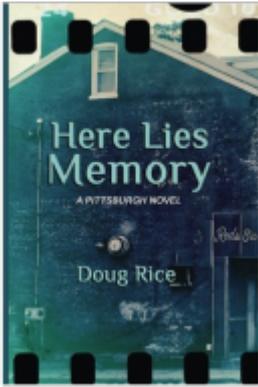


# Here Lies Memory by Doug Rice

written by John Trefry | September 19, 2016



*Here Lies Memory* by Doug Rice  
Black Scat Books, 2016  
316 pages – [Amazon](#)

Even in the presence of each other, the two men felt that they had entered into a strange solitude... Their voices uncomfortable with so much more silence than the silence they had grown accustomed to, the familiar quiet of not talking.

After several days of not using one's voice, the voice being the earnest and announced expression of thoughts and feelings, several days of not doing more than just talking, three things tend to happen. First, the voice tends to weaken, not physically, for I don't believe the vocal folds can atrophy, not so quickly at least, but weaken in terms of the voice as an assertion of the consciousness, but yes, it feels physically strange to talk as well. Second, silenced expression seems to become the norm. And third, the voice moves inside the body, the voice that had the ability to express thoughts to others, a cultivation of community, becomes a soliloquy, still functioning in the same way, manifesting thoughts in a physical form, but never to escape. The voice, the spoken word, is a figure manipulated by those three qualities in *Here Lies Memory*, the new novel by Doug Rice. *Here Lies Memory* is a novel of an entire community of people silenced in many ways, many individual and many shared.

One could say the above qualities of silence are ideal for a writer. Different than a storyteller, the writer endeavors to cultivate the artificiality inherent in the written word, its artificialness in relation to the spoken word, the oral tradition. But these qualities are not desirable for the sustenance of a community, or a culture of place. Rice indulges in the former as a writer, but does so in order to manifest the sadness of the latter.

*Here Lies Memory* is a panorama of intertwined lives, primarily black lives, a compression of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County novels or Zola's *Les Rougon-Macquart* novel cycle, taking place over a relatively short span in late 20<sup>th</sup>-

century Pittsburgh. Rather than Zola's fixation on heredity as the primary force shaping the actions of the novels' characters, Rice explores the genealogy of systemic and institutional forces—gentrification, lack of access to services, and the looming specter of the disproportionate impact of the Vietnam War on the black community—as the forces that define the state of the characters we discover. These forces isolate people from the place they live and from each other. They are forces that divest people of interconnection. They strip people of a medium in which to exist. They silence the outward projection of the voice.

The reason I focus in on the voice, the spoken word, is because much of what is important in *Here Lies Memory* is contained in quotation marks. Depending on the type of book, quotation marks either assert to the reader, simply, "Imagine this being said aloud," or it can be an assertion that, "This is not the writer speaking, but me, the character, and I have a voice existing distinct from the writer." Rice, in a sense, is primarily doing the latter. The people who say these things own these things, but not necessarily because they say them, because it is quite clear through the continuity of the prose voice flowing straight through into these quotes, that it is Rice saying these things. They own what they say because these words are all that manifests their existence.

"Some things can't be mended with a needle, no matter how sharp the needle is. Some things you leave broken on the floor. You just look at it for what it is."

"They ain't just words. They're a calling back to our ancestors and they in you. And you can't rub them out. Things like these names, you try rubbing them gone, and all you do is rub them deeper into your skin and that rubbing stays."

"Waiting can't hide or go away or change. Waiting is not like that. It's just the space that opens between wanting something and that day that comes when you have the thing itself. It's not hiding."

"True fairy tales catch on fire at the end, immediately before you can say 'happily ever after.' True desires are private affairs. A true desire wants you to beg forgiveness."

This is not talking. This is writing, clearly. It would be relatively easy to inflect the content of this dialog to sound as though a person were saying it to another person. But that doesn't seem right in the greater context of the book, because the characters are not truly saying it to those around them. They are uttering, but to themselves, in the presence of another. Nobody seems to be listening.

I should also mention a paratextual clue. It is often noted in political discourse that children are off limits. I have not heard this in literary criticism. It seems a useful tell that two of Rice's three children, Anna

Livia and Quentin Joyce, to whom the book is dedicated, give us both Faulkner and Joyce (Joyce in spades) as prominent forces in his life. As a fiercely paratextual reader, I suggest that this be admissible for an understanding of the book. But if that isn't enough to inflect your reading, the Compson family of *The Sound and the Fury* makes an appearance deep in *Here Lies Memory*. Somewhere else in the dark, a girl echoes Molly Bloom whispering, "Yes, I said, yes, I will, yes," when a man touches her. Why is all this important? Inarguably Faulkner and Joyce represent the two pillars of American and European modernism and both embody literature as being a work that exists with the knowledge and exploitation of its abstraction, its distance from the speech act as a conscious cultivation of the book's being an object separate from the world. That modernist project of establishing the book's distinct consciousness was a reclamation of a previously existing project—*Tristram Shandy* knew it was a book—damaged by naturalism. The book needn't aspire to contain a plain transcription of reality (itself a naive impossibility). So, as simply existing as the narrative and characterization of *Here Lies Memory* can seem, I believe that it is meant to be read in a different way, as artifice, with each component having multiple internal and external values.

Rice's dialog is saying things that his characters need to say in order to exist in the book, but it also functions symbolically. I think of another type of symbolism, not in terms of the cultural currency of its content, but in the way its function shades how the book is meant to exist within the culture of literature. For example, J.K. Huysmans' *Des Esseintes'* interest in flowers concurrently represents the project for modern literature embodied in *A Rebours*, "He had done with artificial flowers aping the true; he wanted natural flowers imitating the false." The language of expression between the citizens of *Here Lies Memory* is that strange flower, with "the appearance of a fictitious skin marked by an imitation network of veins."

Because of the functional potential within their dialog, they not only speak their words, but their words construct a formal picture of their disenfranchisement. The manifestation of words in these strangely artificial bodies of vibration develops the sense that they are contained within. They are the voices of the silent harbored in the bodies that nobody wants to hear from. That silence is manifested in the strained relationship of a husband and wife who have lost their son, as much as it is an institutional silencing by a city that has not afforded the community the same opportunities as its other citizens.

There is another side to this topic. A thoughtful consideration of this book would be not complete without reflecting on the real-world scenario that underlies Rice's undertaking of this book: that he is a white man who grew up in Pittsburgh and is writing about the black experience that existed parallel (would will forever exist parallel) to him. Certainly Rice is conscious of this. In a [post on his blog](#) he says:

The one thing I know (and I have known this since I was young and running around shooting hoops and other such things along Fifth Avenue in the Hill District of Pittsburgh and West North Avenue on

the North Side of Pittsburgh) is that I am white, and being white, I will never know what it is like to wake up with black skin in America. I will never know that experience.

Is this dynamic a continuation of the type of silencing that Rice laments? Is it enough to acknowledge that that issue exists, or must one question whether the white writer is continuing the usurpation of black suffering and cooption the of black culture and experience? I am afraid that I am not able to answer the question, although I do harbor an ongoing concern about it. It brings to mind Joe Milazzo's thoughtful afterword to his novel *Crepuscule W/ Nellie*, a work of historical speculation about the lives of Thelonius Monk and his wife Nellie in mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century New York. Milazzo says:

So, what business, what right do I think I have? I have no right; the answer is none. Because of the power I have arrogated to myself in writing this book, I have surrendered any ethics I may have genuinely held to those freedoms (not all of them free from ideology, not by any means) that only the imagination can enjoy. As such, I perhaps retain only one right: the right of all daydreamers, which is to apologize for the miscarriages of a sympathetic imagination. If only we might gather together every one of these botchings—our catastrophes—and fashion a kind of commonwealth out of them.

To call either novel a “botching” would defraud them of their aspirations. But it is true that both exist in contested terrain, their benevolent artistry a subject worth discussing further. In his lovely article [“There is No Secret to Writing About People Who Don’t Look Like You,”](#) Brandon Taylor assists with this wisdom:

We must be able to honor the trauma that marginalized people feel when a story does violence to them and we must also be able to discern the cause of the story's failure. There can be no story without empathy. Our stories begin because we are able to enter the lives of other people. We are able to imagine how a person might move through the world, how their family might operate, what their favorite foods might be, how their nation works, how their town works, and the smallest, most inconsequential aspects of their lives rise up to meet us at our desks. You can't write if you can't empathize.

In the same blog post as above, Rice also says, “Too often the voices, the stories of Black people are silenced by well-intentioned, progressive whites speaking over the voices of the Black woman or the Black Man or the Black child.” Empathy exists only in parallel consciousness, in parallel plight. It is contingent on an awareness of that separation because only across a distance can the caring and sensitivity devoted to that other person require

effort, and be an exercise of grace.