

Memory, Bifurcation, and Responsibility: Literary Reporting's Influence and Effectiveness in David Carr's *The Night of the Gun*

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Published in 2008, David Carr's *The Night of the Gun* follows the author's search for a cohesive image of the years prior to the composition of the text. Formerly a cocaine and alcohol addict and now a father with a steady job and a home, Carr seeks to pull together the fragments of a life muddled by coke, compulsion, and at times, cruelty. In service of this goal, Carr deploys two methods of reporting to gather information on his past: his own, private memory, and external sources such as interviews of former acquaintances and salvaged documentation of bygone incidents. Cumulatively, Carr's use of the former technique as a framing device establishes the necessary foundation of *The Night of the Gun*, while the integration of the latter adds clarity and readability to the text, accomplishing Carr's goals for the personal narrative of the book. From his particular perspective, Carr's reporting conventions are effective, and map perfectly onto their intended function within the broader context of Carr's personal narrative. Yet, I argue that the author's reporting also allows him to disassociate from his erroneous past, allowing Carr to avoid responsibility for his horrific, previous actions, forestalling a genuine opportunity for introspection. Hence, from my perspective, one independent of Carr's goals for *The Night of the Gun*, the author's utilization of reporting is unsuccessful.

Let us begin with the first investigative device that David Carr employs within *The Night of the Gun*: his own, private memory. Over the course of the book, the personal recollection of its author serves as the primary staging ground for many of his forays into the past. Take for example the titular "night of the gun," a notable episode in which Carr recalls St. Patrick's Day, 1987, when he was laid off from his job, kicked out of a bar, and "abandoned" (still high, drunk, and angry) by his friend Donald.¹ Carr subsequently narrates storming over to Donald's home, where his friend—armed with a gun, in Carr's version—called the police, compelling Carr to flee the scene.² Another instance of Carr's use of private memory as a means by which he examines erstwhile events is evident in his account of the domestic violence he perpetrated against one of his former girlfriends, Doolie. In less than a page, Carr summarizes the genesis of their romance, its peak, and eventual abusive denouement, ultimately admitting that "I had always remembered that I hit her...but I told myself that it was always in response to some physical provocation from her."³ Every inch of each story is recounted in the first person and purely from Carr's frame of reference, unadulterated by external perspectives and with justifications for his misadventures.

Yet, while memory is a necessary foundation for *The Night of the Gun*, Carr is aware that there is a bifurcation between what *he* remembers and what *actually* happened. Carr's memory is fundamentally unreliable; his initial self-reflective method built on unstable ground. He establishes this from the beginning, in the opening pages stating: "HERE'S WHAT I REMEMBER ABOUT HOW THAT GUY BECAME THIS GUY⁴: Not much. Junkies don't generally put stuff in boxes, they wear the boxes on their heads, so that everything around them—the sky, the future, the house down the street—is lost to them."⁵ In this excerpt, the author acknowledges the obfuscatory powers of drugs of abuse. However, the inconsistency of Carr's memory is even more multifaceted. As he himself confesses, "We all remember the parts of the past that allow us to meet the future."⁶ This revelation adds an intriguing double layer to the recollections evoked by Carr above, suggesting that not only is Carr's past variable due to

¹ David Carr, *The Night of the Gun*, (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2008), 7.

² Carr, *The Night of the Gun*, 7.

³ Carr, *The Night of the Gun*, 94.

⁴ "That guy" being Carr whilst using, and "this guy" being the Carr that writes this book—a father with a steady job.

⁵ Carr, *The Night of the Gun*, 16. Capitalization is the author's

⁶ Carr, *The Night of the Gun*, 23,

quotidian chemical use, but also because he is, to some degree, trying to make his past actions more acceptable to his present self. “To be fully cognizant of the wreckage of one’s past can be paralyzing,” says Carr. “So we, or at least I, minimize as we go.”⁷ This is an earth-shattering realization—one that makes Carr and the reader question memory’s validity in *The Night of the Gun* as a manner of self-discovery. Therefore, there is the need for a method of investigation that transcends the unreliable nature of Carr’s personal recollection.

In an effort to diversify his sources, Carr “decided to fact-check [his...] life using the prosaic tools of journalism.”⁸ Committed to verifying or dismissing the testimony of his mind, the author crisscrosses his old stomping grounds, interviewing old acquaintances as well as acquiring records from police stations, social workers, and the like. In the process, Carr adds clarity to previously oblique recollections. To illustrate, Carr had previously justified his abuse through the supposition that Doolie had always instigated the altercation, but “[Carr] knew when [he...] saw her again...that that was a lie.”⁹ Doolie paints a disturbing depiction of life with David, recalling one specific occasion when Carr pinned her to the front lawn, striking her repeatedly and assuring her: “I’m going to kill you.”¹⁰ Carr supplements the interview with a police report filed after an especially vitriolic clash between Carr and Doolie, where the officer describes how the “Vic [Doolie] stated they had had argument concerning his infidelity at which time he [Carr] became upset and slapped her...he admitted to slapping the vic. Def [Carr] was searched for weapons, cuffed and...booked for above offense.”¹¹ The text is riddled with instances such as this one in which conventional journalistic practices uncover a more tragic truth than Carr originally remembered. Carr’s recollections, it would seem, follow his previous assertion that reminiscence is fundamentally incomplete, and that in order to get a more satisfactory rendering of the past, it is necessary to lean on orthodox means of reporting. The evidence-based methods that Carr utilizes to uncover more detail about his past add structure and definition to his tale, increasing its lucidity.

However, aside from this boost to clarity, Carr’s evidence-oriented approach results in a separation of the author into two distinct “Davids”; the David Carr unfurling his rendering of *The Night of the Gun* is a different person entirely from the addict sketched in its pages. This strategy mirrors Carr’s interpretation of personal narrative. Personal narrative, says Carr, “is not simply opening up a vein and letting the blood flow...The historical self is created to keep dissonance at bay and render the subject palatable to the present.”¹² By centering *The Night of the Gun* in the past, and filling in the details with external interviews and documentation, Carr constructs this “historical” identity; a version of David assembled independently of the author. Carr’s personal history is no longer associated directly with his own memory—it is agglomerated across multiple sources, detaching it from the David Carr who is writing *The Night of the Gun*. In fact, Carr professes that he does not even fully associate with his past, likening it to a “phantom limb,”¹³ or a “dead, unrecoverable”¹⁴ self. This uncoupling is most effectively portrayed in Chapter 28, wherein Carr recalls leaving his young daughters, both clad in snowsuits, out in a freezing car

⁷ Carr, *The Night of the Gun*, 24.

⁸ Carr, *The Night of the Gun*, 25.

⁹ Carr, *The Night of the Gun*, 94.

¹⁰ Carr, *The Night of the Gun*, 95.

¹¹ Carr, *The Night of the Gun*, 97.

¹² Carr, *The Night of the Gun*, 9.

¹³ Carr, *The Night of the Gun*, 185.

¹⁴ Ibid.

while he completed a drug run.¹⁵ Yet, years later, when dressing his daughters for more cold weather, Carr is adamant that “a different guy was zipping...[the snowsuits] up.”¹⁶

The upside to this disassociation is that it keeps the story cogent. The fogginess of Carr’s memory would not be conducive to effective storytelling; its many absent or understated particulars make it difficult to discern precisely what happened and when. Carr’s evidence-aligned reporting counteracts this uncertainty, introducing supplemental elements of his story through extrinsic sources. At the same time, by de-centering his actions from his present self via reporting, and attributing them to “a different guy” (his former junkie self), Carr makes *The Night of the Gun* more readable. His tale, lest we forget, is *disturbing*. By rooting *The Night of the Gun* in the exploits of a “historical” Carr, the author dilutes some of its nastiness. What if instead of “he admitted to slapping the vic,” the text read: “I beat Doolie”? How about in place of Doolie reminding David of that struggle on their lawn, Carr instead had written “I pinned Doolie down, struck her, and said that I was going to end her life.” Notice how the shift to first person and the explicit “naming” of Carr changes who we attribute his actions to. It is no longer the “junkie”—it is the family man. The reader is encouraged to think about how disgusting such things would be to read—how difficult it would be to get through *The Night of the Gun* were it narrated by a character who committed such horrendous acts. Carr is correct—by creating a “historical self,” the book is certainly much more “palatable.”

Nevertheless, despite keeping the story lucid and relatively agreeable, Carr’s employment of empirical investigation *does* have limitations. The reader is encouraged to think back to that earlier excerpt when Carr refers to the “prosaic tools of journalism.” Directly before defining the nature of these tools, he qualifies their usage as a way “not to Truth, but fewer lies.”¹⁷ For Carr, memory is not *just* tenuous for him personally—the “truth” is no less elusive in other people’s accounts. Suboptimally, this unresolvable uncertainty permits Carr a degree of absolution for his misdemeanors.

Contemporaneously, Carr continues to distance himself from the drug-addicted, belligerent, past persona that he discovers in his interviews and record retrieval, attributing a variety of appalling deeds to the “phantom limb” of the “old” David—a side of himself that exists only in the memories of others. Thus, whether he does it deliberately or not, Carr avoids responsibility for his past. The beatings, debauchery, and misbehavior of the younger Carr remain contained neatly in journalistic, sterile statements far removed from *The Night of the Gun*’s author. Carr’s reporting is a method by which the author can make his way from “Truth” to “fewer lies,” a tool that enables Carr to piece together a more comprehensive image of his “historic,” junkie, almost alien self. Not only is this younger version of David far removed from his present self, but it also may not even be complete.

By introducing doubt into *The Night of the Gun*’s Narrative and de-centering his past from his present, Carr does not engage in the tremendous amount of introspection nor acceptance of responsibility that his history necessitates. For all of the effort it took to assemble the text, without a complete affirmation of this responsibility, *The Night of the Gun* remains an underachieving fact-finding exercise. His family, friends, and Doolie are left with the emotional and physical bruises of the past, while Carr, to some degree, is able to pass on the blame to an avatar of himself. There are no winners here, only a twofold pain; the agony of the “old” Carr, mired in the self destructive cycles of addiction, and the people that he hurt along the way.

¹⁵ Carr, *The Night of the Gun*, 164.

¹⁶ Carr, *The Night of the Gun*, 227.

¹⁷ Carr, *The Night of the Gun*, 25.

In closing, although the “historical self” that Carr erects via external reporting dovetails nicely with the basic establishing power of his private memory to produce a coherent and “palatable” personal narrative, the author’s investigative methodology also grants Carr an “out” to avoid complete culpability for his past. According to Carr’s standards, the emotional moderation and narrative clarity accomplished by the bifurcation of “historical David” from “present-day David” constitute a successful application of reporting techniques. But, the escape from responsibility that these techniques offer Carr does not sit well with me, the reader. With these two ideas of success in mind—Carr’s and my own—no definitive value judgement on the relative effectiveness of the author’s reporting strategy can be made.

Bibliography

Carr, David, *The Night of the Gun*, New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2008.