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# Reader's Guide

from Riley Hanick  
 author of *Three Kinds of Motion:  
 Kerouac, Pollock, and the  
 Making of American Highways*

## Author Asks:

1. I chose to write and organize this book through the juxtaposition of different segments against one another, rather than separating out and sustaining topics and time periods over the course of longer sections. How did you feel about this formal approach? Did it change as the book went on? How did this approach change your relation to the content?
2. The three central figures in this book (Eisenhower, Pollock, and Kerouac) are all famous enough to require very little introduction. How did the preceding sense you had of one or more of them inform your reading?
3. Italics replace quotation marks as a means of citation in the book. But there is often no immediate indication of where a text is coming from or who, exactly, is speaking. As a reader, how did you decide to handle this formal choice? Did this change at all after the letters were introduced?
4. As a follow-up: when people remain unnamed, or only partially named, or ambiguously named (we have only a pronoun, or we're unsure which "Jack" is being referred to, etc.) what possibilities are opened up or shut down in your understanding of the book and/or the processes and problems of figuration?
5. Where and why does the second person get deployed in this book? What is it doing that couldn't be done otherwise?
6. I was trying to wrap this project up in 2008, when the summer floods complicated my narrative. How would the book hold together if it had to do without that episode?
7. How would you describe the difference between the historical and the mythic as particular concepts or modes of writing in this book? Are there different varieties of each? Where do the two get tangled into one another in ways that feel necessary, and not just inconvenient?
8. Which among the elements and materials that recur throughout the book (oil paint, concrete, fire etc.) played the largest role in holding the project together?

# Writing Exercises:

## Ekphrastic Essaying

Here is a general prompt on ekphrastic essaying: One way of creating new work is to write in response to and in dialogue with existing works of art. This book required me to have fairly consistent access to one painting for a fairly long stretch of time, but it seems equally possible for a writer to return to a film, building, or piece of music that instigates a response. With any luck, this is something that will shift and develop across multiple encounters. But, after awhile, you will probably feel like you've done what you can in terms of both describing and critically judging the work. This is when things will either get more interesting or end. Since, like any relationship, something will have to be invented between you and the work, something that will allow you to re-engage with and reframe it, let your impulses wander. If you've really gotten to know the work, you can let your writing live beside it, on its own terms, so that even an essay intent on being associative and digressive will remain somewhat under its spell. This is a mixed blessing. Ekphrastic writing tends to be both infatuated and rivalrous with the art object it has allowed itself to fixate on. Some element of that relationship will probably be frustrating and incomplete, but this is also what allows an essay to live.

### Dear Jack,

I started inserting letters into this book about halfway through the process of writing it and, to be honest, I'm still not sure why I needed to do it. I have a few theories, and some justifications, but all of them are supplemental to the basic impulse to begin a section in a particular, pointed way: Dear Jack. The direct address clarified things, maybe only temporarily, but it felt like I had a different mode of making more work and I was excited/curious to pretend-speak to someone that remained mostly a myth or figment to me. And the blurriness proved helpful. Last year I gave a craft talk about "epistolary engines" in the work of several writers and interpolated some of the following inducements to letter-writing into my talk:

Write a letter to someone you have never spoken to.

Someone you see all the time – maybe every single day – and have never spoken to.

Maybe it would be better to make sure that this person is not in any way famous.

Write a letter to someone you have never seen.

Write a letter to someone so famous that you don't have to speak her name for a reader to know who you're talking about.

Write a letter to someone you think of fairly often who never thinks of you.

Write a letter to someone that you are confident often thinks of you.



Write a letter to someone you're convinced sometimes thinks about you but wouldn't want to hear from you. Make sure you are confident that this person would not want to hear from you.

Write a letter that pretends the previous one was lost and picks up the conversation accordingly.

Write a letter with nothing but regrets.

Write a letter that fails entirely to get to the point.

Write a letter that can never be answered in any way by anyone alive.

One that you are determined to never send.

## Further Reading:

1. W.G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*
2. Lisa Robertson's *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*
3. Eduardo Galeano *Memory of Fire* trilogy
4. Thalia Field's *Point and Line*
5. Hilton Als' *The Women*
6. T.J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea*
7. Avital Ronnell's *Stupidity*
8. Eliot Weinberger's *An Elemental Thing*
9. Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*
10. Ali Smith's *Artful*

