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Alive in the Reading: Nayaran and Chekhov

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Abstract

Kirin Nayaran's *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov* is a five - section book about finding "company amid the often isolating and difficult aspects of writing" (p. xiii). As an English Literature major, I recall the basic tenets of story - writing: plot, setting, and characterization. Narayan's chapters offer a kinder entry. "Story and Theory" invoke Anton Chekhov as an ethnographic companion offering expertise about the essentials of writing a good story. "Place," "Person," and "Voice" take the innocent writer further in to the power of writing, until "Self" provides a denouement of sorts, when the reader finally realizes that learning to write with Narayan, Chekhov, and a host of others was actually a foray into ethnography itself. This book is at once an insightful textbook, an inspiring read, and an ethnographic experience

Keywords

Ethnography, Writing, Story, Chekhov

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Alive in the Reading: Nayaran and Chekhov

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Kirin Nayaran's Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov is a five-section book about finding "company amid the often isolating and difficult aspects of writing" (p. xiii). As an English Literature major, I recall the basic tenets of story-writing: plot, setting, and characterization. Narayan's chapters offer a kinder entry. "Story and Theory" invoke Anton Chekhov as an ethnographic companion offering expertise about the essentials of writing a good story. "Place," "Person," and "Voice" take the innocent writer further in to the power of writing, until "Self" provides a denouement of sorts, when the reader finally realizes that learning to write with Narayan, Chekhov, and a host of others was actually a foray into ethnography itself. This book is at once an insightful textbook, an inspiring read, and an ethnographic experience. Keywords: Ethnography, Writing, Story, Chekhov

"Sometimes, struggling to begin a book, an essay," or in this case, a book review, I "find someone's voice speaking on the issue I hope to write on, [and] I begin with a quote. If I particularly liked that person, their words offer company, helping me through the first uneasy steps of writing" (Narayan, 2012, p. 73). How fitting that this quote came from a writer I particularly like: Kirin Narayan. *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov* is a five-section book about finding "company amid the often isolating and difficult aspects of writing" (p. xiii). As an English Literature major, I recall the basic tenets of story-writing: plot, setting, and characterization. Narayan's chapters offer a kinder entry. "Story and Theory" invoke Anton Chekhov as an ethnographic companion offering expertise about the essentials of writing a good story. "Place," "Person," and "Voice" take the innocent writer further in to the power of writing, until "Self" provides a denouement of sorts. Here the reader finally realizes that learning to write with Narayan, Chekhov, and a host of others was actually a foray into ethnography itself. Glesne (1999) describes ethnography as a form of qualitative research that requires "long-term immersion in the field...needed for getting at how people within a cultural group construct and share meaning" (p. 17). This book is at once an insightful textbook, an inspiring read, and an ethnographic experience, immersing the reader within the culture of writers.

It is a book of stories, one that begs for community. It is not simply a book about how to become a better writer; rather, it is a book about finding our own stories, and the ethnography inherent in story. Narayan allows Chekhov to draw us in to the quietness of his voice, then at each moment of deep experience, ask us to write. The first prompt seems simple enough: "Beginning with the words, 'I most hope to write...' write forward for at least 5 minutes" (Narayan, 2012, p. 6). A few pages later, however, Chekhov implies that his hope as an artist is to pose questions, not answer them. "An artist observes, selects, conjectures, arranges – and these very acts presuppose as their starting point a question" (Narayan, 2012, p. 20). As we read selected pieces of Chekhov's non-fiction and listen to the stories of his own life, Narayan's writing prompts provide a reflective way of posing questions of our own. Chekhov's presence grants a kind of depth, not only complementing the writing process, but validating our questions, our stories. In short, the reader is inspired, and empowered, to write.

Narayan weaves the magic of Chekhov's "richly ethnographic" *Sakhalin Island* with an eclectic variety of descriptions. Sakhalin Island hosts a penal colony near the Russian

coast. Chekhov describes a stark picture of the prison cells, then moves into the chaos and sickening smells of prison life. Margaret Mead, Piers Vitebsky, and Sidney Mintz are among the many who offer descriptive imagery and various perspectives on writing with the senses, and the writing prompts seem almost to emerge naturally from these examples. After Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg's glimpse into the secret places of shooting up heroin, Narayan's (2012) suggestion is to "describe some aspect of a place that seems literally or figuratively hidden" (p. 41). She brings the reader into a rich and evocative world of imagery, and one feels, too, the breath and touch of the writers nearby. At that moment, the reader picks up the pen quite naturally, almost without conscious thought, and joins them.

In the chapter "Person," Chekhov's "inner biography" begins to emerge in the selected writings (Narayan, 2012, p. 57). After reading a short passage by Russian writer Alexander Kuprin, she offers, "These passages moved me, I think, partly because of the extreme contrasts: the self-contained quiet of Chekhov emerging from his study to muse at the sea...and great diverse hubbub of visitors with their demands. I was reminded again of how contrast enlivens description" (Narayan, 2012, p. 59). By focusing on one element of good writing, she gives the reader the key to doing the same. The next prompt, to "juxtapose two moments of solitary absorption and social interaction," (Narayan, 2012, p. 59) bring to mind one's own experience and observations. The reader emerges as a writer who is unconsciously an ethnographer at that moment as well. V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko describes a remembered moment when Chekhov listens to Danchenko's criticism about his play: "There was not the slightest doubt that he was listening to me with particular attention, yet at the same time it was as if he was carefully following something happening in the little garden in front of the windows of my apartment; sometimes he even moved closer to the glass to look through, and turned his head slightly" (Narayan, 2012, p. 64). Narayan describes this moment's mesmerizing spell due to the writer's simple description of a scene. The writer did not interpret Chekhov's thoughts but instead offered a memory. The prompt that follows asks the reader to: "Describe a person in a scene fixed in your memory. Allow your understanding of that moment to remain a set of unresolved questions" (Narayan, 2012, p. 64). Again, the impulse to write is strong. The reader is freed from the constraint of interpreting, and Narayan begins to empower the observer with a voice.

Her purpose in Section IV is "to suggest ways of thinking about voice: ways to present other voices, and ways to cultivate your own" (Narayan, 2012, p. 69). One example concerns transcribing interviews, which Narayan likens to play-writing. Then from Chekhov's voice: "There are big dogs and little dogs, but little dogs must not fret over the existence of the big ones. Everyone is obligated to howl in the voice that the Lord God has given him" (Narayan, 2012, p. 86). This advice is amplified by its context – written to encourage another writer who went on to become a Nobel Prize winner for Literature. "Fear squashes a voice" (Narayan, 2012, p. 86) and the format of this book squashes fear.

Perhaps my most telling experience occurs in the last section, "Self." I am reading differently now, reflecting, enjoying, yes, but also hurrying a bit, in order to get to the writing prompts. Why? I am not yet a writer, but this book creates in me a desire to write. I am now ready to listen when Narayan explains the power of including myself in my writing, whether that be my conversations or transformational experiences. In the climactic moment of this book, she offers an auto-ethnographic passage from Shahram Khosravi, where his riveting first-person description of leaving his family in Iran evokes a feeling of devastation and loss. "In my mother's embrace, the outside world, war, migration, borders, future, and past all ceased to exist. I breathed her smell, the smell of my childhood, probably the first smell I experienced in my life, until she took a step backward and muttered something like, 'Go!'" (p. 106). At that moment, Narayan (2012) asks the reader to describe "a turning point that has

forever marked your life” (p. 106). The book drops to the floor, and the reader becomes fully a writer, as this prompt inspires story, place, person, voice, and self at once.

Although the book closes with a fine list of helpful and practical tools for writing, it is not simply a how-to book for writing ethnography; *Alive in the Writing* is an example of ethnography itself. Narayan as the researcher “develops the ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) needed for getting at how people within a cultural group construct and share meaning” (Glesne, 1999), but she does not simply describe this for the reader. Journeying into these pages is like entering a culture of ethnographic writers, and the reader quickly becomes more than an observer and is instead a participant, immersed in the field, with Narayan and Chekhov close by. Narayan writes, “While a fiction writer can freely imagine and describe this inner life, an ethnographer is constrained...to staying at the level of what people choose to reveal” (p. 58). It is a culture within a culture and Narayan inspires the reader to reveal a vulnerability and creativity by participating in the book itself.

What, then, is the real purpose of this book, and does the author accomplish it? The author states that “the writing exercises I offer here twist together the possibilities for an inward-facing cultivation of understanding and outward-facing performance for readers” (Narayan, 2012, p. xii). The book achieves this goal, and would be an outstanding textbook for a class on writing ethnography. She also writes, “I hope that Chekhov, the literary ethnographers, and the ethnographically inclined nonfiction writers I have assembled here may bring you good company and luminous inspiration” (Narayan, 2012, p. xiii). Despite her stated goals and hopes, Kirin Narayan is an ethnographer, and she does more than write an excellent writing textbook with the good company of fine writers. She not only journeys into the culture of ethnographic writers, but she also takes the reader into a shared experience with another culture, compelling the reader to become a part of the book, both as writer and ethnographer.

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