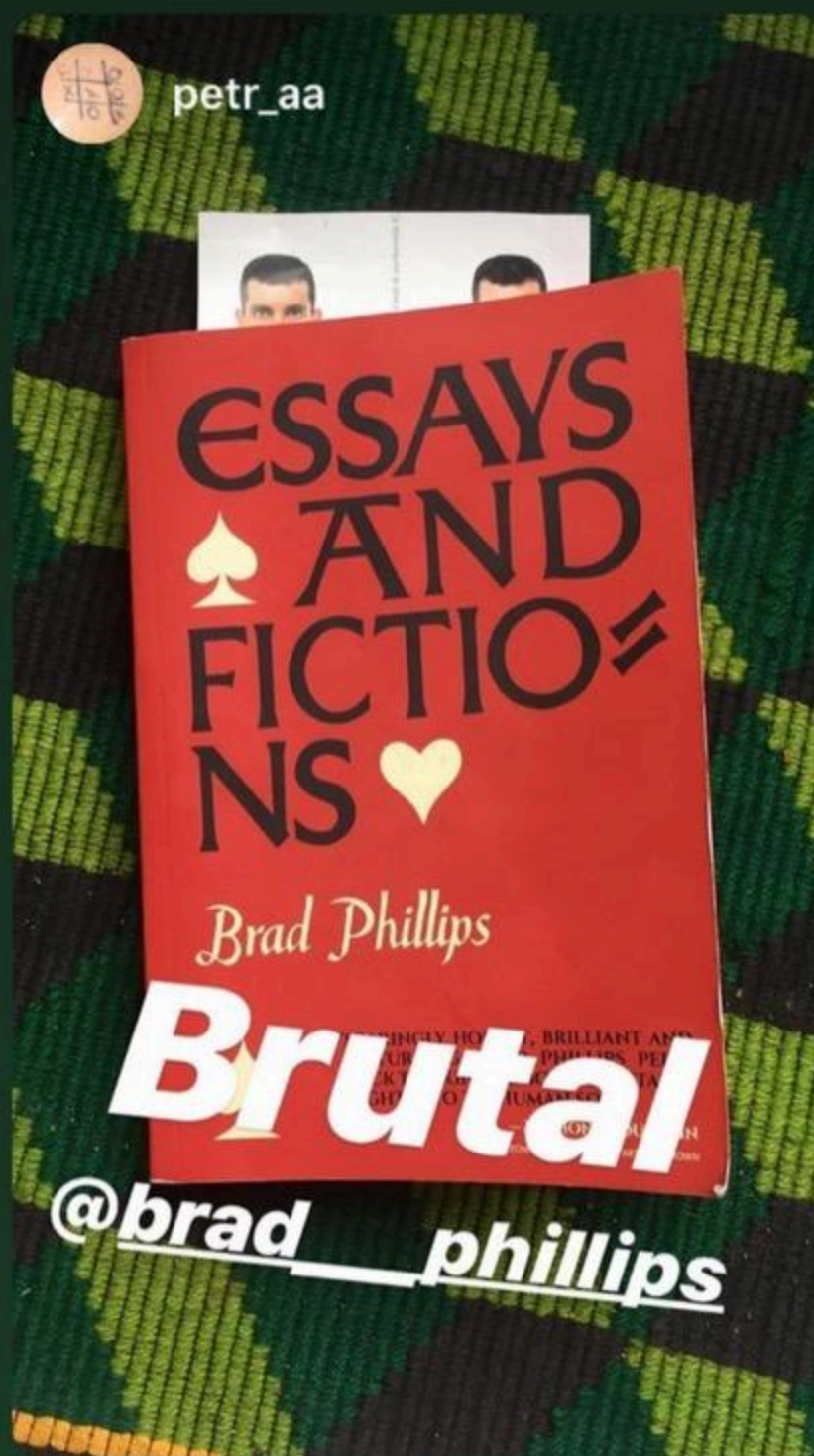
Feelin' less alone on
many levels

@brad phillips

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book May 8, 2019



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book June 17, 2019



unpiano

**I really needed this to
make it through today.**

I owe you one

@brad__phillips



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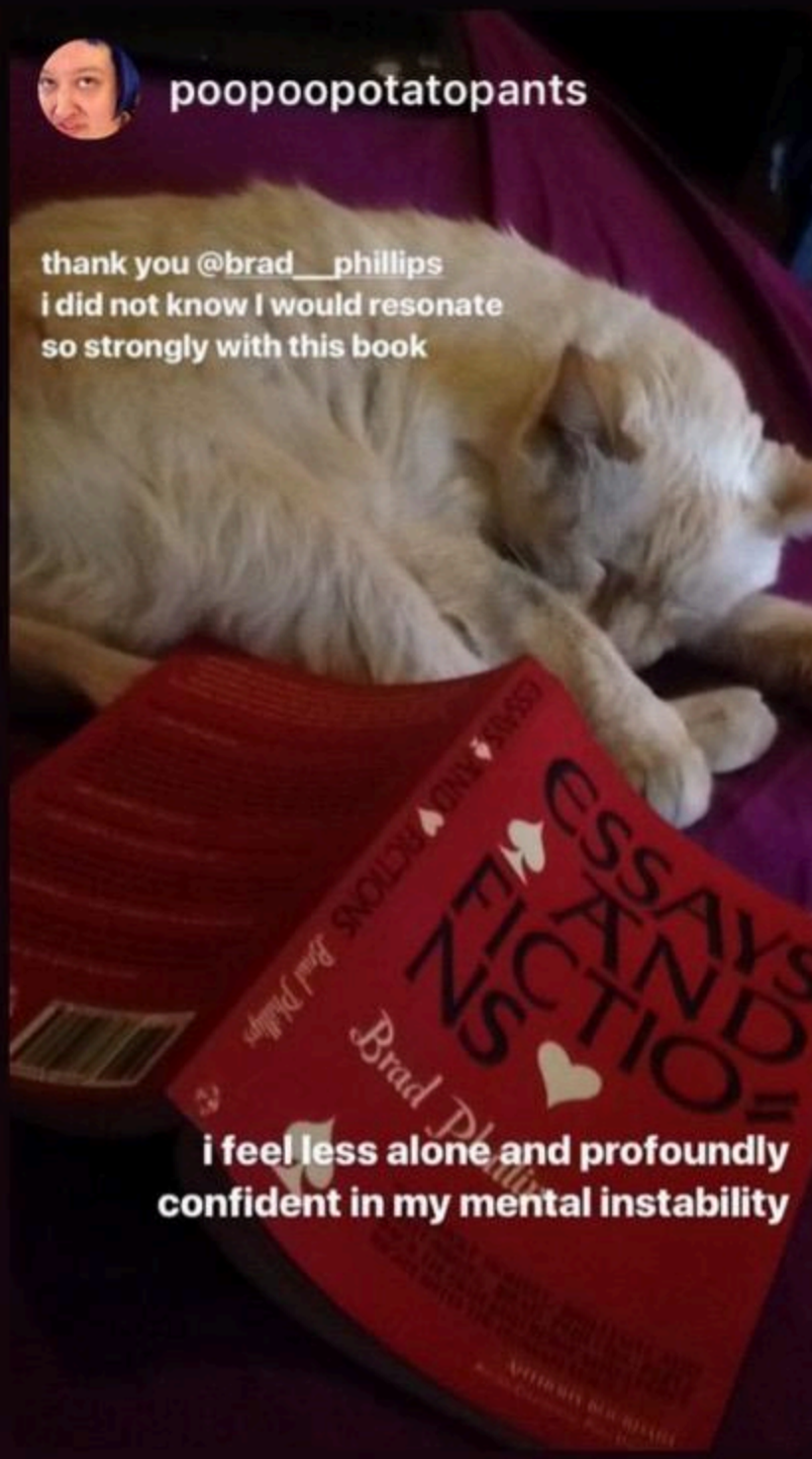


book February 17, 2019



poopopotatopants

thank you @brad__phillips
i did not know I would resonate
so strongly with this book



i feel less alone and profoundly
confident in my mental instability

11:27



book February 25, 2019
soldiersdisease 7h
commitcrimes



thanks for the recommendation @soldiersdisease

ESSAYS
♠ AND
FICTIONS
♥

Brad Phillips

"ST; BRILLIANT AND
AD PHILLIPS PEELS
D BONE AND STARES
HUMAN SOUL."

—ANTHONY BOURDAIN
FOOD 52, BOSTON

@brad_phillips

Changing lives one book at a time

11:28



book March 1, 2019



a_valeriya__

Cant stop reading



@brad_phillips



