

Gravitating Toward Between-ness or Both-ness

AN INTERVIEW WITH **EULA BISS**

by Mike Shier



Photo Courtesy of Eula Biss

Eula Biss is a nonfiction writer, poet, and the current Laurence A. Sanders Writer in Residence at FAU. She is the author of *The Balloonists* and *Notes from No Man's Land*; the latter was awarded the Graywolf Press Nonfiction Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism. As a Guggenheim Fellow, she is currently working on a book about medicine, vaccinations, myth, and metaphor. She has been the recipient of a Jaffe Writer's Award, a 21st Century Award from the Chicago Public Library, and a Pushcart Prize. She currently teaches writing at Northwestern University.

Coastlines: When I go to buy *Notes from No Man's Land*, I can find it categorized as nonfiction, and when I do the same for *The Balloonists*, it's considered poetry. Stylistically and conceptually, I can't help but feel that they are remarkably similar. Then, toward the end of *The Balloonists*, you present a Virginia Woolf quote that ends: "and I went on to ponder how a woman nowadays would write a poetic tragedy in five acts—would she use verse—would she not use prose rather?" And I feel that the book itself is almost an answer to this question in the form of a hybrid of prose and verse. When you finally began to "write for yourself" as the quote begins, how did you arrive at this form?

Biss: I have to admit that it's now difficult for me to say how exactly I arrived there. I studied nonfiction in college under the mentorship of three poets, and that had something to do with it. I read quite a bit of prose poetry early in my education as a writer, as well as quite a bit of Didion and a little Anne Carson. But I gravitated toward between-ness or both-ness even as a student of painting, long before I studied writing. A particular ethic or attitude is what ultimately guided me toward this aesthetic.

Coastlines: Lyric essays tend to have a friction within them between different ideas. In *The Balloonists*, there is a brief passage about sonatas that reads:

"Sonata," he says, "means 'sounding together.' It is an argument in which one theme is presented in opposition to another and they struggle until one wins, in the resolution. It is a beautiful form, it has endured into this century."

I understand this passage in relation to the theme of the work, but I also see it as a great definition of the form itself. Does a lyric essay need to have a “winner” after the struggle plays out? What, to you, is a lyric essay?

Biss: Thanks for such a close reading of *The Balloonists*! Yes, that passage was meant to speak to both the form and the content of the book. I was engaged in an argument with myself, a struggle on the page, as is often the case in my work. Sonatas aside, I’m tempted to say that a satisfying resolution in an essay doesn’t allow for a “winner.” I’m thinking, for example, of the last paragraph of *Notes of a Native Son*. Baldwin could have ended that essay one paragraph earlier, on a strong and definitive note, but he chose to close with greater, truer ambiguity. As for your second question, I don’t bother much with what a lyric essay is or isn’t. I wrote a short essay on this subject titled “It Is What It Is,” and that title is still a fair summary of my attitude. Most systems of classification and taxonomy aren’t very helpful to me as a reader or a writer.

Coastlines: *Notes from No Man’s Land* is a collection of essays largely about race in America, although we do get glimpses into other locations as well. I’m taken with the way the collection begins in the same spirit that it ends—with essays that are visually separated and lacking indentation (“Time and Distance Overcome” and “All Apologies”). “Babylon” is presented in the same way. While I understand it as a convention of the genre, I can also see it working here as a visual representation of “segregation” and an absence of traditional grounding. For you, what was the function of having those three essays presented in a different form than the others?

Biss: That visual effect is really a product of the logic of those essays. They are all three associative essays, and the paragraphs are not indented and abutted because they aren’t meant to be read that way—the movement from one paragraph to another is not, in those essays, determined by narrative or argument or scene so much as by association back to a central concern. The paragraphs are meant to be read like stanzas, so I treat them like stanzas on the page. “All Apologies” was one of the earlier essays I wrote. I knew that it would be last in the collection, and I wrote “Time and Distance” as a call to that response, knowing that I would position it first in the collection. “Babylon” was a kind of resting place for me in the middle—it’s easier for me to write associatively than any other way, so these three points in the collection were places where I returned to an approach that was more comfortable and natural for me than the approach some of the other essays demanded.

Coastlines: You graciously write about the motivations behind your essays in the notes section of *Notes from No Man’s Land*. It seems that many of your creative endeavors are inspired by research, and at the very least, all of them contain a large research component. How differently do you treat research of things like newspaper articles or scientific studies from the research of your own personal memories? Do you have conversations with people who were present for the personal events you plan to write about before you commit them to the page?

Biss: I don't tend to make much of a distinction—as a thinker, a writer, or a researcher—between the personal and impersonal. So my research just as often includes asking my next-door neighbor about a book she read in her Dante class while we're walking her dog as it involves searching a newspaper database in the library. When writing *No Man's Land*, I began my research on the word “pioneer” by rereading *Little House on the Prairie*, because I realized that everything I knew about that term “pioneer” was sourced from my original reading of *Little House* when I was seven or eight. Rereading it as an adult was an education, as it was quite different than I remembered, and that experience launched me into some further research on Laura Ingalls Wilder and her work. That process is fairly typical of the ways I tend to check my memory with research. Memory and experience often lead me to texts.

Coastlines: With the Internet and all its links, we can often end up learning about things far-flung from where we started. When you sit down to do research, what role does serendipity play in what you end up finding?

Biss: Well, research for me is all serendipity. I used to long for a more efficient research process, but I'm now fully surrendered to the meander of it. My research is time consuming, messy, hard to document, impossible to replicate—all kinds of inconvenient—but it reliably produces surprises, which is what I'm after.

Coastlines: Can you tell us a little about your current writing and research interests?

Biss: I'm working on a long essay about vaccination that is becoming a short book on vaccination. I began my research for this work by reading about the history and politics of vaccination, but that quickly opened into less obvious territory—Dracula, financial regulation, the biology of bees, Kierkegaard, the nature of metaphor, etc. It continues to unfold!