

Telling Stories, Telling the Truth

written by Guest Contributor | September 7, 2020



True Story by Kate Reed Petty
Viking Books, August 2020
336 pages / [Bookshop](#) / [Amazon](#)

The first thing to know is that *True Story* does it all. It's a detective novel, a horror novel, and a coming-of-age novel; it's a series of screenplays and scripts and essays and emails; and its most stunning achievement is that despite its ability to inhabit many genres and forms, it is bound by none of them. As I finished the book and reluctantly closed it, I started thinking: We've known for decades that everything is a text, that everything can be (and maybe ought to be) read, but how much of our popular literature has reflected that? Challenged or prodded or played around with that? How much formal innovation have we really seen?

I predict that much will be made of *True Story's* puzzle-like structure and Petty's ability to move fluidly from genre to genre, format to format, keeping us on the hook, all the while, like the genre novels and films to which the book pays a kind of loving homage. All of this praise will be well-earned and absolutely justified. But what I found so impressive about the book—and what should not go unmentioned—is that *True Story* is a tense and fraught attempt at connection, at creating shared meaning—at *communicating*. I mean “tense” and “fraught” in the most complicated senses of both words. *True Story* is so much more than formally inventive; it carries the complexity and the complication of emotional depth.

When too much attention is paid to formal innovation, books and their authors are often treated like flashes in the pan. (We've heard it all before: “Those kinds of things are distractions from the *real* story”; “It's pretentious”; “Just tell the story well, and you won't need anything extra!”) Sometimes

innovations in form are taken to be tricks, ways of fooling a reader into hallucinating depth or seriousness or wisdom when it is not, in fact, present. But *True Story* does the opposite: it plays with form *in order to* deepen, to encourage alternate modes of engagement with the wisdom and seriousness on offer, and it does so with a generous spirit and tremendous sensitivity. It is a book about our need to tell stories, to make meaning through the telling, and in so doing, to file down the sharpest corners of our lives and memories and our relationships to ourselves and the world. In some sense, it's a book about how we use language to (try to) make life liveable.

Petty's use of formal innovation in order to deepen engagement and understanding is particularly clear in Part II, a section of the book about a girl named Alice's final year of high school. Alice has been the subject of rumors and a series of stories. She was the drunk girl passed out in the back of a car after a "legendary party" thrown by the lacrosse team. She attempts to make sense of what her life has become since that night—who she is and what she wants and who she can trust. This section of the book made my heart sink into my stomach. I felt a familiar rush of fear and shame and resignation as I read, in draft after draft of Alice's college application essay, evidence of her teacher and mentor coaching her—gently nudging her—away from an honest reckoning with assault and trauma and her own agency, in order to help Alice craft a flat, dead-eyed but appropriately cheerful description of a lesson Alice's mother once taught her about the importance of nice shoes, and how the right pair of shoes will help a young woman stand eye-to-eye with men. (You have to read the book to see how brilliantly Petty handles the essay-drafting and teacher-feedback developments.) We watch, at the speed of essay-writing and -revising, as Alice's teacher tells her indirectly that some stories are not to be told. We see the real and devastating limits of certain brands of feel-good feminism, and we see Alice, alone, struggling to articulate something crucial—something that might save her life—falling on closed ears, no matter how sympathetic and supportive they may strive to be. I read all this and thought of Chris Kraus writing, "Who gets to speak and why [...] is the only question." I thought about the fact that Alice suffers from a kind of deficit in reality in *True Story*—and how that deficit in *being real, being seen, being heard* is very much tied to her ability to claim language and use it to express herself. It is more than telling that as the rumors of what happened to Alice circulate and recirculate, no one other than her best friend even *knows her name*. She is just "the girl in the backseat."

At this point in my reading I had to put the book down for a moment. I remembered being Alice. I was overwhelmed by some particularly sharp, painful reminders that to a certain extent, I will always have to be Alice. Not to myself (though being taken to be an Alice certainly affects my relationship to myself), but to others, some others. Anyone who is not supposed to tell stories is treated as an Alice, at some point, regardless of what stories and the act of telling are taken to be. Some get it all the time and in different ways, in different registers; some get it only occasionally. But we get it—we all get it. I think it never stops being sharp and pointy, capable of doing real damage. I am thankful that *True Story* does not shy away from this

uncomfortable fact.

As the title suggests, many of the motivating tensions and questions in the book circle and spiral and loop around storytelling—the act of people recounting, remembering, broadcasting—but it is not a rosy or uncomplicated picture of storytelling that the book gives us. Like anything with power (particularly the power to move a listener or a reader), stories are just as dangerous as they are precious. The book leaves the question of the value of stories open, or unanswered. It's the application and the aftermath of stories and the act of telling that animates *True Story*.

There are many voices in *True Story*. The bricolage nature of the book makes this feel organic. And the fact that the book is an account of someone trying to piece together *what happened* makes this feel real, and realistic. The story moves back and forth in time, hopping perspectives, hopping genres, and we are invited to *be* Alice, someone struggling to form a clear picture. The book asks us to think about what it means to give an account, particularly if we are trying to give an account of something that happened years ago, and particularly if all those years ago, we had never been encouraged to make sense of what happened (to give an account first of all for ourselves), let alone to *articulate clearly, for others* what happened. What occurs when assault victims begin to articulate themselves? How many details cannot be provided? How fuzzy is the timeline? We take “lack of detail” or “fuzzy timeline” to be a bug in the system when it comes to remembering and articulating, but when it comes to trauma, these things are *features* of the system. So often the nature of abuses of power cannot be captured easily by language, let alone the (largely) legalistic language we have at our disposal when we begin to say that something happened, and it might have been wrong.

By the end of the book, I wondered if *True Story* wasn't engaged in a bit of cruel optimism in relation to the telling of one's story and stories (telling or saying is only one of many conditions for freedom or liberation, after all). But the book is ultimately quite right about the power of telling. Some way or another, the telling has to happen, particularly if, like Alice, you have been the subject of the story but never the one with the voice and the authority to tell the story. It might be entirely private, it might be done only for the sake of a relationship with oneself, but in some way or another, at some point, it has got to happen.

If there is a willing ear—like a best friend with whom you wrote stories and screenplays as a child, or the person who picks up a book with an open heart and mind—well, then listening and its deeply powerful corollary, *being heard*, might occur. And what a gift to tell and be heard. What a gift to be trusted with the possibility of hearing.



Lindsay Lerman is a writer and translator. Her first novel, *I'm From Nowhere*, is now in its second printing with CLASH Books. Her second novel will be published in the fall of 2021. She teaches philosophy and creative writing courses sometimes too. You can find her on twitter [@lindsaylerman](#) and instagram @lindsay.lerman.