



Book Recommendation

The Art of the Personal Essay by Phillip Lopate

When I began writing blogs for **my manifesto**, I found a great deal of encouragement from this anthology on my shelf, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, selected and introduced by Phillip Lopate. His introduction encouraged me – along with the invitation to be ‘playful’ by our very own Justin Robinson – to have fun with the medium. The anthology itself, following the introduction, may become the subject of future blogs, comprising as it does a wealth of essays from the classical era to the present. For now, the introduction alone is my focus.

Through Lopate’s lens, I claim my place:

“The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy. The writer seems to be speaking directly into your ear, confiding everything from gossip to wisdom. Through sharing thoughts, memories, desires, complaints, and whimsies, the personal essayist sets up a relationship with the reader, a dialogue – as friendship, if you will, based on identification, understanding, testiness and companionship. At the core of the personal essay is the supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience.”

If I consider the full range of blogs that I write – and Justin too – I see these hallmarks of the personal essay. While I initially thought I would ‘hide’ behind formalities, increasingly, especially as I developed the full understanding and trust that I was writing regularly to you, our readers, I relaxed. I have been, and am, prepared to unmask myself in the manner of which Lopate writes: “Part of our trust in good personal essayists, issues paradoxically, from the exposure of their own betrayals, uncertainties and self-mistrust.”

It is this very personal lack of certainty that in the past, given my upbringing as a woman in the 1950’s in the male centric town of Broken Hill, New South Wales, which would have resulted in me masking myself, and shrinking myself whenever I spoke or wrote. Fear of being judged as ‘wanting’ or ‘of limited intellect and scholarship,’ would have governed my actions and my writing and the outcome would have been of a different kind altogether – silence or inauthenticity.

Now, it is indeed through the writing of the blogs – the personal essays themselves – in which I find *myself*. Lopate quotes, O.B. Hardison, Jr’s definition: “The essay is the enactment of a process by which the soul realizes (sic) itself even as it is passing from day to day and from moment to moment.” The unfolding of my perceptions, my individual ‘takes’ on life, including the minutiae of the everyday, and my interpretation of its meaning, is my soul realising itself and I am being bold enough to offer my findings to you.

It was a joy to read such an eloquent unpacking of the personal essay form in Lopate’s introduction. It is worthy of standalone attention. I can’t wait to sample and learn from the essayists whom he has assembled in this generous volume.

Warm wishes, Sue