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The Lifespan Of A Fact

The Lifespan
of a Fact.

John D'Agata,
author.

Jim Fingal,
fact-checker.

"A fascinating and dramatic power struggle over the intriguing question of what nonfiction should, or can, be." —Lydia Davis



Synopsis

Named a top 10 Best Book of 2012 by Slate.com An innovative essayist and his fact-checker do battle about the use of truth and the definition of nonfiction. How negotiable is a fact in nonfiction? In 2003, an essay by John D'Agata was rejected by the magazine that commissioned it due to factual inaccuracies. That essay—which eventually became the foundation of D'Agata's critically acclaimed *About a Mountain*—was accepted by another magazine, *The Believer*, but not before they handed it to their own fact-checker, Jim Fingal. What resulted from that assignment was seven years of arguments, negotiations, and revisions as D'Agata and Fingal struggled to navigate the boundaries of literary nonfiction. This book reproduces D'Agata's essay, along with D'Agata and Fingal's extensive correspondence. What emerges is a brilliant and eye-opening meditation on the relationship between truth and accuracy and a penetrating conversation about whether it is appropriate for a writer to substitute one for the other. Two-color throughout

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Customer Reviews

The pre-publication hype about *Lifespan of a Fact* prepared me for a smackdown between the heroic fact-checker demanding truth and the artist who values his creative process above mere facts. Who doesn't value truth, especially in nonfiction? But once I began reading the book, it didn't take long to start seeing essayist D'Agata's side of the story. It also didn't take too long to start to suspect that the entire book was a set-up. Co-author Jim Fingal introduces himself as an intern for the magazine that D'Agata has submitted an article to. He has been assigned to fact check the

article and takes issue with the first few lines of the essay and D'Agata responds (it is ostensibly an e-mail correspondence) that he doesn't think a fact checker is necessary for his type of writing. Fingal checks with the editor (who remains unnamed) who seems exasperated with Fingal and tells Fingal to correspond with D'Agata directly. The rest of the dialogue is therefore between a supposedly young, inexperienced fact checker and the established writer. Fingal picks at the essay word by word, and the fact checking quickly becomes a parody, an outrageous exaggeration. At one point, he even fact checks his own comments. He's also oddly sarcastic for an intern who claims to be new at his job. We are also to believe that he didn't read the entire article before he started fact-checking it. Once you read to the end of the article, some of what seem discrepancies are explained. I wondered why D'Agata continued to respond to him after Fingal became excruciatingly nitpicky and snarky. Or why D'Agata didn't contact the editor directly. But they do continue the exchange, which we are told lasted seven years.

There are two ways to review this book: at face value, taking the book at its word; or once you know the entire backstory. The book has an unconventional structure, with John D'Agata's essay on the page, surrounded by his "conversation" with fact-checker Jim Fingal. Read the essay from start-to-finish first. Then, once you read the conversation, you will see the factual 'errors' throughout the essay, about a teenager who died after jumping off the Las Vegas Stratosphere tower. These errors would not have jumped out to you before. D'Agata's original narrative is full of detail, description, interviews and quotes, so it seems completely accurate and credible. In fact, as Fingal discovers, D'Agata has taken numerous liberties with the facts - changing "pink" to "purple" because he wanted the extra "beat" that purple provides. Or by "punching up" various quotes. D'Agata doesn't explicitly change the factual meaning, but he mixes, matches and changes to serve his literary purposes. Fingal, apparently offended, does yeoman's work to break down every inaccuracy no matter how seemingly insignificant. So if D'Agata says "he walked on a red brick driveway," Fingal checks and says, "the driveway was brown." At first, a reader might be taken aback by these factual liberties - after all, the original essay was considered nonfiction. But, D'Agata's position (I wouldn't call it a defense, because he doesn't accept the opposing argument) is that as an 'essayist' he owes the reader an artistic experience, not 100 percent factual accuracy. That his job is to the story, not as a journalist, and that "nonfiction" as a category is a fairly new concept, while "essays" (defined as "an attempt") have been around for hundreds of years.

John D'Agata wrote a nonfiction story on the suicide of a Las Vegas teenager named Levi Presley.

Following standard journalistic procedures, the magazine who had commissioned the story turned it over to a fact-checker named Jim Fingal. Fingal fact-checked the piece to an inch of its life. Fingal's dedication is truly breathtaking, and close to borderline obsessive-compulsive. Fingal checked every statement made in the essay from the color of the carpets in the hotel from which Levi jumped to the time that it would have taken Levi to fall. Where Fingal stands for the "fact" in non-fiction, D'Agata stands for art of non-fiction. D'Agata wants to engage the reader, keep the reader's interest, and, well, create art. So, were there "white palls of dust" swirling through the Las Vegas streets on the day that Levi died? It makes for a nice image, but Fingal's fact checking turns out that the weather records show only a "gentle breeze" that day. Fingal's response was that "it makes for drama." (p. 24.) This is the story of the interaction between D'Agata and Fingal. The layout of the book fits the back and forth and forth style of the argument between the two. The text of D'Agata's essay is printed in the center of the page with Fingal and D'Agata's debate presented in a "gloss" format around the main text. If you like debate, and/or the back and forth of an intellect and wit, the book makes a great vehicle for dipping into. It is like eavesdropping on a clever, non-obscene, intelligent Facebook argument that you have absolutely no stake in. Since I like that kind of thing, I found the book entertaining. The interest of the book is not really in the particular topics being argued about.

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