

# WATER~STONE REVIEW



*Water~Stone*, known in alchemy as the Philosopher's Stone, was composed of the four elements of earth, fire, air, and water. The stone was supposed by alchemists to possess the property of changing base metals into gold, the most perfect of all metals. It was thought to combine within itself matter and spirit, or body and soul: a union of opposites in perfect harmony. *Water~Stone* connotes the dynamic, transformative power of literature, as well as the search for beauty and perfection at work in the hearts of aspiring writers. The logo type for *Water~Stone* is based on a hybrid of two ancient alchemic symbols: one for the amalgam of all elements, and the second for the element of water as a pure and dynamic force. The amalgam is a reference to the multigenre, interdisciplinary nature of the graduate writing program at Hamline University.

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*Book Review*

## A Summa for Our Times: The Biographical Impulse and New Nonfiction Form

MARY CAPPELLO

*The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*

by Siddhartha Mukherjee

Scribner, 2010, 571 pp., \$30, cloth

*How to Live, Or a Life of Montaigne in One Question  
and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*

by Sarah Bakewell

Other Press, 2010, 389 pp., \$25, cloth

### I.

*I have seen no more evident monstrosity and miracle in the world than myself. We become habituated to anything strange by use and time; but the more I frequent myself and know myself, the more my deformity astonishes me, and the less I understand myself.*

Michel de Montaigne, quoted in *How to Live*

This year yielded an astonishing number of compelling biographical works as major contributors to nonfiction form, and there are many that I expect to dive into this summer: Susan Cheever on *Louisa May Alcott*, R. Tripp Evans on *Grant Wood*, Manning Marable on *Malcolm X*, Wendy Moffat on *E. M. Forster*, to name a few. But in this year's quest for a state-of-the-art of creative nonfiction, I wanted to find books that were *biographically inflected* without adhering to strict biographical rules, or, edging into the territory of literary nonfiction, biographies that did not take for granted life-writing as a form.

Siddhartha Mukherjee's biography of a disease (cancer) and Sarah Bakewell's life in one question and twenty answers (Montaigne's and her own) enticed me with their experimental-seeming subtitles: here were turns of the biographical screw that I hoped would be more than marketing ploys. Was Mukherjee's title hoping unconsciously to invoke Jumphah Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies* (but why?); was Bakewell's reminiscent of any number of self-help books it intended to gloss? Both books are brisk and breezy page-turners whose felicity belies the labor involved in their making. Both recall biography as the place where thinking like a fiction writer bears upon nonfiction. Narrative, well-paced and well-placed; dramatic intensities; and suspense-filled interludes make the journeys through these books more of a ride and less of a fight, and the books' carefully graded climbs leave the reader with a feeling that s/he's accomplished something.

From the outset, Mukherjee sets his readers up for a tantalizing literary hybrid, explaining that *Emperor* is "also a personal journey of my coming-of-age as an oncologist," in effect, an autobiography. But his rationale for calling the book a biography introduces flimsily formulated ground:

This book is a 'biography' in the truest sense of the word—an attempt to enter the *mind* of this immortal illness, to understand its personality, to demystify its behavior. But my ultimate aim is to raise a question beyond biography: Is cancer's end conceivable in the future?

So long as cancer is understood as "having a life," it can be met by biographical form; to conceive of its end would require a different form. This sheds interesting light on life-writing's conditions and terms. By invoking biography's "truest sense," Mukherjee introduces un-theorized trouble into the mix. While biography's "truest sense" need not match its definitional sense (literally, "life writing"), one wonders where Mukherjee gets his impression that psychology, or "mind," is at the heart of the genre. History may be closer to what Mukherjee is up to in this book (and he does call *Emperor* a "history" and "chronicle"). What's telling about his definition, though, is a significantly frustrating conundrum that the writer perhaps hoped "biography" could clarify, if not save him from: how does one *write* cancer without playing to its cultural myths—i.e., its personification or its capacity for metaphor as detailed by Susan Sontag? Is what makes cancer an emperor, with or without clothes, the fact that the disease resists representation?

If the only thing Mukherjee had written was a riveting chapter titled "A City of Strings," *Emperor* would still be remarkable. Here, he pieces together

the scientific drama and the economic and activist forces that brought the drug “Herceptin” to people with breast cancer who tested positive for a “her2neu” protein. The puzzle of starts, stops, accidents, inquiries, wills to live, and wills to know show the drug’s “discovery” to be anything but an even or singular path. *Emperor* blows the typical cancer suite of emotions—faith, hope, and charity—out of the water, replacing cancer, the illness laden with sentiment, with the idea of cancer, in the U.S. at least, as a big business, a political machine, and an advertising campaign (even though it’s not always clear if Mukherjee aims to critique the history he recounts or rest easy with a journalistic presentation of the “facts”).

Sidney Farber, the “father of modern chemotherapy,” turns out to be a “conceited and inflexible” figure whom few people could stand, and the picture of Farber creating a playground of Disney World uplift for the sick and dying children he experimented on competes for ghoulishness with the history of institutionalized denial that for nearly a century endorsed Halsted’s “heroically” disfiguring radical mastectomies. Farber’s work with Mary Lasker to make cancer the target of not just a battle but a full-scale war in need of federal funding, leading in time to the American Cancer Society, forms one of the larger-than-life centers of Mukherjee’s ambitious cancer saga. The war is shot through, so to speak, with mind-bending discoveries, like the fact that a chemical meant to kill (mustard gas) was called upon to cure, and that scientists were forced to reconstruct the foundational paradigm of molecular biology with the identification of a “retro-virus.”

This same biographical imperative to mine for knowledge while revising an historical record is what moves a reader through the pages of *How to Live*. Thus, we learn wonderful details of Montaigne’s life (if we didn’t already know them), like the fact that, made into the subject of a pedagogic experiment, Montaigne was “brought up as a native speaker of Latin” and was six years old before he understood French; that he was lured out of bed with a lute each morning; that he couldn’t keep a journal; and that he preferred to read biographies and histories over poetry (a favorite being Plutarch’s *Lives*). That Stefan Zweig chose to write a long essay on Montaigne while in enforced exile during World War II forms a fascinating section on the reception of Montaigne through the ages, while the book as paean to Montaigne’s invented form confirms every essayist’s counter-intuition that it’s better to take what one doesn’t know or fails to know

as a starting point than to follow the grammar-school dictum “write what you know”: “one must imagine [‘I don’t know’] appended, in spirit, to almost everything [Montaigne] ever wrote,” explains Bakewell. The extraordinary rendering of Montaigne’s unrivaled friendship and love for Étienne de LaBoétie is beautifully stirring and potentially revisionist since Bakewell leaves us with the sense that the essays were written to La Boétie as monuments to his memory (he died at age thirty-three) much in the way that some literary historians understand Emily Dickinson’s poems to have been written to her sister-in-law, Susan, and that the poetry was born of that passionate exchange.

My own predilection is for nonfiction’s affinities with poetry, so I was drawn to associative, cacophonous, mellifluous, and strangely telling lists as they figured in each book even though these were few. I wanted to dwell with Mukherjee’s list of remedies for cancer through the ages rather than keep pace with the book’s journalese, which is all too well-suited for a flight across the country (the moment the book appeared, it was on sale in airport bookstores everywhere):

... tincture of lead, extracts of arsenic, boar’s tooth, fox lungs, rasped ivory, hulled castor, ground white-coral, ipecac, senna, and a smattering of purgatives and laxatives . . . . In the 17th century, a paste of crab’s eyes, at five shillings a pound . . . goat’s dung, crow’s feet, dog fennel, tortoise liver, the laying of hands, blessed waters, or the compression of the tumor with lead plates.

Lists of “wildly divergent customs from all over the world, marveling at their randomness and strangeness” were one of Montaigne’s favorite devices, Sarah Bakewell reminds us, so, in “Of Custom” and “Of Ancient Customs,” he writes of:

... countries where women piss standing and men squatting, where children are nursed for up to twelve years, where it is considered fatal to nurse a baby in its first day, where hair grows on the right side of the body but is shaved completely off the left side, where one is supposed to kill one’s father at a certain age, where people wipe their rears with a sponge on a stick, and where hair is worn long in front and short behind instead of the other way around.

The arrangement of *How to Live* might reflect Montaigne’s writing itself—“a self-portrait in constant motion,” or a “book with a wild and eccentric plan.” Indebted to Montaignian felicity of form, the book is bound to make readers want to enjoy a summer of nothing but Montaigne in the same way that people pretend they have spent whole summers of their lives with the pleasing demands

of a multivolumed Proust. Yet, *How to Live*, when it comes down to it, is neither wild nor eccentric, and when the book plays to Montaigne as a kind of hero, or capitulates to hagiography in a manner typical of biography with a capital "B," it remakes the *Essais* into the brick that it physically is rather than invite us to frolic inside its estuaries and streams. Impatient with philosophers who depart from the version of Montaigne the book endorses, Bakewell seems intent on dismissing Descartes and Pascal, for example, with the assumption that they misread or failed properly to appreciate the great master. A commonplace assumption about Montaigne is that he created a version of an everyman in his essays: he produced a familiarly inviting voice that readers and writers centuries later turn to for solace and identification and that leads him to be dubbed the "most human of writers" by Bakewell (and others). Here there is a wish, if not a tendency, to de-historicize Montaigne—to laud the Montaignian voice for being human (all too human) and therefore transcendent of his time and place—rather than to read him (alongside Descartes and Pascal, for example) as a contributor to the history of the *idea* of the human.

It's hard, if not impossible, however, to write biography without constructing monoliths. One might wish for the shape-shifting and multifarious list to serve as an allegory for *The Emperor of All Maladies*, especially given Mukherjee's critical assertion that the orienting obsession, fundamental error, and essential problem of cancer research and cancer treatment in this country has been the search for a "common cure" for a disease understood as a "single, monolithic entity," or the need for a grand narrative that is an effect of the discourse of a targeted war against "the" disease. To imagine cancer differently would require us to write it differently, which in turn might enable us to treat it differently. "The hierarchical practice of medicine," Mukherjee writes, "its internal culture, its rituals of practice, were ideally arranged to resist change and to perpetuate orthodoxy."

The history he tells, however, doesn't resist that practice but constitutes it. *Emperor* transmutes a complex and intricate history into a single-minded drive to conquer a single-minded disease—which might suggest that cancer as heterogeneous entity resists imagining, and it resists biography, too. *The Emperor of All Maladies* has nothing to say about the history of alternative cures, prevention initiatives, or, for that matter, non-Western conceptions of the disease: it's a book about an empire passing as a book about an emperor. The literal place of colonialism in the history and production of cancer is something Mukherjee announces

and skirts at various points inside the book. *Emperor* is just as inconsistent in its promising to demystify cancer, in the tradition of Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, all the while remystifying it, most especially in its nearly operatic closing chapters, where cancer is understood as an illness that personifies the human urge for immortality. In bracingly lucid passages, Mukherjee explains that cancer is a "clonally evolving disease" because it follows a "mirthless relentless cycle of mutation, selection, and overgrowth." Generating cells that "are more and more adapted to survival and growth," cancer "exploits the fundamental logic of evolution unlike any other illness": "every generation of cancer cells creates a small number of cells that is genetically different from its parents." Cancer is prone to constant regeneration, resistance to attack, and morphological fortitude: all that it knows is that it wants to live forever, and it will do anything to ensure its immortality. Or, cancer is a life force that necessitates the death of its host.

There is no question that a person who has undergone treatment for cancer will read this book differently from a reader who suspects she is immune. It would be terrible to suggest that a book could cause cancer, and yet, at moments, I felt as though a cell might begin reforming within me while I was reading, so powerful was Mukherjee's picture of cancer's mutating drive. Anyone, for that matter, who has been required to remake him or herself in light of an illness, endure the indignities of being ill, or live a life athwart illness as an identifying narrative may have a distinct response to the way that actual persons figure in this history of the disease writ large. (In a consumer world drenched in pink accoutrements, breast cancer patients especially are the readiest to comply with group-think about their disease or to comply with the order to wear their disease as a badge, making it all the more difficult *to be* in light of it.)

One of *Emperor's* thinnest threads is its opening with Carla, a thirty-year-old woman diagnosed with leukemia who is the young oncologist's earliest cancer patient. One worries that an editor advised the writer to include a few stories of patients in the nearly 600-page book in order to humanize his biography of a disease. (In this way, the book joins a cadre of nonfiction books by physician-writers of the past twenty years bent on convincing a lay public of their doctor-authors' capacity for feeling.) It's hard to understand why Mukherjee felt the need to develop the characters of patients *other than* Carla (unless it's simply a journalistic tic) since they only serve as exemplifying statistics. On the other hand, where I wished patients to be more present, they were absent. "These were all deep, audacious,

and meaningful victories borne on the backs of deep and meaningful labors," Mukherjee writes of treatment breakthroughs. He neglects to say on the backs of *patients*. Tamoxifen is described as a drug with "barely any significant side effects," but patient-readers will know that it can cause blood clots and uterine cancer.

Most unfortunate are Mukherjee's energetic equations of cancer with a person's identity, and his implicit assumption that people with cancer identify entirely as such: *I have cancer, therefore I am*. The book that has primarily featured a history of ruthless and heroic male researchers and physicians ends with another female patient's tale as bookend to Carla's. This patient, however, does not survive. Coming to the end of her "battle," Mukherjee imagines that "[s]he had stared into the vault of her resourcefulness and found it empty" in this "game that had taken over her life." In describing her this way, he thus commits the cardinal sin of wellness: the exertion of an epistemological advantage over the Other about whom one always knows more than she can ever know about herself.

Which is also a fundamental challenge, and problem, of biography.

## II.

*Of a hundred members and faces that each thing has, I take one, sometimes only to lick it, sometimes to brush the surface, sometimes to pinch it to the bone. I give it a stab, not as wide but as deep as I know how. And most often I like to take them from some unaccustomed point of view.*

Michel de Montaigne, quoted in *How to Live*

What can be said of Montaigne can also be said about cancer: both, it turns out, are ready sites of projection, which makes their being the subjects of biographies—a genre that is Other-directed on the face of it—an interestingly complex undertaking. Siddhartha Mukherjee dubbed *Emperor* a biography because, as he continued to write, "it felt, inescapably, as if [he] were writing not about *something* but about *someone*: [his] subject daily morphed into something that resembled an individual—an enigmatic, if somewhat deranged, image in a mirror." This "feeling" of the presence of a ghostly double, we later surmise, derives from a way of imagining cancer in terms of "malignant growth and normal growth . . . so genetically intertwined that unbraiding the two might be one of the most significant scientific challenges faced by our species." Metaphorically speaking, and projectively, Mukherjee starts to experience cancer as an evil twin, an image

that he allows silently to govern *Emperor* without exploring it. Maybe, like Montaigne, he'd have gotten closer to his subjects' multiply conflicting truths if he'd been willing to produce a "grotesque" literary form, to quote Bakewell on the great essayist's collocation of "monstrous bodies . . . without definite shape, having no order, sequence, or proportion other than accidental."

Literary form is neither arbitrary nor neutral, as Bakewell's book makes clear, but in its wild willfulness, it can have the power to teach us not only "how to live," but more subtly how to hear, how to listen, how to conceive, how to move, how not to tame, and therefore, how to imagine and thereafter, act—all this, *without* being prescriptive, dogmatic, didactic, or representative, but wily and seductive, unsure, humble, and unmoored.

I pull a volume from a shelf as I am wont to, and if it is the *Oxford English Dictionary*, I enjoy it for its heft, for language weighs—I don't wish to forget this—and I weigh: both it, and I, are heir to gravity, and to dust. I can't think "biography" without this image of the book as brick, doorstop, Bible, or dictionary, but somehow the body gets lost in the equation. Biographies as analogs to reference books, conveyors of information, *summa*? In an age of informational crisis (some call it overload, or TMI) in which the major representational medium is the screen and its free-floating nets (never snares), how do I know? What do I know? How do I know what I know, and how do I tell one thing from another? In this age of infomercialism, a writer of literary nonfiction who wishes to compose a biography may find himself instead writing an extended Wikipedia article. I consider this a problem.

A biography is *not* a *summa*, those massive Medieval compendia that summarized the theological or philosophical knowledge of their day. Biographies only look like *summae*. The *summa* is much more interesting because summists charted contradiction, whereas biographers make the mess of life cohere. Summists were also known as "sententiaries," and their *summae*, "sentences," as in Peter Helias's *Book of Sentences*. I should like to be a maker of sentences, and a reader of sentences, and I like the challenge of wondering if any of us were asked to produce a *summa* for our times, what form it would take. If the life is in the language, how has language, in the form of sentences—their shape, grace, pittedness, or edge; their rip-rap, rustle, explosiveness, or sledge; their exogamy, vituperativeness, insanity, or dredge; their mellifluous uncanniness, their twitchiness, their breathy sign of life, or urgency, or death—fallen out of the biographical equation?

Non-narrative biography might seem a contradiction in terms, but it's worth courting: writing the life as a form of what we could call "shard work," in which coherence is not the aim so much as distillation is, or as a series of what Roland Barthes in *Sade/Fourier/Loyola* calls "biographemes," defined thus:

. . . were I a writer, and dead, how I would love it if my life, through the pains of some friendly and detached biographer, were to reduce itself to a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections, let us say: to 'biographemes' whose distinction and mobility might go beyond any fate and come to touch, like Epicurean atoms, some future body, destined to the same dispersion . . .

Of Barthes's mother, for example, "she felt comfortable in somewhat tangled gardens, etc."; of Sade, a "white muff"; of Loyola, "flowerpots"; of Ignatius, "Spanish eyes." To pare the life down and assemble its discontinuous pieces; to admit the shape of dream into the life: one color advances while another bleeds about the edges—a single letter thrums in the silence of a half-forgotten room—a key turns into a rose, and so on; to restore the dream to the dreamer-subject in a language that doesn't merely describe but gives life to what it more than names: biography as a tympanic bell concert.

Journalist DT Max recently told *The Guardian* that his biography of David Foster Wallace, due out next year, won't be "a conventional 500-page type thing, one of those big, thick biographies. They are terrific, but I didn't think it was the right way to tackle David Foster Wallace—it's a little paradoxical because he wrote such big books himself." Instead, he said, his book would be more "in the form of an argument." The tome-like nature of biography has a tendency to cut the book off from what surrounds it; thus, if biographical writing is going to reach into the more variegated terrain of creative or literary nonfiction, it might need to be read alongside books unlike itself on similar subjects. Can a Montaignian gulf be breached, for example, by pairing *How to Live* with a literary, theoretical meditation on Emerson that appeared this year, *On Leaving: A Reading on Emerson* by Branka Aasic (Harvard University Press, 2010) that starts with the Emersonian question, "Who is alive?" Or, what if we were to read conventional life-writing alongside a book that comes at Joseph Beuys by way of his materials, *felt*, whose chapters are tuned to the pitch of text as textile, Chris Thompson's *Felt: Fluxus, Joseph Beuys, and the Dalai Lama* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011):

Felt is a nonwoven fabric, a body without axes, created through the multiple, random interlockings of spiral strands. The material owes its structural integrity to the chance bindings among its irregular spiral fibers. Felt is arrived at through the leaving-to-chance—even if it is a methodical and meticulous leaving-to-chance—of the combination of the spiral fibers, textures, and interstices of wool.

Biographies are more often written about the dead than the living; like the outmoded sense of memoir as memoirS—a coda to the life, the thing that needs to get written when there is nothing left to write, no more left to say, but whose status in the world makes the life noteworthy: always it's a backward glance. At worst, it's a CliffsNotes guide to something greater than itself. Rarely if, ever, is biography a form of felt.

Theoretical books, however, are no picnic: their insular insiderness can be exasperating, deady dull, and just as dutiful as church. Needless to say, strictly academic writers have a great deal to learn as well from biographical stylists, but coffee-table books might serve as antidotes to both. I happened upon Jessica Kerwin Jenkins's *Encyclopedia of the Exquisite: An Anecdotal History of Elegant Delights* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2010) when I was looking for large-scale books on royal weddings and the history of British monarchy for my brother's fiancée, who fancied such. I bought this book instead, and ended up keeping it, for here was a biography of a theme—in this case, the exquisite—and an autobiography made up of choices. Here, too, was an archive that the writer could call her own, and that I could carry, as if to say here's something that matters in an info-glutted age, a hand-hewn assemblage of nectar and ambrosia, silence and string, white paint, dark towers, and cumulonimbus.

*How to Live* seems to assume that the self Montaigne invented in his essays, and indulged, is the same one we experience when we blog, but I'm afraid this is a pipe dream. There's a difference between a Montaignian mirror (or Renaissance tain) and a screen, or, for that matter, the screening devices that govern our senses of ourselves (she says, as she hallucinates the chiming of her cell phone). The sixteenth-century person's inner life, or lack thereof, is not the same as our inner life (or lack thereof), and the self heralded by the Internet seems more often than not the same for all, sprung from a tower of opinion polling in place of thought.

Biographers as writers of literary nonfiction have their work cut out for them (and then some): we are not simply conveyors of information or transmitters of knowledge. In the "information age," I'd love to access each writer's

collections—the creation of an uncommon archive in the form that is a book. Most of all, if the genre is going to evolve, we might need to bring incompatible modes and knowledges (yes, plural) into the same space so as to quell a poverty of too-sequestered readers, each to her own tastes, monads and monoliths, pop consumers and disciplinary elites. I want a reader who can tell one thing from another (we could call such readers discerning minds), at the same time that he reads across, within, and at the intersections of various types of nonfiction prose, never singly or alone, no longer convinced by a book's fixed borders or bounds.

Which brings me back to cancer and its infiltrations. Let's return to the retrovirus: Rous sarcoma virus possessed a property "unprecedented in any other living organism." It could convert RNA back into DNA when the central dogma of molecular biology forbade such a transition: such molecular transcription had only ever been imagined as a one-way street—DNA yields RNA, not the other way around. Literary form is neither fanciful nor decorative nor a trick, as is so often hinted at in *How to Live*, though tricksterism should not be underestimated for its radicality or political aplomb, and if tricking were more often a part of nonfiction prose, at least eros would be restored to it. Newly to imagine the shape that the transcription of a life can take in writing (but, no, it's transformation, not transcription that we want) is not so different from reimagining the face of a disease, the nature of its course, its origin and demise, what and how it responds to or resists. To be able to imagine new forms of thought (literary genres) is also to be able to imagine new forms of life: not how to live, but how to make life living. Sarah Bakewell reminds us that Montaigne produced a beautifully formed, mal-formed writing in an attempt to look his own deformity in the eye: "I'm full of cracks and leak out on all sides," he wrote. I look forward to the new de-formed and gangly biographies twenty-first century writers need to find the courage to produce.

