

Non/Fiction. Stress testing the genres

9th International Non-Fiction Conference

1-2 May 2015

Friday, May 1, morning

Narrating non-fiction: fascinating but tricky

Introduction

Maarten Valken – Finally I can welcome you to the ninth non-fiction conference. The idea came up a few years ago. When I hosted the first conference in 1997, we only had three months to prepare. The subject of the first conference was the border between literary non-fiction and fiction, so in a way we've come full circle, having in between treated themes like taboos in non-fiction, popular versus academic non-fiction, globalization, digital developments etc., and now we're back to the borderline and the genre with many names: fictional or creative non-fiction, the historical or non-fictional novel, literary reportage, non-fictional memoir, faction, friction, unconventional non-fiction and so on.

Almost everybody I presented this subject to over the past years reacted enthusiastically. Some of them will be speaking here. But not in every country. For instance in the US quite a lot of publishers are very careful to stay away from the borderline. Lieve Joris can tell us more about that. In other countries, like France, different categories are used, classifications like *document*, *essai*, *récit*, the last one possibly the nearest to the type of books that we are discussing on these two days. The same book can be called fiction in France and non-fiction in Germany. National differences in how the crossing of the line between fiction and non-fiction is looked at is an interesting point to discuss. As are many others, like the responsibilities of the non-fiction author, publisher or agent, the influence of images from the internet, games, film and television, and the recent stress on emotions, subjectivity, intimacy, authenticity, identification etc., and perhaps also the question of

what future generations will expect in the time of information overload and fictionalized reality.

My own fascination with the theme comes from the time when I was in publishing, a long time ago, when we published narrative non-fiction from authors like Simon Schama, Jonathan Spence and Georges Duby. Later, during my time at the foundation, I talked about authors whose books you can see over here: Henk van Woerden, Frank Westerman, Jan Brokken – Dutch authors who move freely in the area between fiction and non-fiction, some of whose publishers are here too.

So how does the mixing of fiction and non-fiction work, or not work? As this subject seems endless, we'll try to focus on the leap over the border from the side of non-fiction. But of course we will also talk about in-between forms like the personal essay, and other forms which accept the imagination and the manipulation of facts. Those forms come back in the titles of the three sessions. I had a lot of discussions with my co-organizer John Müller, who cannot be here unfortunately, about the various definitions of truth: historical truth, objective truth, subjective truth, literary truth, emotional truth, truer than truth... I want to thank John for all his contributions to the programme and to finding a good title. The speakers have seen a few passing by: The end of non-fiction, The new clothes of non-fiction, Fooling ourselves with stories, which finally became 'Non-slash-fiction: Stress testing the genres'. And the discussion is often about classification. Who decides on that? The author, the publisher, the agent, the reviewer or the bookseller? How elastic are they and do we really believe in divisions? We kept some teasing subtitles in the programme, like 'Fascinating but tricky' or 'Compelling stories and confidence tricks', or 'The space between where strange things happen'. And the titles of the speeches of our eight speakers show how each will deal with the subject in their own unique way.

It's very special that they're here, as I have pursued them over the last year with questions and propositions with the aim of making their points as provocative as possible. I want to thank them for their continuing commitment to this conference. Among the participants are authors, publishers, agents, translators, book

reviewers and literary journalists, and colleagues from the Foundation, all of whom we have asked beforehand to answer a few questions, which you can find in the programme, together with the list of participants. It also has some practical information: the twitter account is there, the password for Wifi. Important information for smokers is that a tent has been built outside especially for you. We also hope to be outside when the weather gets better. The conference staff, for those who were not here yesterday when I presented them, consists of Tijmen, Lisa and Suzanne, and my colleagues at the Foundation are Barbara, Jaja, Tiziano and Victor, who will take photos and is responsible for the twitter account. As you can see we will also film the speeches, that's Daan, and that will all come on our website afterwards.

Today we have lunch here, at the Foundation, all made by Amstelkeuken, who, by the way, will try to bring some fiction into the food that they are preparing. This is for you to find out. The combination of our different backgrounds and spending one and a half days together in discussion has proved to work well in the past. I am again very curious as to how the discussions will unfold. Therefore I gladly introduce our moderator Maarten Asscher to you, who not only combines all the backgrounds I've just mentioned – author, translator, publisher, literary critic – but is also the director of Athenaeum, the best bookshop in Amsterdam, so in more ways than one he might have the final word on the stress testing of genres.

Maarten Asscher – Thank you very much Maarten Valken. The confusion of Maartens should not be exploited too much. A warm welcome from my side as well to all of you, especially to the three speakers of this morning's session seated behind the table. I'm very happy that we are assembled here in this imitation bookshop, which feels very much like being at home, not only for booksellers but also for writers and translators and publishers and anyone professionally engaged in dealing with books. I myself returned last night from a stay of a week in New York. I slept very well I must say, but it could be that in the course of the day I start keeling over to the left or the right and I trust the people behind this table will then put me in an upright position again.

I would like to begin by saying that we have for our morning session until twelve thirty, which is a generous amount of time for three presentations and a discussion. And the title of this morning's session is 'Narrating non-fiction: fascinating but tricky'. I would like first to introduce to you as our opening speaker of the day, Neil Belton. Perhaps you have already met last night. I wasn't able to be here for drinks and the opening dinner, so perhaps all kinds of interesting discussions have already taken place which I missed. But in any case I'm very happy that to my right is Neil Belton, who has worked for distinguished publishing houses like Jonathan Cape, Granta and Faber and Faber and is now heading a newly established imprint called Head of Zeus, and if I look at the list of writers and books he has been engaged with over the past years – Steven J. Gould, Orlando Figes, Neil Ascherson, Mischa Glenny, John Gray, Rachel Polonsky, Enzensberger – I think we could have no better speaker for this morning session. I should also mention two Dutch writers he has been involved with, Henk van Woerden and Willem Elsschot, a Flemish Dutch-language author. So Neil, tell us about your views on the dangers in between fiction and non-fiction. Is it a demilitarized zone or are there battles going on there?

Neil Belton: Danger on the border

Neil Belton – When Maarten first mentioned the possibility of this conference and of the subject, the phrase that instinctively came to my mind was that of 'debatable land'. Now the debatable lands were a strip of territory on the border of the old Scottish and English kingdoms that didn't clearly belong to either. This was a dangerous and rather lawless zone, and I think the border between fiction and non-fiction can be equally porous and tricky territory. Today it's full of traps, temptations, and also of watchtowers and vigilant police. As publishers I think we have a duty to our readers to make sure that our writers are describing the world accurately, that their work has an integrity the reader can trust, but the borderline cuts across important issues of historical truth, the legitimacy of different perspectives and the instability of genres. There are I think gradations of intermingling or outright invention in what we might like to think of as securely truthful forms of writing. None of us would connive with forgery, but we may still be lured into strange places where all is not quite what it seems. Historians, for example,

are expected by editors and the public to tell us what their sources and documents tell them, which can usually be narrated in the simple past tense, but they're also expected to write vivid narrative prose in order to bring their subjects alive in the setting in which they lived. We desire the pleasures of narrative non-fiction, even in more conventional narrative history. We want colour and the illusion of immersion in another world, what real characters would or might have seen, which is the role not of the simple past tense but of the conditional perfect, at least in English, although it may appear in the text pretending to be the ordinary past tense. Here for example is a passage from Antony Beevor's *Stalingrad*. 'Those who fell through the ice were doomed. Nobody even thought of going to their aid. Comparisons to the Berezina were uppermost in most people's minds. Occasionally, on these lines of retreat, an officer as unshaven as the men around him decided that it was his duty to halt the disintegration. He drew his pistol to round up a few stragglers, then, using them as a core, press-ganged others until their force snowballed. (...) The scratch force, with varying degrees of compulsion, then took up positions and waited for Soviet tanks or cavalry to appear out of the icy mist.' Now, how does Beevor know that comparisons with Berezina were uppermost in anyone's mind at that moment on the banks of the Don? Some historians are extremely suspicious of any resort to this conditional perfect mood. One distinguished conservative historian recently wrote to me that he thinks it is terribly unprofessional of a historian to use it at all. 'If I can prove from firsthand accounts that the uniforms were crisp, then I'll write it, but how do we know they were? I call it "out of the darkness looms" history, and it's long been a major bugbear of mine.' Now this is a legitimate position, but it is perhaps unnecessarily restrictive. Beevor's brilliant scene of chaos on the banks of the Don surely contributes to our understanding of that terrible moment, but the line between legitimate reconstruction and outright invention has to be carefully controlled. If the historian isn't careful about signalling to his or her readers that there's a certain speculative element in what the soldiers trapped at Stalingrad saw or felt, are we being sold a lesser kind of truth?

In non-fiction reportage the temptations are much more extreme. The overwhelming need to create a narrative that is compelling in its grasp of detail and has the seamless uncluttered

propulsion of a well-told story, can lead the writer into a form of writing that approaches the condition of fiction. The classic case is Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, dogged since its publication in 1966 by accusations that Capote made up quotes, misused facts and exaggerated the role of the lead detective in the terrible murder case that forms the subject of the book. It remains a great work of art, nothing in it departs from essential truth, but would he get away with it now? Almost certainly not. We have become ever more eager for books of the kind he pioneered, and ever more critical of them. The new biography of the wonderful *New Yorker* writer Joseph Mitchell, whose portraits of the city's characters are among the best-loved literature, concludes that he amalgamated people and situations to create his stories. He invented these endearing characters, bent the rules, used the techniques of fiction that can add so much to a true narrative that it is robbed of truth. Janet Malcolm defended Mitchell a couple of weeks ago in an already controversial essay in *The New York Review of Books*. 'Every writer of non-fiction who has struggled with the ditch and the bushes knows what Joseph Mitchell is talking about,' she wrote, 'but few of us have gone as far as Mitchell in bending actuality to our artistic will. This is not because we're more virtuous than Mitchell. It is because we are less gifted than Mitchell. The idea that reporters are constantly resisting temptation to invent is a laughable one. Reporters don't invent because they don't know how to. That is why they are journalists rather than novelists or short-story writers.'

So, fraudulent genius is okay – true art if not true crime – and forgivable because Mitchell was so good at what he did. The implications for conventional truthful reporting are a little dizzying. But these are relatively benign examples. In other situations the stakes are so much higher. Ryszard Kapuściński, for example, is one of the greatest non-fiction writers that I've ever read and he helped form an image of Africa for an entire generation of intellectuals and more general readers. I still think *The Emperor* is a magnificent book, a fable of tyranny, of the withering effects of power on those who practice it. But did the courtiers he interviewed really speak in that melancholy, stoical way? Did he speak to all of them at all? As Neal Ascherson wrote in a review of the great poet-reporter's recent biography, his was 'a style of "literary reportage" in which

embroidery and even manipulation of the facts were skilfully used to create a reality “truer than the truth”.

Books of course can have important political effects. When fiction intrudes the result can complicate the search for historical truth, and here the rubber really hits the road, as they say in America. I'm thinking for example of the autobiographical writings of Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Fein, the party that jointly governs Northern Ireland and may soon hold the balance of power both north and south of the border. His books are a tissue of partisan narrative, pious sentimentality and outright denial of the truth. Adams, who is a former chief of staff of the IRA, insists that he was never even a member of the organization, he never ordered the death of a single person, never authorized the placing of a single bomb. This is the political leader as fabulist, a kind of willed amnesia, a corrosive public lie, and his books support the lie and make any coming to terms with the recent past in Ireland extremely difficult.

In the late 1950s one of the most famous men in America was Tom Dooley, jungle doctor of Vietnam. He was on the cover of *Time*. When he died in 1961 he was ranked third behind Eisenhower and the Pope in an American poll of the world's most esteemed men. His books, especially his first, *Deliver Us From Evil*, sold millions of copies. He was hugely admired by the Kennedys and if there is a single book that helped to ease the US into Vietnam, to imagine the country was a hapless victim of communist aggression and to make the case for intervention, it was Dooley's bestseller. He wrote it with the considerable assistance of his editor Robert Giroux of what became Farrar Straus Giroux and the editors of *Reader's Digest*, then the most popular magazine in the world, which serialized it and gave the book its distinctive slick adman's gloss, its aw-shucks false modesty and its incredible sentimentality. And although it wasn't wholly fictional, everything important in it was made up. His heroic central role in saving refugees from North Vietnam who had fled to the South, his witnessing of communist atrocities, his conversations with Vietnamese and American civilians and officers – we can tell ourselves you wouldn't get away with it now, but I'm not so sure. We should also remember the egregious inventions of Benjamin Wilkomirski, who claimed to

have survived Auschwitz as a small child and wrote a book that was translated by Carol Janeway and published by Knopf and Picador and praised around the world, until he was exposed as a non-Jewish Swiss man who'd never been near a Nazi camp in his life. Fables like these are grist to the mills of Holocaust deniers. And in the case of Holocaust memoirs above all, the real victims deserve to be protected from the fantasists by a certain rigorous scepticism. Yet the questioning of evidence can seem almost obscene, particularly to experienced editors and translators and publishers, who perhaps should have been troubled by the man's claim to have survived as an infant in a camp where no one was allowed to survive unless they could work, and be worked to death. Yet in many less historically important cases we – gullible publishers, editors, journalists – are not rigorous at all. Every year now brings its crop of scandals, of soon-to-be forgotten names like Belle Gibson, Norma Khouri, James Frey, Louis La Roc, J.T. Le Roy, or Clifford Irving, an author who back in the seventies wrote the fantastical memoirs of Howard Hughes, which has recently been republished as a novel.

In our voracious, intrusive, confessional culture, we don't want to admit that there are any areas of experience that are off-limits. Memoirs of degradation and redemption are devoured. Celebrity isn't complete without its demons, which can be exorcised with the help of ghost writers and editors. We want to believe that we can share vicariously in almost any experience and immerse ourselves in any hell that we would never dare visit ourselves: Afghanistan, Somalia, North Korea, the backstreets of Mumbai or Belfast. And sometimes the incredible bulletins come from no-go zones of our own cities. Thus Margaret B. Jones, the author of a sensational autobiography of life in foster care and a ghetto gang, rather boringly turned out to be one Margaret Seltzer who grew up in a rich suburb of Los Angeles and went to a private school. When the *Washington Post* was famously conned by a writer called Janet Cooke, with a moving article about a child heroin addict in the city's projects, after the whole thing was exposed and she had to give back her Pulitzer Prize, Ben Bradley, the editor of the *Washington Post*, admitted that he and almost all the senior executives and other reporters were so hopelessly ignorant of the city's large African-American population that they just simply couldn't judge the truth of Janet Cooke's article.

There are other difficulties. Authorship is diluted by researchers, co-writers and assistants. What is the status of the book we're being asked to believe in? What is the ontological status of the author? Cheryl Sandburg, for example, is a kind of collective. She has a writing partner, she has a lead researcher, she has legions of editorial assistants. There are eight pages of acknowledgements in her book. I'm sure she was the executive chef, as it were, of the book, but going further back, John F. Kennedy won the Pulitzer Prize in 1957 for *Profiles in Courage*, a linked series of essays on courageous politicians, but his speechwriter Ted Sorensen actually wrote the book. Many years later he admitted to writing a first draft of most of the chapters and that he helped choose the words of many of the sentences. So if we could penetrate the fog of non-disclosure agreements, I wonder whose hand we'd see crafting sentences for Tony Blair and George Bush and people like that.

It's not always the author, or the ostensible author, and his or her team who are pulling the wool over the eyes of the innocent editors. The editor's own role can be very seductive, tempting him or her into improving a text at the expense of what might be called stylistic truth. Take the case of *The Railway Man*, a celebrated bestseller in Britain in 1995 and in print ever since, also translated into Dutch. I set out to edit what was then an unpublishable manuscript, became obsessed with Eric Lomax's story and became his ghost writer. Whatever literary qualities the book has, for better or worse, are mine and not those of the man whose name is on the cover of the book. I invented nothing as far as I know, and the book is an accurate rendering of an austere 1930s childhood and of cruelty in war. Lomax was tortured by the Japanese while working on the notorious Burma railway. The book moved people to tears, it won many literary prizes, but my name didn't appear on the title page. I was a silent partner. I think I did a good job, but had I also conned the public into believing there was an organic connection between the subject of the story and the style of his book? The movie of the book, which came out last year, dispensed entirely with the truth, turning the story into a lurid revenge drama, an utter travesty.

Movies are a law unto themselves of course, but perhaps we're not quite as innocent as we like to think. Yet we can revel in the ambiguities and despite the dangers this ambiguous zone

remains a rich field for creative work, for books that occupy an interesting grey zone which I'm sure others here will be talking about this morning, impure texts that are not easy to categorize as either fiction or non-fiction. *In Cold Blood* is one of them of course. *The Dark Room at Longwood* by Jean-Paul Kauffmann re-imagines Napoleon's life on St Helena. It was the product of the author's fascination with solitude and hopelessness as a result of his experiences as a hostage in Beirut. There are many other examples. I've always been fascinated by Penelope Fitzgerald's novel *The Blue Flower*, which she always described as 'a novel of sorts'. Alan Hollinghurst wrote recently that 'it is indeed a new kind of book: a fusion of novel, history, and biography that has something of the overall effect of a poem, a constellation of images and ideas'.

We should of course prefer the historians who base their work on verifiable sources and memoirs to show it can be checked. But it may be that there are certain aspects of the past which are so elusive that they can only be brought to life for us by a fusion, more or less overt, of fictional techniques and the kind of writing based on evidence, on documents and witness statements which are themselves problematic. Maarten mentioned Henk van Woerden's *Een mond vol glas, A Mouthful of Glass*, which is his story of Verwoert's assassin. It's an extraordinary and wonderful near-fictional but truthful account of this man's life insofar as it can be reconstructed. The assassin's life. One thinks of Francis Spufford's extraordinary recent book *Red Plenty*, a book about Soviet economics that frankly fictionalized the alliance of young Soviet communists that he was writing about and fused it with an interesting narrative of late-Soviet society. Think also of George Packer's *The Unwinding*, which Faber and Faber are publishing in Britain, a great non-fiction novel about the decline in American society, with narrative profiles of representative characters, satirical portraits of celebrities and fragments of newspaper reports. It's a non-fiction book written very much under the influence of John Dos Passos, the American novelist of the interwar years. Packer takes formal risks but he tells the truth.

So there it is, I don't want to live in a world where I'm not allowed to admire *In Cold Blood* or *The Emperor*, but I do recognize the need to be on my guard. Thank you.

Maarten Asscher – Thank you very much indeed, Neil Belton, for a very fine and fascinating overview that I think covers various issues that we should discuss further. I would like to pick out just a few to prepare the ground for a more complete discussion later on this morning. If you say that probably Truman Capote would not get away with *In Cold Blood* now, what then would you say has happened in the intervening decades? What is it that has changed?

Neil Belton – I suppose readers and other reporters have become more sceptical about the status of these texts and are more ready to question them, and of course it's easier now in the digital age to immediately check facts and sources, to communicate with people whose alleged verbatim conversations appear in a book. I think there are fewer hiding places, and also in view of the multiplication of publishing scandals which are almost comical, from year to year. I think that as with any book with an incredible story, its credibility is soon going to be tested. There are grey areas. In the case of a reporter or a writer coming back from Afghanistan or Iraq, it's extremely difficult to check all their facts and sources, but I do think we've become perhaps more testing.

Maarten Asscher – For a war report I would indeed say that it is entirely legitimate to be suspicious and we're talking about journalism, which is ideally the profession of reporting truth about reality, but for the genre, if it is a genre, of narrative non-fiction there should be room for more liberality, if you can say that, for the imagination. If Flaubert in *L'Éducation sentimentale* describes the street barricades and the fighting in the streets in, what is it, 1848-1849, no one, even I believe no one at the time, questioned his version of events because what counted was not the exactitude of his observations but the role these happenings play in the story. So what has happened between Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and the time we're in now in literature? Is it political? Is it moral? Is it legal?

Neil Belton – Well I wish I could give you a clear answer. The conservative historian whose letter I quoted from – the truth is that I was pressing him to include more colour and to depart from the strict letter of the documents because I thought his text needed some more imagination. Truthful imagination. He was highly

resistant to this. But yes, I agree, I do think there is room for that. I love these grey areas.

Maarten Asscher – Your idea of fraudulent genius, that is okay...

Neil Belton – No, I'm not saying... I mean I think it has to be carefully controlled. I think sheer invention and forgery is one thing, imaginative embroidery, imaginative colour is another, and I think one can take risks, enjoyable risks.

Maarten Asscher – We will come back to this later on. There's one more issue which I would like to raise out of what you have told us before I move over to the second speaker: the whole concept of fiction and non-fiction. We are already discussing these two words as if they indicate literary genres, as if they have a meaning with regard to the text they refer to. I've always regarded fiction and non-fiction as sort of supermarket terms, where you have fiction to the left and non-fiction to the right. Likewise you have food and non-food. But isn't that a matter for booksellers and retailers, and should the real writer not be a literary writer? I mean should he or she not be above such a commercial distinction, or is it something other than a commercial distinction?

Neil Belton – Yes, I think you're right and I think the categories can be rigid, overly rigid, and artificial, although there is a certain epistemological value in trying to make a distinction between what is a pure work of the imagination and what is purporting to be a falsifiable narrative of actual events. Perhaps these distinctions are more enforceable in the Anglo-Saxon publishing world, or in my case Anglo-Hibernian-American publishing world. But yes, I think the writer can survey the whole thing per his or her fingernails.

Maarten Asscher – Good. There are a lot of other topics in your presentation that we will come back to, but before we do I would like to give the microphone to Nina Sillem of Fischer Verlag in Germany, where she has been editor-in-chief of non-fiction for about two years I believe, but she has worked there much longer, and before that time she worked for Links Verlag and C.H. Beck and Hanser Verlag. Nina, please.

Nina Sillem: One book can change everything

Nina Sillem – When I started to take down notes for today on narrative non-fiction, the more I thought about it the more confused I got. As you just said: is it just a label for booksellers, or what agents need or we need? The term narrative non-fiction is confusing and I think it's really difficult to grasp. Therefore I would like to start with a definition. It's a very basic one. There's one key distinction between fiction and non-fiction. Fiction can be based on facts but it doesn't have to be, and non-fiction must be based only on facts.

Well, as I said, it's very basic, but there it already gets difficult. Does pure non-fiction really exist and what does pure mean? As we heard before, the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is blurred. The historian Hayden White went even further. He has argued in his book *Metahistory* that historical writing mirrors literary writing in many ways. Fictional elements are unavoidable, meaning that many techniques of composition and storytelling apply to both.

I think we are therefore talking about narrative techniques rather than fictional elements, and that's a very important distinction. An author of a non-fiction book who is willing to open up his field and touch a wider audience has to work with these techniques. It starts with the story, the *sujet*. The story the author decides he wants to tell will always be arbitrary. He or she will mention some facts and leave out others. He will have access only to a certain number of documents and sources, and he will highlight some characters and neglect others. He needs to tell a story to engage with the reader. This means he must choose a beginning and an ending, for example, and that he has to rely on storytelling, not forgetting a plot. In some cases and in some books the author even becomes part of the *sujet* too, like Bruce Chatwin in *Songlines*. In this sense all non-fiction writing is in some way fictional, because it's impossible, for example, to reach 'historical truth' – although it would be interesting to discuss whether something like historical truth does exist – and to show how things actually were, or to quote the German historian Leopold von Ranke: '*Wie es eigentlich gewesen ist.*' I think it's really impossible to achieve this. Fictional elements

are unavoidable. Good storytelling is essential, and starting with the first myths of creation we need stories to explain the world we live in. This is exactly what good non-fiction should do too.

I think it's now more expected for non-fiction books to be narrative. We probably all know a now very common form of praise: 'It's non-fiction but it reads like fiction.' We published George Packer as well, and it became a bestseller after we got this huge review saying that the big American novel this year is a non-fiction book. So that's how it started.

The ways these narrative techniques are being applied are influenced by various aspects. I'd like to mention three of them. First, professional influences; second, cultural differences; and last, the historical distance.

So the first, professional influences: my example there would be the German science writer Stefan Klein. He was a kind of pioneer of science writing, or German science writing, and he wrote various bestsellers. You probably all know *The Science of Happiness* that was translated into twenty-seven languages. Klein is influenced by American and English science writers, such as the evolutionary biologist and science populariser John Haldane. He learned from him that ideas can take over the role of the protagonist, to mention one technique, or that the reader can become the hero who discovers, by himself, how science or the laws of nature influence his daily life. The reader gets involved in the topics, sometimes together with the author. For example, in his latest book on dreams, a book about what we know or what neuroscience knows about dreams and how the brain works, Klein talks about his own dreams a lot. That's of course very fictional, but clearly it also takes the latest research to understand what's beneath them. Of course it's always clear what are the facts and what is the interpretation or the explanation. His books have a certain dramaturgy, are packed with facts; they are pure non-fiction - as far as possible. This is very rare and uncommon in Germany, therefore he's one of the few authors who have become a kind of brand.

It's rare because of the second point I'd like to mention, the cultural differences. In Germany non-fiction writing used to be

mostly academic, in contrast to, for example, the United States, where the human touch and the personalization is much more important. And in some ways it's still the case that German non-fiction writing tends to be very academic. The more narrative non-fiction is – especially historical non-fiction – the more suspicious the reader is that the author is not truthful, that his work does not fulfil scientific standards. This has several reasons. First it's the academic tradition that most historians are busy till their mid-forties fulfilling academic demands within the university and the demands of their colleagues. Another reason are the media and reviewers. Many non-fiction books are reviewed by experts in the field and that's not always very helpful. And the readers, they long for clear labels. It has to be *the* book by *the* expert on that topic. So selling books by journalists on a certain topic becomes more and more difficult. I think the perfect book, the ideal book, would be by a scientist who writes, himself, about his research, skilfully applying narrative techniques. That's a kind of non-fiction editor's dream.

The third point, the last point, would be the historical distance. There are certain topics which need some time before they can be fictionalized. It would be interesting to see later if this is true in all other countries, or rather what the specific topics are. In Germany one of these topics would be National Socialism and books on the Holocaust – it's still a very sensitive topic to mix with strong narrative, like moods or emotions – or writing on subjects that that are connected with or were occupied by National Socialism, like euthanasia. The term alone would be impossible to use in a current discussion; it's not at all neutral. An author really has to stay clearly within the borders of fact-based non-fiction.

So probably fictionalization of a certain topic can be an indicator of how sensitive a society is to a subject, of how much a society comports itself to a certain topic. And it can be vice versa. New ways of storytelling and the diversity of formats, like movies, graphic novels etc., can initiate a new way of debating a certain topic or of confronting the past. To reach a broader audience, fiction probably works better; it's so much more direct and easier to identify with.

To stay with the sensitive subject of National Socialism, I find it interesting that a TV series, *Holocaust*, really sparked a big discussion within German society about the Shoah, not a book, and it also initiated a debate about whether it is adequate to deal with a topic like that.

Incorporating fictional techniques absolutely enriches non-fiction and the readers seem to accept or even long for it. That's a change. So the good news is: in the end the readers will decide which course non-fiction will take. Whenever a new non-fiction book is published in a new format or a new literary style and it becomes hugely successful, it opens up new possibilities for other books, whether it's the format or the topic, like Dava Sobel many years ago or Florian Illies now with his book on the year 1913. That's a book full of facts and quotes, but put together in a wonderful, very narrative way, so it's one that really reads like a novel. And this shows that one successful book can change everything.

Maarten Asscher – Thank you very much Nina Sillem. I do remember quite some complaints by writers who seem not to be able to conform to the German non-fiction culture. For example Philip Blom, who is greatly respected all over the world as a narrative non-fiction writer. He doesn't seem to get into the form that is acceptable to a larger audience in Germany, just because he narrates too much and he uses perhaps his authority not enough and instead of that he creates, he doesn't imagine but he gives a dramatic turn to events. Is that a question of just this personal example, this individual example, or is there indeed one of those cultural differences you have been talking about?

Nina Sillem – I think it's a real difference. In Germany you need very clear labels, especially for history books, and that the reader should think: these are the facts I'm getting; nothing is invented. But I think one important aspect is the reviews, too, and how the feuilletons, the newspapers reacted to these books. All these books, or many of these books, get reviewed by other historians. And they are really strict, like Neil said. They're really suspicious about colleagues writing in a too narrative way. I think it's also interesting to see that even young historians are. I thought they would admire the Anglo-Saxon way of history writing, but they don't, they're not

really too interested in doing it. We have two authors, for example, Florian Illies, who wrote the big bestseller *1913*, but he's not a historian, so it would be interesting to imagine what would have happened to this book if he had been a historian. And another book I just commissioned is by a young historian, at least he's in his mid-forties but he says he's now free because he has fulfilled the academic standards and published enough, and now he's free enough to write the way he would love to write.

Maarten Asscher – Yes, we have a similar case in the Netherlands with Geert Mak, who is also continuously under criticism from historians. He's not a historian himself but a legal man by background, but with a great literary pen, and historians point out minor mistakes or say that his canvas is much too rich and too broad, but still he has acquired an enormous audience for a wonderful body of work.

Nina Sillem – I think people have to be sure that the author is a good one. For example we published Simon Sebag Montefiore, and when we published his first book we added a foreword by a professor of Russian history at Berlin University, because we had the feeling we had to add this to make sure to show the audience that he's, well, that he's a historian, you can trust it. Then his book became famous and then it was okay, but at first we had to do enough to make sure.

Maarten Asscher – To use authority to force the people...

Nina Sillem – Exactly.

Maarten Asscher – I'm also reminded of a lawyer called Von Schirach, who writes about legal cases from his own practice, but in a very narrative way. Would you consider – he's also translated in the Netherlands by De Arbeiderspers – is he considered in Germany as a literary writer, or as a writing lawyer, or is it non-fiction or fiction?

Nina Sillem – I would say it's seen as fiction with a certain thrill that it's based on real stories, but it's mainly seen as fiction.

Maarten Asscher – And is that work reviewed by – I would gather not by fellow lawyers. So it's reviewed by literary critics probably.

Nina Sillem – Yes.

Maarten Asscher – Who cannot judge the legal side.

Nina Sillem – Because of the way he writes. It's fiction, and it's so well done. There is also well-written non-fiction of course, but I think it's clearly seen as fiction. Like Steven Cross, for example. We published it as non-fiction but it's seen as fiction.

Maarten Asscher – There was one sentence in your presentation that I noted. You said about Klein that he wrote about his dreams, which are of course fictional.

Nina Sillem – Well, okay. Nobody knows, you know?

Maarten Asscher – You can write truthfully about your dreams.

Nina Sillem – That's true.

Maarten Asscher – Isn't that pure autobiography?

Nina Sillem – Probably it's the fact that you can't prove it. That's probably why I said it's fictional, and it's very colourful and very exaggerated. But of course, yes. You just can't prove it, you have to trust.

Maarten Asscher – That was also the criticism levelled at the *Traumdeutung* by Sigmund Freud, that it was all made up to provide the maximum number of clues in the interpretation. Right, we will continue this conversation with the rest of the table and with the other participants later on, but first of all we have our third presentation of the morning by Grégory Martin, who is editorial director of La Librairie Vuibert, an imprint of the Albin Michel group, and was previously working for Denoël, part of the Gallimard empire, I may say. You have published Jan Brokken in French, *Baltic Souls*, and have also been active as a translator, notably of *The Boys in the Boat* by Daniel James Brown. So tell us about your views please.

Grégory Martin: The publisher as gatekeeper

Grégory Martin – Thank you. As everybody may have understood from the title Maarten gave to my speech, I will mainly deal with the responsibility of the editor. To sum up my point from the beginning, I would say that the fictionalization of non-fiction shows how essential an editor is.

First of all, I consider the phenomenon as a good thing. Because what enriches non-fiction is the use of fiction-writing techniques. It makes the reading more enjoyable.

I'm comfortable with the idea of letting the imagination of the writer wander. What the job of the non-fiction editor is, is to bring them back to reality when it's time to edit their work. First we have to let them wander and then we have to bring them back to reality. Such books, narrative non-fiction books, can exist only because there is a serious and professional editor behind every piece.

There is no such thing as an objective reality as far as I'm concerned, either in fiction or in non-fiction. The writers can't set apart their subjectivity. Maybe to that extent we can consider that a non-fiction piece written with fiction-writing techniques is more honest, because it says from the beginning that it's not a neutral account of the so-called reality. And the use of fiction-writing techniques can bring life to facts, which is a point we realize I think when we read books.

My point, as a translator of both narrative and journalistic non-fiction, is that narrative non-fiction gives you more freedom. I would define translation as a kind of constrained freedom. You're free to use the words you want, but you can't make them mean anything else than what the writer intended. To that extent, narrative non-fiction gives a translator more liberty, because the reality it's describing is a staged reality. It's staged in the writer's mind, so it's up to you as a translator to stage this reality in your own mind, and that's where a translator's freedom exists.

I remember, for instance, a difficulty I had when I translated *The Boys in the Boat*, which is the story of the US rowing crew who won the gold medal at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. At the very beginning of the book, the author, Daniel James Brown, describes the shell house of the crew in Seattle. He adds that the damaged boats were repaired in a workshop located in a 'loft'. I was very puzzled by the word 'loft' because I didn't know what the writer intended to describe with it. So I wrote him an email asking: 'What do you mean by "loft"?' He replied by sending a very unhelpful photograph taken from the interior. So I wrote back: 'Thank you, but it's not enough to help me.' Since I needed to be able to describe the room with my own words, I had no choice but to go to Seattle to visit the shell house to see by myself what that 'loft' was. I did it. I went to Seattle, not only to visit the shell house of course, but I took advantage of my trip to see the places where the action of the book took place. I consider this trip helped me a lot to reconstruct the reality in my own French words instead of technically translating the reality written in English. At the end, it appeared that the 'loft' was more of an 'attic-mezzanine-annex' thing (and of course we don't have any word in French to describe this). It was my liberty to describe it with my own words, provided I could describe the reality I saw.

By contrast, when I translated Bob Woodward's *Obama's Wars*, which is an investigative book about the way Barack Obama dealt with the war in Iraq at the beginning of his presidency, I didn't need to go to the White House to check the colour of the oval office carpet - although I would have liked to do that; maybe one day for another book. I didn't need to because this reality was obvious to everybody, given the number of descriptions we read in books and articles. We even get to see the carpet on TV reports. So it was an objective reality and I hadn't the choice of the words to describe it, because everybody could check.

The difficulty lies in knowing what comes from reality and what has been imagined by the writer. Trying to establish that is the most fascinating part of the translator's job, because you have to dig into the documents used by the writer to stage the reality, and that I think - and by looking into the documents we are in a way doing the

work of the writer – is the most fascinating part of the translating experience.

To my mind, the main benefit of using fiction-writing techniques in non-fiction is to reach a wider audience than with traditionally – or ‘academically’ if you prefer – written non-fiction. Furthermore, it’s a big help in popularizing the latest discoveries in the field of history or science.

One of the greatest risks is that the author replaces facts as the basis of the book. In fiction, we read a novel written by an author we like, whereas in non-fiction we read a book dealing with a subject we are interested in.

So I’m very concerned by the fact that mixing fiction and non-fiction can sometimes harm people. We should never forget that behind the facts, behind the story there are some real people in non-fiction who can be offended by the way their reality (or the way they live that reality) is staged. Here I’m thinking of a French book written by Bernard-Henri Lévy with the title *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?*. It was a report about the US journalist abducted and in the end killed by the Taliban. In an according to me very shocking chapter, Bernard-Henri Lévy describes what happened, what was in the mind of Daniel Pearl at the time he was executed. And I remember having read some articles about the reaction of the wife of the reporter, being at first very shocked, because nobody knows what happened and it’s part of his intimacy and, you know, just reading it I feel ill-at-ease and then I have the same reaction as his widow, saying that it shouldn’t be in a book.

Furthermore, the editor needs to protect the writer from press attacks, readers’ complaints or legal proceedings, and for that the editor should know where the border lies between facts and fiction. In other words, the publishers shouldn’t let the writers do everything they want to. For their own sake.

When it’s well done, I don’t considering the mixing of fiction and non-fiction as tricky. It all depends on the subject of the book. The main criterion, and maybe the only one, should be the level of transparency about the mixing. It should be clearly stated somewhere in the book, maybe in a foreword or at the back but

anyway somewhere very obvious, that a book is either fiction or non-fiction, and in the last case, in the case of non-fiction, whether it has been written with fiction-writing techniques. That's why the label 'it's a non-fiction piece written like a novel' to me is very good, because it says everything in a very simple way. Once this rule is set, I think everything is possible. But there's a risk. It's when an editor is elastic with his or her own classification of 'fiction' and 'non-fiction'. Because there can be some confusion. The responsibility of the editor according to me is to be constantly aware of what she or he is doing.

The editor is also accountable to the authors he works with. Some of them may be seduced by fictionalized non-fiction when they see such books on the best-seller lists. But when one succeeds, as we all know, ten or twenty fail. The reason is that it's far more difficult to write a non-fiction book with the tools of fiction than to make a traditional non-fiction piece. And to my mind, there are far more constraints in the field of narrative non-fiction than in the field of academic fiction: you need to be accurate and imaginative, deal with facts and the structure of the book, know where you want to go without having the freedom to choose your road. As publishers we must warn the authors who want to write narrative non-fiction how difficult the task is.

If needed, our reunion here today shows how heavy the burden is, and I hope we'll make it lighter by sharing the load. Thank you.

Maarten Asscher – Thank you Grégory. I see that new coffee has been brought in. I propose that we do a ten minute coffee break and then we come back and I will have a few questions for you.

Discussion

Maarten Asscher – Grégory, let me start with you if I may. Nina Sillem talked about cultural differences as one of the elements in her talk about fiction versus non-fiction. How would you describe the French approach to this fiction/non-fiction difference from a literary point of view? What is typically French here?

Grégory Martin – I would say we can't describe it, because we start with the charm not to know where fiction divides from non-fiction, and so I think French readers are pretty open to these kinds of experiments. You quoted Flaubert earlier and Flaubert made sure everything is totally true. We learn when we are at school to study Flaubert's work and the teacher explained to us that before writing a novel he did a lot of work of research. For *Madame Bovary* as well as for *L'Éducation sentimentale* he read a lot of newspapers and also with fiction about the 1848 revolution, to get it correct. So from school we know that you can read a novel and also learn a lot of history, and I think provided it's good, perhaps it doesn't matter if it's a novel.

Maarten Asscher – Okay, but still I think there is something more to be said about the French approach to fiction and non-fiction. There is a book, a recent novel in France called *Constellation* by Adrien Bosc which won the Grand Prix du roman from the Académie Française.

Grégory Martin – And that was a real surprise.

Maarten Asscher – Yes, and it sold more than 150,000 copies, a first novel, praised from a literary point of view as a novel, but it tells the story in quite a factual, reportage kind of way, about a famous plane crash in 1949, where something like seventy or eighty people died, among them the famous violinist Ginette Neveu and the famous boxer Marcel Cerdan. In the Netherlands, I can safely say, a book like that, describing a plane crash and describing in detail all the people who were involved in the crash and their families and their life stories would not be published as a novel but simply as non-fiction or narrative non-fiction or reportage non-fiction? Why do the French call this a novel?

Grégory Martin – First of all I haven't read it yet, so I would speak only from the outside. I would reply that it's only because of marketing. As far as I remember the book was released in September, and in September if you want to exist, first in the press, then in bookshops, you have to publish a novel. If it's your first novel it's even better because you are sure to be placed first. Everybody wants to touch you and say how cute you are if you put

the label 'first novel'. You will find a bigger audience than if you say: I'm a journalist with a very literary report. It's only because of marketing.

Maarten Asscher – Good, now we're getting at the truth. Let me switch to Nina if I may. You also said that in Germany the phrase 'it reads like a novel' is a marketing expression. It's intended as a compliment, as a positive qualification. Nevertheless I think in Germany there are so many wonderful non-fiction successes over the past few years that a non-fiction culture is flourishing tremendously. At what point would the expression 'it reads like non-fiction' be a compliment to a book? What is needed for this, well, silly idea that fiction reads easier than non-fiction, to put that to an end, to change that? You as a non-fiction publisher, you would like to publish non-fiction in its own right, not because it reads like something other than it is.

Nina Sillem – I think probably, like you said before, many people read a non-fiction book because they are interested in the subject and there are very few authors, or non-fiction authors, who became brands like Stefan Klein. I think people know that he's an excellent writer and they would buy books because they're written by him and not because of the subject – or yes of course also because of the subject but that would be... The author's outstanding. And to stay with Florian Illies, I think for a broader audience they have the feeling, that it's more accessible, or easier to identify with if it's fiction. I think Florian Illies is a good example because it's so in-between. It's a non-fiction book and we published it as non-fiction, and people have the feeling: now I'm getting a serious non-fiction book but it's very gossipy, it's easy to read and very entertaining. So they have the perfect mixture. It's still a non-fiction book. But I'm not sure. I think that with a non-fiction book it's more the subject that has to attract people, an audience.

Maarten Asscher – Perhaps a lot of non-fiction is not good enough. If it were better written, then...

Grégory Martin – Actually I disagree with you. It's not a compliment to say a non-fiction piece is written like a novel. We can say of some works that they are written like a novel. It's not a

compliment, it's a neutral description. For me it's a first step just to say what it is. It is a non-fiction piece that you can read as a novel. Then either it's good or it's bad. But it's not on the scale of compliments, it's just a description.

Neil Belton – Of course there are novels that are written like PhD theses.

Maarten Asscher – Academic fiction. But Neil, you mentioned the phrase 'a pure work of the imagination'. Does that exist? A pure work of the imagination?

Neil Belton – Did I? Well, yes, I suppose probably not, except that the ideal or an ideal vision of the modern novel is that it's supposed to be a pure work of the imagination, but of course they rarely are. It's drawn from the deep well of the writer's memories about family life and about their experiences. There are some great novels which are intimately based on historical realities and they're none the worse for it. I'm thinking in particular of Mario Vargas Llosa, who I had the pleasure of looking after at Faber for several years, and indeed I think some of his best novels are based on actual historical events, like his magnificent *War at the End of the World*, which is about an actual millennial movement in the north-east of Brazil and it drew heavily on a great Brazilian non-fiction literary classic. Another of his novels is based on the assassination of Trujillo in the Dominican Republic and again it's closely based on historical narratives. So yes, there's a constant shifting of boundaries and inspirations, I guess.

Maarten Asscher – Perhaps the problem lies in the use of the word 'pure'.

Nina Sillem – Yes, it does, that's stupid, I'm sorry.

Maarten Asscher – Perhaps that is a sort of literary racism. We should sing the praises of impurity perhaps if we want to find ourselves on a literary level where texts are concerned.

Neil Belton – Yes, that is true, but I suppose there's still a distinction to be made between the fine craft of a novelist in bringing a situation alive, creating an emotionally compelling story which

functions in a way that no non-fiction work can, no matter how closely it's based on non-fiction sources. The Irish writer John McGahern is often held up as being one of the purest, most Chekhovian of modern Irish writers and he had a very, very refined style and conception of his craft, but his work recycles over and over again aspects of his own life, his childhood; you can trace the linkages between his stories. He's one of the greatest of modern short-story writers as well as a novelist. And that tension... You don't need to know anything about his art in order to read about the authentic life of the worlds he created.

Maarten Asscher – Good. I'd like to open up the discussion for all of you. There is a microphone over there, so any contribution is welcomed, in the microphone, and before you make that contribution please mention your name so that in the report of this conference your contribution can be correctly ascribed. Who? Any points that have been raised that have provoked you? Marco Vigevani.

Marco Vigevani – Well, I think that when you say that it is a mostly commercial distinction, the one between fiction and non-fiction – so on which shelves do we find fiction and on which shelves do we find non-fiction – it is also a distinction that wasn't made until the nineteenth century. So if we think of the great works of history, for instance Edward Gibbon, or Jules Michelet or Alexis de Tocqueville, or even if you go back to Vasari, the history of the Italian painters, they were writers who had of course a kind of important scholarship on their subjects, but there was not the idea that came later, probably in the twentieth century, that you had to be scientific about non-scientific matters, so that you had to expurgate all thoughts, all personal views, all sentiments, and this has gone very, very far into – I don't know if there exists such a word but illegibility, so non-legibility, non-readability of a work. In Italy we have one of the great works of scholarship probably of the twentieth century which is De Felice's biography of Mussolini in three volumes. It's a wonderful piece of research, it's absolutely unreadable and we are still waiting for someone to make a work of fiction/non-fiction on these great events, this great and terrible character of the twentieth century. So I think that it is very welcome that now we are reintegrating the writing, the personal views, the

judgements etc. into what was called the scientific and the academic kind of writing, of course always keeping the distinction between historical facts and personal views, but I think that it is something very, very positive.

Maarten Asscher – Thank you very much. I think that's an important point. In Italy, is there a word for fiction and non-fiction that is used as a classification of Italian books? Is there a word for non-fiction in Italian?

Marco Vigevani – No, you say simply 'non-fiction', because *saggistica* is more like an essay, so it's *narrativa* and *saggistica*. That's more the distinction. But for instance we have been recently very much influenced also by the success of somebody like Emmanuel Carrère. Because the latest book by Carrère, *Limonov*, and also *Le Royaume*: are they novels? Yes, probably, but they are also wonderful – especially *Le Royaume* – wonderful pieces of non-fiction. And so there are writers in Italy that are going down this same path. Just to give a short example, one of my writers, Antonio Scurati, has just written the parallel lives of Leone Ginzburg, who was the founder of the Einaudi publishing house and a great anti-fascist, and of his own family. Parallel lives. There is absolutely nothing invented in this book, which is selling like a novel and everybody is treating it like a novel. It is not a novel, probably, but we wouldn't dare to say that.

Maarten Asscher – Over there, please.

Annette Wunschel – I wanted spontaneously to ask, because you asked Nina what she had to say in Germany to make a non-fiction book sell. Would you call it non-fiction? No, you would say it's true. Truth sells. And truth means objective facts, and that used to be science, so in a way you don't have fiction and non-fiction, you have *Belletristik* and *Wissenschaft* at the extreme poles and in between you have *Sachbücher*, which is this kind of mediation of truth to make it understandable for a larger public. And in the nineties there was a change. You mentioned Dava Sobel, and that was a time when in science itself there came a change and there came up history of science with authors like Bruno Latour and in America Trevor Collins and many others, François Jacob. These are books which

also sold in Germany, with their well-written science or history of science, and also history of knowledge that suddenly made knowledge attractive in a way. It was not imaginary, but it was historical.

Maarten Asscher – But isn't it strange that two hundred years after Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit* this is still an obsession, or is it useful?

Annette Wunschel – It's strange, but it's even more strange that you have to import it from America. It's very strange. And we thought then: how strange when in Berlin we have so many historians of science, who have good topics and write well but they don't reach the public and you have to go to Dava Sobel as a German to have a story about the history of science. But I found it great that Dava Sobel functioned on the market, because then François Jacob functioned, after Dava Sobel.

Nina Sillem – Like I say, you need just one successful book and then it can change. Like with Florian Illies. It will be interesting to see whether there will now be more German historians who would like to go down this path.

Annette Wunschel – And now you have a new one, Philipp Felsch in Germany. He wrote a book called *Der lange Sommer der Theorie*, the long summer of theory, which is a very German story because it's about the Merve Verlag, which was the one German theory publisher who imported Foucault and the other big French philosophers or scientists, or however you call it, which was for every German young person in the seventies and eighties absolutely important. Everybody had a book from Merve in his pocket and you cannot do that now because it's over, it's a part of history which is now over. This is a book about which every positive critic writes that it reads like a story, it's a good story, which is funny because it's theory of theory, it's on the most dry topic you can think of.

Maarten Asscher – Just one question in between to Nina: Aren't these concepts, from *Belletristik* to *Wissenschaft* and *Sachbücher* in between, aren't these shifting under the influence of post-modern creativity? Or do they remain as fixed as they were, say, fifty years ago?

Nina Sillem – I think it depends on the topic. For example, historical writing has to be very non-fictional, very based on the facts. I think it's really difficult to talk about because we have to look at every different genre, like narrative non-fiction or science writing or historical writing, and there are some changes in general non-fiction. For example, I wish there were more essays. That's another thing that's very difficult in Germany. So there are traditional genres and other genres that are more open or getting wider now.

Maarten Asscher – Thank you... Yes.

Christiane Burkhardt – I'm a translator, and I thought it was interesting what you said, that there is an historical distance that sort of made possible the story of the publishing house Merve, but on the other hand someone like Roberto Saviano for instance, who was a huge success everywhere – there is no historical distance. He really immersed himself in the world of mafia and families and where he comes from. This is an approach that is very common to journalists of course, this mixing of the genres, and it has been turned into a film, now I think there is a series, a sort of a soap based on *Gomorra*, and I think the mixing of genres that we are discussing now in the field of literature is already very common in the field of filmmaking. We have Docu-drama, we've got documentary soaps, and I think people also get used to this kind of mix, watching all these film genres, and maybe that's why even in Germany they are more open to crossing the borders.

Maarten Asscher – Perhaps a question to Neil Belton: Neil, the need for historical distance, is that perhaps more a continental European thing? Because if I look at *Granta*, as you have edited that magazine for a couple of years, and if I look at the 9/11 novels for example, there seems to be no such need for historical distance in Anglo-Saxon writing. Or less so.

Neil Belton – Yes. Well, as Nina pointed out, the Nazi years and the Holocaust make that for obvious reasons radiant with difficulty in all kinds of ways and need very sensitive handling in Germany. Perhaps the Anglo-Saxons have had a luckier history. There is less need for distance. There is nothing like the Algerian War for example in France, which was for many years something of a no-go

zone in French publishing as far as I can understand. But yes, in America I think there is very little historical lag, with their immediate need to reprocess events in the form of narrative non-fiction.

Maarten Asscher – And also a positive note: there is the tradition of investigative journalism in England and America that also borders on, say, investigative fiction.

Neil Belton – Yes, this is certainly true, though certain events still remain to be raised. The war in Northern Ireland, which of course intimately involved both Britain and Ireland, still can't be written for the reasons I alluded to in the case of Adams. I mean Adams was a major protagonist in that conflict and he's a crucial figure in the political settlement that was reached, and there are very powerful interests militating against anything like, for example, a truth commission of a South African kind in Northern Ireland, because it would require present political actors to be utterly truthful about what they did during a sectarian war. It means that the history of that conflict can't be written. There have been a couple of memoirs, by ex-IRA men in particular, which offer significant insight into what went on, but they are often controversial or inevitably partial, so that's an area where distance has still to be taken.

Maarten Asscher – Grégory.

Grégory Martin – I think if we need to find a reason why American writers are so good at writing non-fiction, and why from America the example spread all over the world, it's because America had to write its own history. It's a brand new country. And if you look at how they write articles, how they do things, how they brand politicians, it's a question of narrative. They all need to have a narrative history, something to say. Everybody has his own role, his own narrative. I think it's a good point about America, because everything is an experience, everything is something to narrate, somewhere later.

Neil Belton – Walt Whitman has a lot to answer for.

Grégory Martin – Yes. And the point is that America literally has no history. It all began at the end of the eighteenth century, whereas

here in Europe we were very old already. We have archives and so forth and they have none, so they had to write their own stories, they had to write their own narratives, and maybe this strand is so deep – some American people can speak better than I do about it – the American mind is so open to narrative from school, from the cultural roots of the country, that everything has to be narrative. And so, America being so powerful in the field of cultural exchange, everybody has to be of the same standard. I think it may be one of the reasons, the cultural background of the United States.

Maarten Asscher – Richard Nash, do you agree with this interesting simplification: there is a tradition of research in continental Europe versus a tradition of narrative in the States?

Richard Nash – Yeah, what's funny is that I'm both Irish and American. I think you point to something, although I would add to it... I think you're absolutely right that the absence of a white-slash-Western history in North America requires a crafting of alternative narratives. Which is why I've often tried to figure out why Americans are obsessed about flag-burning. Why can you burn flags happily in Europe and no one gives a shit, but in America you burn a flag and it's all over? It's because the flag is the nation. There was no nation. America is one of the few countries where the state precedes the nation. Then you have to create narrative around the state in order to give legitimacy to the state. But it's even more extreme, because of course it was not a tabula rasa. All these people came over and slaughtered the people who were there, so they had to create not just narratives to invent themselves but also to cover up a sort of an epic crime that had occurred. The victors write the history. In a certain way I'm reminded a little bit of Ireland where you had a country which spoke one language but had another language imposed on top of it and therefore you had writers who had this very ambivalent relationship to the language in which they were speaking: I'm speaking the language of my oppressors. They built powerful satirical structures in order to turn the language of the oppressor against the oppressor. That was something that never really quite happened in America. Which is why satire is a relatively new and awkward beast in America but the sentimental narrative is incredibly powerful, whether it's Whitman or Hawthorne. It's why

these sentimental narratives, which are kind of a *Bildungsroman*, or an alternative, are so powerful I think.

Maarten Asscher – A microphone here please.

Livia Manera – I'm a literary journalist and author and I would like to raise a very pragmatic question. It seems that we all know what fiction is and then when we talk about non-fiction we talk about a galaxy that has so many shades and differences. Well maybe that is a problem that we should address here. What I mean is that to me it seems these days that we really need a new category: fiction, non-fiction, narrative non-fiction. That would help very much define certain things and give authors a bigger chance to be read. I will make an example of two. Oliver Sacks is read by everybody, and this is because he started on *The New Yorker*, the kingdom of narrative non-fiction. If he had written his books not having published for *The New Yorker* he would have ended up in bookstores in the scientific sections and he would never have had the readership he had. Same thing for Emmanuel Carrère. He was a very well-known novelist before writing *Le Royaume*, but today *Le Royaume*, without his past, could have ended up in history of religion and been really not appreciated by the readers, the critics, no one. Why am I so concerned? I don't want to compare myself with those two writers, but I've just written a book of narrative non-fiction: it's a collection of eight portraits of writers but also memoir; they're written like short stories although everything in them is true. Well, right now it's in the new releases, so it's in the front of the bookstores. Soon it will leave that place. I already saw it's going into literary criticism, which it's not, and it's going to be killed. No one will read it. So thinking about these things, I thought: well, this narrative non-fiction is so important, why are we all here talking about it today? Because it is a very, very strong trend. Why not recognize it and give it a special place in the bestseller lists, a special place in the bookstores and a special place in the literary prizes too? I think it deserves it.

Maarten Asscher – Okay, but what then according to you is non-narrative non-fiction?

Livia Manera – Well, it's essays. It's what we call *saggistica* in Italian. So you have more specialized non-fiction that is going to be

reviewed by specialists, like the lady was saying happens in Germany all the time.

Maarten Asscher – I think the matter is more complicated than this. If you look at *Best American Essays 2014*, edited by John Jeremiah Sullivan, you will find at least half of the essays in that volume are what in the Netherlands would be considered short stories. It's incredible how these cultural differences can...

Livia Manera – That's why we need the new category, because it's inclusive of what you're saying and what I'm saying.

Maarten Asscher – And if I may make another objection as a bookseller, most books are found nowadays on the internet, in webshops, websites of bookshops, in blogs. Do we need all these refined categories? Are these not categories from the old days when you had one corner for this category and another corner for that?

Livia Manera – We do. We do because otherwise, as I said, we'll find Carrère in history of religion.

Maarten Asscher – Neil, what do you think of this proposal? Narrative non-fiction as a separate category.

Neil Belton – Difficult. The separation could be... I think it would mean that certain works were recategorized as merely boring, worthy and scholarly, which I think would make a lot of people very unhappy. You know for me this point about the ways in which German historians have to make their academic bones first – this also applies certainly in England and America as well and I think there is something good about that, there's a kind of filter through which historians, for example, have to pass to show that their work is rigorous and has been peer reviewed and they can handle sources before they cut loose and begin to give us the pleasures of narrative non-fiction. I think it would be very difficult.

Grégory Martin – I think also that if you as a narrative non-fiction writer want such a classification, then some traditional fiction or non-fiction writers may not desire it because they may say: I'm too serious. They may write a traditional non-fiction piece and then see it on the narrative non-fiction shelves and say: I disagree, I wrote

traditional non-fiction. So who would decide? That's always the same point. Is it up to the writer? But if I let the writers I work with do their own classification, my imprint would be dead in a few weeks. Because they all want to be in the most literary shelf, the most Pulitzer-prize-winning shelf and so on. So it's up to somebody. Maybe it's the bookseller. I think the booksellers are the best judge, because they know the market, they know all the books that are published and they know who buys them. I remember having seen in some bookstores in France some tables more dedicated to narrative non-fiction and some more dedicated to academic non-fiction. I think it all depends on the booksellers. And I tend to trust them.

Neil Belton – One of my favourite Dutch literary cartoons... I can't now remember... You know the ones I mean, the guy who was... Peter van Straaten, right. Well my favourite is a cartoon of an irate man confronting an assistant in a bookstore saying '*Waarom ligt mijn boek niet naast de kassa?*' 'Why isn't my book next to the cash register?' That is the deepest impulse of any author.

Grégory Martin – The cash desk book is a category by itself, and now we're considering making some false cash desks, just to be able to put some so-called cash desk books next to them.

Maarten Asscher – Nina, narrative non-fiction in German bookstores as a category: how would such books behave in their surroundings next to other types? You would have books about football, about religion, about history, about sexuality which, because they are narrative non-fiction, would all go in one category. Is that an attractive idea?

Nina Sillem – I don't think so. Probably our marketing people would like it and they would surely like a third bestseller list for narrative non-fiction, that would be a good idea for them, but I think it's too difficult. As you said it's so difficult to really know for each author where to put him and I think they have the biggest potential as general non-fiction. I think it would split up the non-fiction too much. Non-fiction is so sophisticated. It's true as you said that it's a big galaxy, but to split it up into small slices narrows the approach for authors.

Maarten Asscher – And you said, and I think rightly so, that non-fiction is mostly bought on subject as a criterion, not so much on authorship or style.

Nina Sillem – So that's then the extra-bestseller shelf. Can we have this too?

Maarten Asscher – Well, you can watch film or TV with a second screen, so perhaps you could. A second text. I would like to... Sorry, yes.

Jannah Loontjens – Actually I was intrigued by Marco's remark when he said that there is a book and it's based on a true story, on his life, but it's sold as a novel and everyone knows, maybe, that it's non-fiction but nobody would dare to say so. I thought: this is interesting, because I remember in the eighties, and still in the nineties I think, if a book was said to be autobiographical that was not meant as a compliment. There was still this idea that a writer was this genius who had to have this brilliant imagination and if you based it on your own life it wasn't as interesting, whereas now if it's autobiographical it sells well. So truth sells now and this is really a change. I was wondering: is that how that's working in Italy or in other countries? Because it's, well, I think it's a clear development in the Netherlands.

Marco Vigevani – No, to Maarten Asscher as a bookseller, what I would really like to see in a bookstore is in big writing on the wall: 'Stories are everywhere, not only in the novel section.' This is also a way of responding to narrative non-fiction. But another very short point in response to what Christiane Burkhart said about Saviano, which is that I think it's very interesting about the pros and cons of very good narrative journalism, because Saviano is a very intriguing narrative. It's a book that has reached a million or more people. I was the publisher at Mondadori of several books on the mafia that sold a maximum of 100,000 copies when the mafia were murdering people on the streets, but Saviano has sold millions. Why? Because the narrative is a great narrative, but at the same time it's a narrative scarcely based on facts, so you can't really... Saviano gives a fantastic narrative of the Camorra and the mafia but it's a narrative that is imposing its, how can I say, its imagination on reality. You can't

start from Saviano if you want to understand how the facts on the ground are. So the Saviano book has brought the mafia and Camorra to the worldwide audience, while at the same time it has falsified, if I can say so, the facts on the ground. And this is a big risk of successful narrative journalism.

Livia Manera – So is it fiction or non-fiction in Italy, Saviano?

Marco Vigevani – Saviano? Saviano is Saviano.

Livia Manera – In the bestseller lists is it fiction or non-fiction?

Marco Vigevani – It's considered... and I don't want to be wrong because it hasn't been recently reissued. I think it was fiction, it was considered fiction.

Maarten Asscher – Anyone else? On this point? Are there writers who are above genres? That is I think the issue now. The introduction of new genres is not applauded by a majority, that is clear, but 'Saviano is Saviano' means there are some writers who are so wonderful, so important, so innovative that it doesn't matter where you place them exactly.

Lieve Joris – I think you can put the two questions together, because the best way not to be forgotten is to be written about very well and then nobody will care about the category. Yesterday there was a prestigious Belgian prize, the Gouden Boekenuil, which was awarded to Marc Schaevers for a non-fiction book he wrote on a Jewish painter during the Second World War, and this prize has gone to fiction writers as well. This book is just going to make its way partly because he got this prize.

Christiane Burkhardt – They make an audience, of course, you know. If you are listed for a prize like this then of course it will be in the papers etc. I want to say something else regarding the categories we were talking about, fiction, non-fiction or whatever. In Germany especially I think it's not only these categories but also of course the big distinction between popular literature, or entertainment, and serious literature. There is a big border still, but I think this is changing because people are changing. I think, well, twenty years ago when I saw an academic person reading an entertainment

novel, nobody would have liked to be seen with a certain type of book. You would be ashamed to read, say, *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Only certain people read that. Nowadays I see as I talk to people that everybody reads everything, so there are not these big distinctions any more. So maybe this has also some influence on opening up the borders between fiction and non-fiction.

Annette Wunschel – I wanted to add that especially in Germany I think we need the distinction between *Belletristik* and *Wissenschaft*, and in between *Sachbücher*. There has been a big dualism of *Geisteswissenschaft* and *Naturwissenschaft*, and the history of these categories makes them forceful in a way. They define rules of writing on both sides. So if you write a novel, before, it's changing as you say, but some time ago if you wrote a novel, in Germany, you never should appear yourself, never be visible in any way as an author. You had to be extremely closed, a closed fictional cosmos. One appearance of the author destroyed it. So for Germany it was impossible to have travel literature, it didn't work, or certain types of autobiographical writing. The author had to be absolutely absent. And also in a way that is so of natural historical writing. On one side you had pure truth, objective facts, and this created the need for non-fiction as a mediator. But I think what is changing is indeed that it is not booksellers or someone on this level who decides on the categories of non-fiction or fiction. What's changing is the science scene. The *Geisteswissenschaften* are changing completely and also the *Naturwissenschaften*. And the *Geisteswissenschaften*, there you have now more strong cultural history, which creates writing on history which is more factual, and in the natural sciences you have new ways of communicating or what are called *Visualisierung* and *Darstellung*, facts which create a different kind of talking about them. It's on that level that the changes are made, which drop down to the book market. So it's not the bookseller who sets the categories.

Nina Sillem – But a big thing has really changed because, as was mentioned before, because of the media and what people are used to seeing and reading. So for example you have these TV series and these documentaries. For example that's probably why memoirs are more popular now, because the documents and the facts in the books have changed too. It's very common now to use these kind of

ego documents. That's quite new, in the last ten or fifteen years, and I think this has changed a lot. Before it had to be the big topic written by the big historian, now it's much more cut down to a group or to individuals, and they're using diaries and letters and so on. I think this has really changed, because they're accepted now as sources and facts, and of course they are always subjective. I think that's changed too.

Maarten Asscher – Okay. Yes, please.

S. Anand – This is not about this genre business, to go back to what Neil earlier said about inserting a certain kind of stylistic truth. I've forgotten the name of the book, something that you published in 1995 and continues to sell, continues to move people.

Maarten Asscher – Eric Lomax, *The Railway Man*.

S. Anand – Yes. So you have decided to reveal today, maybe you've done it before now, that you had an active role, your name doesn't appear on the book, and I've been guilty of a similar crime a couple of times where you help the author, you save the author from himself sometimes. You say: there is a great story here that needs to be told, but it's not being told well enough in an engaging way, so you bring in this thing. Does it help that you're a writer yourself when you do this and where do you begin this disclosure? You did give examples of several famous names who didn't write what they claim to have written. So where do you draw the line? I'm sure this happened over the years and sometimes we know because you say so, otherwise... How would the author react to your saying so?

Neil Belton – Well, I mean the fact that I ghost-wrote Lomax's book has been an open secret in English publishing for a long time. I thought it was interesting to give it as an example, but it's the only time in which I've... That was the only occasion on which I actually crossed the line between. I've heavily rewritten many books in the course of my career and improved the author's style that way. It would be indelicate to mention many of them here, but the Lomax case is the only one in which I've made the transition from editor to ghost writer. The story haunted me and I saw a possibility in it, working with him and triggering him over a period of months, and yes, it still makes me uneasy because this was a book that was

winning prizes. As I was saying to Haye Koningsveld earlier, there was one major prize where the jury was well aware of my role in the composition of the book and had agonized debates on whether it was correct to give it the prize. They ended up giving the prize to the book in any case, because they were giving the prize to the book. It was very strange moment. But I think this whole business of ghost writing has now become an industry in itself. We haven't really spoken about it yet, but Haye made the point about the Zlatan Ibrahimovich biography, which has some unusual literary qualities which may not be those of the football player himself. And there is a kind of tolerance among readers for a certain kind of 'as told to' prose, where the role of the ghost writer is transparent on the page. It's almost become second nature just to accept it. But in other cases, where the literary qualities come from ghost writing, then I think it's slightly more problematic. It makes for a much more pleasurable reading experience but it does raise other issues.

Maarten Asscher – I was wondering: have you spoken about the Lomax case with fiction editors among your colleagues? Because I think in literary fiction it is not totally uncommon for an editor in a publishing house to have a very marked, very influential role in shaping a book, in conceptualizing a book, in reorganizing a book and perhaps even in re-writing or writing a book.

Neil Belton – Yeah, there are famous cases of course, especially in American publishing. The role of Gordon Lish, for example, in the work of Raymond Carver and the case of Thomas Wolfe, of course, and Max Perkins, the great editor of the 1930s. No, the notion of pure fiction, a pure emanation of the Flaubertian creator, is complicated by this.

Maarten Asscher – The thirty thousand dollar question is: why should this influential role, this co-shaping role of the editor, why should that be a problem in non-fiction if it is not considered to be a problem in literary fiction?

Neil Belton – Yes. You've just relieved me of an ethical dilemma.

Haye Koningsveld – I was actually going to say that for the public, I think, this role of the editor in fiction is not as much recognized as in non-fiction. I think ghost writers are accepted by the general

public in political memoirs, in sports memoirs, Keith Richards or whoever, whereas particularly when it comes to prizes, if it were to come out about the winner of a big literary prize that the book had been ghost written by someone else, the authenticity of the authorship would be a big issue. That would raise the question I think in non-fiction. In your case I could hear your frustration about *The Railway Man*, about not being recognized and the book winning prizes. Should we maybe put the ghost writer up? Should we maybe think that apart from memoirs also in other subjects, such as the scientists Nina was talking about, who have the great knowledge of the subject but don't have the writing skills, should we acknowledge the role and the credits of ghost writers more in non-fiction? And maybe later in fiction as well? The interesting thing about Zlatan's ghost writer, David Lagercrantz in Sweden, is that after having ghost written Zlatan's book fantastically he's now becoming the ghost writer for Stieg Larsson's next books. I wonder if that will win any prizes.

S. Anand – The Larsson I guess is a question of cashing in.

Maarten Asscher – One more there.

Christiane Burkhardt – I think it's interesting because we're now looking into the subject of the sort of production of those non-fiction or whatever books and Nina Sillem said earlier that maybe the audience is more interested in the topic than in the author when it comes to non-fiction, but I would like to know, from the publisher's point of view: if you are looking for a certain topic, then it is often the case that you commission some journalist or whatever. You're looking for someone who can write about this topic, so it's sort of a book on commission, isn't it sometimes? How often does this take place, or is it more that the authors come to you with their manuscripts and then the book is bought or not bought?

Nina Sillem – As I said before, I have the feeling that it's getting more difficult doing these books, asking a journalist to write on a topic, that's what we see, so we're doing much better with books written by the actual scientists, and there are only a very few of them. One very good example is Cédric Villani, 'The Living Theory'. I mean that's for us really exceptional. We do Lisa Randall, the

Harvard physicist, so it's really hard core science. And also of course the fascination that a woman writes a book like this. But I think these books have a far better market now, and I have a feeling that the time of these journalists' books is getting harder and harder. That's what we see from our sales.

Christiane Burkhardt – But the role of the editor is pretty big then, in those books that scientists are writing?

Nina Sillem – Yes, when scientists are writing the book. But I mean, if you mention the ghost writer I think the next step will be my profession, the editor. That will be the consequence, anyway.

Maarten Asscher – Isn't it completely accepted in, say, science publishing or academic publishing that people have research assistants, have PhD students doing all kinds of groundwork and also the whole tradition of fact-checkers. These are all helping genius to perform what genius should do. Perhaps the whole idea of the lone person sitting in a closed study and shaping the wonders out of pure imagination has, at least over the past hundred years, never been true.

Nina Sillem – But I think it's changing. For example with Cédric Villani I think it's very clear in his book, from all the emails he wrote to his friends, the talks he had with his colleagues, because that's exactly what he wanted to show. Of course he's number one, but he wanted to show that there's not a genius, it's always a team. I think this is changing, but to mention too many authors or ghost writers or people involved in one book would be difficult for marketing the book, because I think there's a longing for an author or someone who stands for it. I think probably it would work for a science book if you have a famous scientist and a well-known writer, then it would work as a duo. But I think that the farther from that it gets the more difficult it gets.

Maarten Asscher – Well there is a parallel here perhaps with the film industry, where every film is a collective work but there is one person who is held up as the supposed creator of this collective work and that's the director, but there are thousands of other people involved, without whom this collective work could never be produced. Perhaps we are moving, in complicated writing projects

and research projects, towards a similar fiction of authorship, or is that going too far?

Grégory Martin – But the problem is that we have far less money than the movie industry. How would you pay all these people? That would be a problem. We rely on the goodwill of everybody and sometimes the PhD student you mentioned a few moments ago is unpaid because it is for the diploma. We totally rely on the goodwill of the people.

Maarten Asscher – I remember that I once told an American publisher of a very well-known and highly successful Italian novelist that the translator she employed, without her knowing it, had six assistant translators at his disposal to help him meet the incredible deadline she had set for him. You're a translator yourself. In the Netherlands it has become totally acceptable for the work of one author to be translated by four or five or six people who supposedly work in one auctorial voice.

Grégory Martin – Yes, but I fear the quality may not survive if you have several translators, on that precise point of translation. I did some translation with other translators on journalistic pieces and I think it would be horrible to do that with narrative non-fiction, because as I said earlier the story is staged in the writer's mind and you need it to be staged in the translator's mind, and if you have several minds, you will have several of them staging the scene. Maybe it will be awful, because you will have several non-fiction narratives in a single book. So I fear for the quality and want to have only one translator.

Maarten Asscher – Okay. Well tell that to all Dutch publishers.

Grégory Martin – I can take them into training in Paris.

Maarten Asscher – They will gladly come to Paris. Richard.

Richard Nash – It seems around this particular area of the singularity of expression that there are at the moment two currents that are pushing in opposite directions, one current which you kind of hinted at a little bit, which is that there is a desire for a heroic figure, around which worship may occur. You see it in things like

sports, in politics, business, the heroic CEO, and the economics of it also flow that way, with a sort of winner-takes-all economics where, especially in the United States, you see a handful of movies and a handful of books become the things that get twenty, forty, fifty million individual units sold and a much, much, much longer tail. So there's that kind of winner-takes-all, hit-driven thing that is centred typically around a sense of an individual. But this opposite direction, like with the movies, like with video games, like with electronic dance music, mash-up culture, where the cultural artefact is an expression of a subculture of perhaps tens of thousands of people. I don't know quite where our society ends up, but I've kind of heard here two distinct cross-cutting trends without us being very clear as to which wins and why.

Maarten Asscher – And the first trend you describe, is that the original world of fiction and the second is the non-fiction way of the world?

Richard Nash – Possibly, yeah. I mean certainly the first thing begins with the invention of genius. Genius is a relatively recent invention. It used to mean a sense of a place, right? In Roman times the genius meant the spirit of a location that could be somewhat personified, but in the eighteenth century it starts to get situated within individuals, and ironically copyright and industrial modes of manufacture support that. There's one historian who argues that in many ways a lot of the arguments of the German Romantic writers had to do with the fact that there was no copyright in Germany. They were building a moral case for copyright as opposed to a business case for copyright, because there were nine hundred entities all engaged in mercantilist efforts to pirate the works of the printer in the other city or in the other province, whereas Britain and France had singular state entities that could enforce a copyright in a way that was beneficial for the whole country as opposed to pirating other people's work. So that did drive, both in an economic and in a cultural sense, the idea of genius. But it also suggested that the thing was provisional, that societies can flow in other directions, more like an Asian view of a decentred individual and a more collective form of cultural expression.

Marco Vigevani – May I just say that I think that an author as a central altarpiece, let's say, has still a long future, a great future. Not only because as an agent it's easier to represent one author than many authors, this is a personal problem, but also because it goes back at least to Roman times, as you say. Some say that the first narrative and the first author of a narrative in the Western world is St. Augustine, *Confessions*. Is it fiction or non-fiction? It is fiction because it's an old way of fiction; it's non-fiction because it's a work of philosophy. So the closeness of fiction and non-fiction is so entrenched in our history that it's very difficult to separate them. That's also why we now see so many works of non-fiction being narrated from an ego point of view. I think it's really at the origin of the Western narrative.

Maarten Asscher – Good. Well, I think some light is already shining on our morning's proceedings. It is clear that the line between fiction and non-fiction is not at all a line, it's perhaps even a very broad stretch of creative writing that, depending on one's outlook, is more taken up by fiction, by fiction-writing techniques, or by facts and by investigative approaches from the non-fiction side. We will continue this conversation after lunch and I would like very much to thank Neil Belton, Nina Sillem and Grégory Martin for their contribution this morning and give them a warm applause please. Maarten, are there any practical things to be said about lunch?

Maarten Valken – I will open the doors here and just go straight on.

Maarten Asscher – I had dinner in the Four Seasons restaurant, of course, in New York, because when you're in New York you should let yourself be treated by other people to a proper dinner, and the recurring theme of the man serving us our dinner – he was an Italian who called himself the Captain of the Four Seasons – was: 'Every door is open, sir.'

Friday, May 1, afternoon

Reportage: compelling stories and confidence tricks

Maarten Asscher – Right, welcome back everybody, after I would say a lovely lunch. I especially liked the fictional desert, very good, compliments to the kitchen. I take great pleasure in welcoming our

two keynote speakers for this afternoon's session, with whom I and you will then discuss their talks further, and in the first place it's wonderful finally to be able to present Lieve Joris to an audience. In the distant past I've been her publisher, I've written about her books, I consider myself to be her friend, but I've never been able to present her to an audience so: ladies and gentlemen, here's Lieve Joris. You, Lieve, have written about at least half the world, about the Gulf States, about Hungary, about Syria, about China, about the Congo, about Mali, and not as a travel writer but as a writer. That's probably one of the things we will be talking about, about the genres, and travel writing is a very interesting case in point here. Your books were published originally in Dutch, but then in translation in at least eight other languages, and I'm very happy that you are here.

Lieve Joris: Creating truths

Lieve Joris – Thank you. I'm going to read a little story, and I hope it will shed some light on the discussion we're having here today.

In the late nineties I was following a military show trial in the wobbly period between two wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo when I met the main character of what was to become the most trying book I ever wrote. I'm a non-fiction writer at heart and all through my career reality has been my material, but this book took me down the slippery slope between fiction and non-fiction. I thought this might be an appropriate moment to share some thoughts about this experience with you.

Assani – as I would call him – was in his early thirties when I met him. He was a half-orphaned Tutsi soldier from the high plains of eastern Congo who'd helped the old Kabila overthrow president Mobutu. But as it often goes in those young countries, the revolution Assani had hoped for had failed to materialize.

He was a village boy and he used an image from way back home to convey his deception. In the high plains, he said, they used to burn the savannah grass in the dry season, but they could never burn it all off because the ground under the grass would still be damp. It was the same with Kabila's war, he said: it had only touched

the surface; the roots were unaffected. He believed the regime was heading for a monumental crash.

His predictions proved accurate. A few months later Tutsi rebels were lynched and burned in the streets of the capital Kinshasa. I couldn't imagine Assani surviving this. But he re-emerged a thousand miles away, in the east of the country, and rose to become one of the most important soldiers of the new rebel movement. Five years later the country was reunited and Assani was appointed as a general in the national army.

When I came home and sat down to write, I evoked the moment I saw Assani for the first time: an enigmatic, suspicious man, who just under the surface seemed vulnerable, full of grief, eager to tell his story. I'd travelled to the austere landscape of his childhood where growing up without a father meant being unprotected; I'd become familiar with his adult difficulties in a country where Tutsi were seen as foreigners; I'd found out he wasn't only a victim, but also a perpetrator.

Some periods in his biography remained misty, but I'd reached my limits exploring them. Even though a so-called peace had come about in the DR Congo, deep down things weren't quiet. It had been too risky to step into certain fermenting puddles of that post-war marshland, but I was confident I'd be able to write my way around the holes.

Five months into writing, I was ready to throw my first hundred pages into the canal in front of my house and jump right in after them. The years I'd been following Assani, feeling one layer after another yield, had been so exciting, but the writing was tedious, redundant. His life story had been burning in my hands; now it felt cold, dead, out of reach.

One afternoon I went for a ride with a colleague and described the days of anguish when a third rebellion had broken out and Assani was stuck in the capital Kinshasa, a general in an army he didn't feel loyal to anymore. 'I can see him,' I said to my friend. 'He's lying on the floor in his living room, the air-conditioning isn't working, he's ready to go back to the bush...'

‘Why don’t you write that down,’ my friend suggested.

The next morning I wrote: ‘He couldn’t bring himself to stand up, so he stayed where he was, lying on the carpet, huddled up with his eyes shut. Suddenly he remembered the title of an essay he’d been asked to write for the state exam in high school. In big letters on the blackboard in the study hall it had said: If you go forward, you die; if you go backward, you die.’

By peeling off the observer, the material became alive, it was shining again. But writing in the third person has its own rules. I had to create a stand-in Assani would confide in; I had to make him act in situations I’d researched in detail but hadn’t always witnessed. After a second fit of despair, I moved to a Belgian monastery, where old monks sat praying so as to keep me from falling into a dark pit.

When the book came out in the Netherlands, I wrote a prefatory note, saying: ‘This book is based on real characters, situations and places, without ever coinciding with them completely.’ It was a way to tell my readers what I’d done, as well as an attempt to protect Assani. I’d stepped out of the fermenting marshland, but he was still in it. If his superiors summoned him, I wanted him to be able to say: ‘Yes, I know this woman, and yes, parts of her book might be inspired by what I told her, but the man she depicted is not me.’

My French publisher called it a *récit*, a story. The Americans had bought it as non-fiction, but when they saw the translation they were at a loss and asked me to write a preface, to explain what I’d done. A publisher’s note said my book fell, and I quote, ‘into a category – literary reportage – that doesn’t have an established tradition in the United States’. That came as quite a surprise to me. At school I’d been bombarded with the terms ‘New Journalism’ and ‘Creative Non-fiction’, and I’d always felt greatly indebted to American non-fiction writers.

The Rebels’ Hour was my third book on Congo. I was on the inside looking out when I spotted Assani. By writing in the third person, I was shedding an old skin – the outcome was maybe somewhat raw.

Philip Gourevitch and Mia Farrow put it on their list of favourite books on the region, I received a kind letter from John Le Carré, a US Foreign Service officer called it ‘a powerful book, one of the best on the Congo’. But in the end, the book sat a bit uneasily, especially with reviewers in the US and Canada, who didn’t know Central Africa nor my earlier work and didn’t have any reason to trust me like my European readers did. The ‘non-fiction police’ were at work: instead of reading the book, they read the prefatory note, the preface and the publisher’s note. Without the perspective of the narrator, a reviewer complained, the reader was set adrift. Literary reportage had become a tough sell in a post-9/11 world, someone pointed out, where questions of invented truths had had serious political consequences. The story didn’t read as a novel, a third reviewer reproached me.

I’ve written twelve books; *The Rebels’ Hour* was number nine. It’s the child that caused me the most trouble, which is why it’s probably closest to my heart. While the others were out there playing, this one knocked on my door time and again, crying: ‘Mama, they slapped me!’ Contrary to my other books, it often sets me thinking: should I have written it differently? Could I? But if there is such a thing as truth, it surely isn’t any less true than the others. In rendering his story less specific, Assani became more universal. It might, in the end, be my truest book. Thank you.

Maarten Asscher – Lieve, thank you very much for your honest, I could almost say true story of your *Rebels’ Hour*. Wasn’t there anything in the Dutch response to the book that hinted at the fiction/non-fiction literary conundrums you’ve been discussing?

Lieve Joris – Not that I can remember. It was really the first time it came up, when the book came out in the US. That’s when there was a certain meanness. That had to do with what the book was covered with, with the prefatory note.

Maarten Asscher – And without all those caveats and notices, an author’s note and a publisher’s note, if that had all been left out of the book, would people then have noticed there was something to notice?

Lieve Joris – Well, I think that the American publisher knew what was coming, or what was possibly coming, and that's why they asked me to... They tried to protect it and somehow you couldn't protect it because there was something out there. It also has to do of course with the fact that the publisher... By the way, Maarten was not my publisher any more, since we're talking about inside things. He wasn't my publisher any more, but he sold the book to America at the Frankfurt book fair. Of course the Americans couldn't read it before they bought it and then they bought it as non-fiction, and when they saw it they saw that some things had happened to the material. And I think that the reason why in Europe something like that didn't happen is because people had read the two former books, *Back to the Congo*, written in the 1980s, and *Dance of the Leopard*, written just before *The Rebels' Hour*. They were preludes to this third book. It was just as if one part of the second book had been highlighted, and that was *The Rebels' Hour*, whereas in the States *Back to the Congo* had been published a long time ago, the editor had disappeared, he had died even, so it was a long time ago.

Maarten Asscher – Some of your previous books have met with reality after publication as well: your book on Hungary, *The Melancholy Revolution*; your book on Syria, *The Gates of Damascus*. This was different, I realize, but you have experienced before that books that you have written have a sort of echo in reality after publication. One could see that as a problem, one could also see it as a compliment to the relevance and the liveliness and the actuality of what you write and how you write.

Lieve Joris – Well, yes, it's real people, as I always say. They are in the book but then their arms and their head and their foot are sticking out and the book is somewhere in the middle of them. It's alive and when you publish it in another language something else happens with it. For instance when *The Rebels' Hour* was going to come out in French, the rebel whose life this book was based on read it in manuscript. In *The Gates of Damascus* and with the Hungary book, the people who are important in the book usually read it as soon as it gets translated, before it's been published. I try to make them read it and even with *The Rebels' Hour* certain small parts were changed. The man I live with said: this guy's got a gun so you'd better be sure that nothing bad is going to happen to you after it gets

published. With the Hungary book, to my great surprise... There was this wonderful family that received me and that I wrote about, because I lived in their house and Hungary was moving. It was '89, and it was a melancholy revolution as I called it in the title, and this was a wonderful family, a young man and his brother and a divorced couple. And the sons – one of them became a cinematographer and the other makes special effects for American science-fiction movies – they somehow were appalled when they saw that they were so many years younger in my book. I'd sent it to them just thinking that they would be so happy, and then I had to change it. I changed the sex of one of the boys, so as to make it... Well of course anyone in Hungary who knows me and knows them knows what had happened, but I had to alter certain things, yes.

Then *The Gates of Damascus*, which is about a young woman I knew when we were both twenty-five. We met in Iraq, and in the beginning of the nineties her husband was in prison for political reasons. I spent half a year in her life and I explain our life during this period, and she of course never asked that someone would write a book about her. Her husband was in prison so we were being watched and I was very much afraid that something would happen when the book came out in French. But then the authorities don't care about those type of books so we were afraid for nothing. But it's true, these books are live material and Dutch is still an umbrella, it's still protected when you're published in Dutch, but as soon as the book travels back to its harbour... Which I think is the most beautiful moment. I can just feel what the book is when the people I write the book about read it, and people from the country I write about. I have been in prison in Congo because of what I wrote in *Dance of the Leopard* once as well. I was in Kisangani, a city in the interior, and as I describe in *Dance of the Leopard*, they didn't have cars at the time, only little bicycles. You would sit on the back of a bicycle on a little embroidered cushion, and I'm sitting on this cushion and I pass by the window of a doctor, who makes an advertisement of the fact that he studied in Greece. I say: well, nobody else in the world would think that was something wonderful, to have studied in Greece. I didn't even write the name of the doctor, but a friend of his got the book and one day I was on a UN plane going from Bunia to Kinshasa, to the capital, and we had to stop in Kisangani. I was taken out of the plane, my passport was

taken, I was brought to this prison where all the windows were broken, so I could still communicate with the outside, which helped me in the end because my friends got me out, but there was a lawsuit against me by this doctor. So sometimes you wish the book to be there but not yourself.

Maarten Asscher – Still, also in the morning we were discussing fictional elements in non-fiction, perhaps more correctly described as literary techniques used in the writing of non-fiction. Especially when you phrase it thus – that you use literary techniques in your non-fiction books – is that something that you would have to apologize for? And when I hear you speak about the non-fiction police, there is an anxiety in what you say that I wish we could shed, because there is nothing wrong here, except that you tell a story. Or is there another source for your anxiety?

Lieve Joris – Well for instance in, let's say, *The Gates of Damascus* it's different from this book because the third-person really has other rules. I remember for *The Gates of Damascus* I arrived in the beginning of the nineties. The First Gulf War had been on and you know as a Westerner you have all these images and then you come to the home of your friend and the first weeks you're just quarrelling all the time, because you have to get rid of the images that you have from back home. She has another way of looking. And I remember when I started writing I was tempted to write about these quarrels. Then suddenly I said: but before making the dish I'm going to break it, so let's not talk about this before, and then I just put it in the end of the book. At the end of the book, when I'm about to go, suddenly we quarrel a lot and that was a more appropriate moment to put it in the book. So in that way of course I don't feel any reluctance to do that, and I have always felt free and I've never questioned that, but with *The Rebels' Hour* what happened was that suddenly they said: oh but if this is a stand-in, who is it? If it's you, then why didn't you say it was you? I must say that while I was writing this little piece I spent two days at my home very depressed, because I was looking at all these reviews again and going through the period of this book travelling into the world and somebody kicking it. But I wanted very much today to explain a little bit how this came about. It was really something that I hadn't planned but it was the only way to do it. And

because I did it that way, suddenly people had questions, which didn't happen with my other books.

Maarten Asscher – Are there other cases, books by other writers that you can link to the case you have described?

Lieve Joris – Well I'm sure that some people here... We're all always appalled to think about what happened to the woman who wrote *The Bookseller of Kabul*.

Maarten Asscher – Åsne Seierstad.

Lieve Joris – Yes, yes. The guy who would just, well, he would be sitting here today and stand up and give his point of view. He turned up at conferences and he sued her I think also. He didn't win, by the way.

Maarten Asscher – No, I don't think he did. I remember such an ugly case at Meulenhoff years ago. We published a historical novel about Athanasius Kircher and in this book there was also the whole *Nachleben* of Kircher with a suspect, crypto-criminal Athanasius Kircher society still active in Germany today. We were promoting translation rights of the book in our booth at the Frankfurter Buchmesse when two of the members of this Athanasius Kircher Society came really to knock the whole booth down. They were so angry that we were promoting this book which put them in such a bad light. So fictional techniques can come back at you, yes.

Lieve Joris – Yes, but I think that it's very important if you really are planning to write about someone at length, that this person from the beginning should know. And of course, for instance this guy in Congo, the doctor who'd studied in Greece, very often people haven't read it. When I was in front of the guy who was suing me he said: how are you going to resolve this problem? What do you do if this happens in your country? So I said, well, we would maybe sit and then go to a café. Ah, so you think one beer will solve the problem? Well it won't! So it's also because people aren't used to it, and I can understand that, they aren't used to having the look of the other on them. It's cruel. I can imagine. The other day I was in France with a woman who was just one sentence in the book. We were sitting with a Senegalese guy and suddenly she said: I'm sure

he was selling drugs in France before. She said: when I read this, oh my God, I was appalled that I'd said something like that. So of course I wouldn't like to be the main character in a book, because then all these things would happen.

Maarten Asscher – You asked yourself just now: could I have written it differently? Should I have written it differently? No doubt you have thought a lot about this. Would there have been alternative ways of treatment that would have fulfilled your literary ambition?

Lieve Joris – I sometimes think: why couldn't I make myself a character in that book? I think the situation was too complex. I was too small, I think, in front of this huge subject, to make myself play a role in it. But later on you think again, and I remember my publisher, who is here as well, saying not only was this a complicated book, I also jump back and forth in time. Recently the book came out in Polish and the man I live with is Polish, and I said: have a look at what the reviewers say. He said: oh, already the situation is so complicated but she makes it even more complicated by jumping around in time. I remember that my publisher at a certain moment said: I'm going to try and make it straight chronologically. I said: you won't be able to. And she looked at it and said: no, I can't. So I don't know. It's the only book that I sometimes think, if somebody would give me two years or something, maybe I could look at it again. But on the other hand it's also a book that taught me a lot and some people have accepted it, so that's alright as well.

Maarten Asscher – What is the most important thing it taught you? Can you phrase it?

Lieve Joris – Oh, well, go ahead and talk to Anand and then I will tell you afterwards. Take some time.

Maarten Asscher – Okay. Don't forget the question. Good idea. Thank you very much Lieve for answering my initial questions and I'm turning to my right to give the floor to S. Anand, who is both a writer and a publisher. Navayana is the name of the independent imprint that he founded together with other people in 2003, and he has published not only books by Indian writers and on Indian subjects but also Žižek, Jeremy Seabrook, a book we discussed over

lunch, on the cheap clothes and the clothing industry across times and across continents, which puts the topical issue of the cheap clothes industry of today in a much richer light. I should say 'S', you taught me to call you 'S'. The floor is yours.

S. Anand: The fiction of facts

S. Anand – I'm Anand, and 'S' stands for my father's name, which as I was explaining to someone I rarely ever had to expand until I made a passport in 2005 when I had to travel to another land. Until then I never had to make a passport or tell anyone what the 'S' stood for. I'd actually like to begin with a song. It doesn't say that I'm a singer in the author bio, and recently I've started adding that I'm a writer. I mean if you sing you're a singer, but I'm not a professional singer. And the book that made me turn to song and poetry again is this thing – Finding My Way - that I've been working on for three years with the artist Venkat Shyam. As you can see, it's a book that says: do you really want to read me? Or: do you really want to be published? Because it's taken a lot of effort and work over three years. And it involved some singing, with which I'll begin and then I'll explain a bit about the song, since we are in the business of truth. It's by a fifteenth-century poet, writer, self-taught person called Kabir. How many of you have heard of Kabir? He's probably one of the most translated poets from India. Tagore gave it a shot in the 1920s. Sorry, bad translations, but he caught the lyrical spirit of Kabir. Robert Bly from the US is very famous for having performed Kabir, he performs it with music; you can catch Bly on youtube. He's a poet himself and he has translated Kabir. There have been lots of people, including Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, who is also a much published poet and translator. There's also the fact that Kabir never wrote a book. So he sang it to people. He's from Benares and the legend is that – there are lots of myths about him; he's contemporaneous with Shakespeare - he sat on the banks of the River Ganga in Benares and sang these songs, which he said were the *truth*. There were followers who picked it up and even today these songs are sung. They're not necessarily in books, but the songs are picked up from people who sing, not from books, and the singers keep changing it. Every time they add a bit of themselves into the song. And they sing it in different ways: classical, what's called folk, what's called popular, and what's called *bhakti* music,

devotional music. I'll turn on a contraption if you don't mind. It's an app.

Maarten Asscher – I want to download that one as well.

S. Anand – Oh it's just an app which is called iTanpura, because it's on an iPhone.

Evi evi seyna batayi satguru ney
Mukh sey kaho nahi jaaye

I'll just quickly tell you what it means. The tune is based on a tune by an itinerant singer from the northern part of Rajasthan, he's called Mahesha Ram, and I learned it by listening to him, I've never met him but and I've heard him live once. And this is a song which begins... It's an upside down world Kabir talks about. 'My true love has...' I translate 'satguru', which literally is 'true guru' as 'true love'. I'm a very faithless translator, I just take what I want from the song and then change it around a bit to suit it to my needs. Mahesha Ram talks about a guru, a true guru, but for me it's true love, because always in the Indian guru tradition there is the authority figure of the guru but you also fall in love with the guru; but the guru is also a fiction, because Kabir never had a guru, and he looked at the sun and said 'that's my guru'. So it's a very different way of perceiving truth. The opening lines of the song in my version are:

My true love revealed to me such signs
I cannot utter them with this tongue of mine
They cannot be captured in these vain lines

So he just establishes the fact that it cannot be described - what he has experienced. Then he goes on to give you five beautiful similes of what truth is like. So first there is a negation, then an affirmation of the truth. The second stanza that I sang says:

In this world of mine
Neither the bounteous earth
Nor the splendid sky
No breeze to caress my face
No water to kiss my lips

In this book only one stanza is used, which is this one: 'In this world of mine, no one dies, no one is born, there is no dusk, there is no dawn, there is no reason, no rhyme, there is no space, no time. Step by single step I reached this kingdom. My soul has climbed to its final freedom.'

So when I met Venkat Raman Singh Shyam... His name is a mouthful, I call him Venkat, Venkat Shyam, he is an *adivasi* artist, *adivasi* in India would translate here as tribal or an indigenous person or aboriginal, and he walked into my office having seen an earlier graphic novel I published using art from that region in central India near Bhopal, about eight hours from there actually, and he lives in Bhopal now. He walks into my office and says: 'Let's make a book about my life.' He has been many things including a rickshaw puller, which is on the back of the book. There was an earlier version I did I remember, where we put this on the front of the cover but later we decided to go for a more abstract cover. And it's still not final, this is a dummy.

So when he walked in and said: we have to write this story, I said: you tell me whatever and then I'll write, you draw the pictures. But it wasn't working. Then I decided to travel with him to his village. He's got an SUV, has an iPhone, latest, he's got more apps than I have on my phone, he taught me to use my iPhone better than I do, and he's a school dropout. Once I asked him: why do you live along this gutter and in the slum? And he gave me an answer which is again a Kabir poem. He kept quoting this poet, Kabir, who is from a place a thousand miles away from where Venkat lived, and it's an oral tradition that he has inherited. He told me the reason for why he still lives in a slum:

Kaudi kaudi maaya jodi log kahe ghar mera
Na ghar tera na ghar mera, chidiya rain basera

I'm just reciting the Hindi to you to give a sense of the alliteration and the rhythms that are there, which makes it easy to remember. Venkat didn't read it in a book, but this book of his life actually ends with the translation: 'Brick by brick you build a house, say it's mine/ The moon does not claim the night with its moonshine.' So you don't claim this is *my* house. So I thought: how do I work with this

guy? He's going to keep giving me these little songs. So I said okay, I'll make this a part of the book. So he started singing me his creation songs from his community, which have been passed on for maybe 2,000 years. I learned those creation songs, started translating them, and this book made me rethink all these things I'd been thinking about.

I've read Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, I've read non-fiction of various kinds. I was very affected by James Agee when I read him, I took a lot of time to read it. It takes a lot of time to read a book like Agee's. And you never are quite done with it. I've been thinking, I became anxious about: how do you write another person's life? I'd seen a lot of writers do it with aplomb and confidence. There are parachute journalists and also 'immersion' journalists, immersion journalism is a term that's now quite commonly used. Agee is an example of that. And when I read Katherine Boo - and this was the time when I met Maarten, which is why I'm here, and I offered a kind of impromptu critique of my unease with the kind of book that she has written. I'll just read a little blurb from Ramachandra Guha, called one of India's foremost historians, author of *India After Gandhi*, which has also been published here: 'More evocative than the finest novel. More insightful than the finest works of sociology.' These are blurb comments, and there's this kind of packaging of the book. And Ram Guha, I must tell you, from an interview he did ten years ago or twelve years ago about Arundhati Roy, he said: 'She must stick to writing fiction. I don't read fiction, but she must stick to writing fiction.' So this is a guy who doesn't read fiction saying that this nonfiction book by Boo is as evocative as fiction.

I've also met a lot of academics who don't normally read fiction who really love Amitav Ghosh. I'm sure he's translated here too, you must have heard of Amitav Ghosh. He's the Indian who is always not getting the Booker, always going there to the shortlist and then coming back emptyhanded, they even gave it to another fellow Indian once. His is another example of fiction writing that almost becomes non-fiction. You know, you never charge fiction with this thing of being something else. With Amitav Ghosh I've always felt that he's actually a non-fiction writer masquerading as a fiction writer, because there's so much research that goes in and he

wants to put all of it in there, and I can only accuse him of a lack of imagination. Because just because you went to a gym and got a tricep you wear a very tight T-shirt and say: can you see my tricep? It's that kind of fiction. (I promised myself after working with Venkat that I'd be very nice to everybody - but that's not me.)

Then it came to the question of how I engage with it, what is my critique of this? This came at around the same time as another book of non-fiction called *A Free Man* by Aman Sethi. It was published by Norton in the US and it was admired by Katherine Boo of *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, which has now become a national theatre play in London at the South Bank. David Hare has adapted it into a stage production. Boo loved Aman Sethi's book, which is about a Delhi daily waged labourer, who goes around doing many jobs, and the protagonist is Mohammed Ashraf. So as a reporter for a national magazine called *Frontline*, working on labour issues, Aman Sethi meets this character called Mohammed Ashraf, with whom he begins to spend lot of time, and then he really starts taking a lot of notes and then he goes to New York and to Columbia School of Journalism. There's this template, which is the way you have to write a non-fiction life, and he tries to do that, he very gratefully acknowledges the help of various people including his editor Chiki Sakar, how she taught him how to shape the book. And it's a kind of a hit book, successful. Like with Agee and immersion journalism, and you do see that Aman Sethi has put himself into the book though it is about Mohammed Ashraf, the protagonist, who eventually in the book doesn't die, but you know he is going to die. He's a dehadi, as a footloose labourer is called.

When I was working with Venkat, Venkat has done all these things: he's been a rickshaw puller, a house painter, he has starved for six days in Delhi, he knows what hunger is in a real sense, a palpable sense, he has survived on chai for six days in Delhi he told me. So I found myself in a big dilemma as to: how am I going to pull this off? How do I do this without really finding myself compromised and feeling gutted like sometimes you feel like going and throwing out whatever you have written; and I had the responsibility of collaborating with this guy. Initially I said: you tell and I'll write and your name will be there and I'll just be there and sign it 'as told to' or something, but it didn't work. At one point

Venkat turned to me and said: you've got to be in on this fifty-fifty, in terms of how the book works, what is storyboarding, how you sequence things and how you play with the art and text. And how you make text a part of art. So this was not just text, it wasn't about telling his life, it was about telling an artist's life and about how words can mean more than they literally come to do and how could I write that?

So there is a way that he tells me stories which is laden with myth and fable. He always takes recourse in what his own life is, and he is mythifying all the time and making it a fable. So how do you capture that? And then using songs all the time: Kabir, his own creation songs, other kinds of songs, sometimes fragments of songs. How do you do that? So that is when I realized that it's... I was reading Pessoa at that time, *The Book of Disquiet*, and here was an autobiography told through fragments. You could open it anywhere and you would not get the truth about Pessoa's life. This Kabir song that I sang and translated for you just now, it has a similar perception of truth that Pessoa seems to have. Pessoa believed that writing is an act of failure. He says: 'When I get up from my chair enjoying the sunshine and want to go and write about it, it's gone. The thought which I had is never going to be translated.' You know writing is an act of translation and for him what comes out on the paper is the failure to resist... That's why he wrote under so many pseudonyms. He was initially not sure of what he wanted, how he wanted to present himself. And when he writes an autobiography, again he is kind of elusive. Where is Pessoa in it? He's not going to tell you: I was born here, I did this, I did that. He's just sitting and sometimes describing the jacket somebody is wearing and he makes a big entry and then you move to another entry.

So somewhere along the line I was mixing a lot of things that I was reading and influenced by, and through Venkat and his perception of what a book like this could be, which is where I started looking back at something like Katherine Boo. I'm going to read a short passage from this - I have no sense of time, you'll have to stop me somewhere; the organizers did write to me and said speak for ten or fifteen minutes - there's an author's note at the end of Katherine Boo's book and when I read it I found it quite unputdownable. I just had to read it, and that's what a lot of people

say of the book. Whereas with Agee it's the opposite; you never can read him at a stretch because he's putting himself in and he's asking you: what is it that I'm doing? Why am I here? And these kind of moral anxieties you really need to make a part of the book and ask if you want to put yourself in the book, or how much of that do you want to do? So Boo: 'The events recounted in the preceding pages are real, as are all the names. From the day in November 2007 that I walked into Annawadi and met Asha and Manju until March 2011, when I completed my reporting, I documented the experiences of residents with written notes, video recordings, audiotapes and photographs.'

This is a book about a slum which is very close to the Bombay airport and this is the glitzy Bombay airport which has been redone by one GVK consortium. It's been privatized and they wanted it to look slick so that when foreigners come they feel like they are in the first world, but once you step... even as you land you see the slums which are described in the book. So the title is from a billboard which she saw, an advertising hoarding which said 'Behind the Beautiful Forever's', so that became the title of the book. At one point when she describes somewhere in the book, a late-night fight in a house between a family, I was thinking: how the hell did she know? And she writes it like fiction, the device of fiction is constantly used.

That's when I realized it's like literally putting a camera up people's arses, because you've got a camera fixed there and you want to see what's happening in that house. I found it quite distasteful to be very frank. I'll give you a scene from this where you have that kind of description, page 170. I'm going to read a passage: 'When Sanjay reached Dharavi, his fourteen-year-old sister Anandi was making tomato chutney for dinner. She nearly dropped the bowl when she saw the fear in his face. The two were close, and recently, in rare possession of disposable income, he'd had her first initial tattooed next to his own on his forearm.' So this is the brother tattooing the name of his sister on his forearm as a gesture of love. 'Anandi often chided him that any brother who loved his sister as much as he professed to would come home more often. But their sixty-square-foot hut was too small for three people and Sanjay liked to be near the airport. He said it made him feel he had a chance

to get away. Sanjay took his sister's hand and, as they sat knee to knee on the floor, told her of seeing a group of men swarm Kalu all at once.' Kalu is a character who dies in the previous pages. "They killed my friend," he kept repeating, "Just threw him off, like he was garbage." So you have this vivid description of the scene, where a sister and a brother are together knee to knee and then the conversations are reproduced. So it's an 'as told to'. But how did Boo see this?

Clearly she did a lot of research, and I'll go back to her author's note and explain to you why it is so problematic for me to be able to read this without really saying: 'No.' 'The gifted and...' She uses a lot of research assistants, she doesn't know the language, she says, and one of the reasons why she says she decided she could do this book was that she ends up tripping over an unabridged dictionary in her Washington DC home. 'I found myself on the floor with a punctured lung and three broken ribs in a spreading pool of Diet Dr. Pepper' - I don't know what that is, maybe it's some kind of a Coke - 'unable to slither to a phone. In the hours that passed, I arrived at a certain clarity. Having proved myself ill-suited to a safe cohabitation with an unabridged dictionary, I had little to lose by pursuing my interests in another quarter - a place beyond my so-called expertise, where the risk of failure would be great but the interactions somewhat more meaningful.' So a little accident in her house makes her feel: I might as well go live in a slum. And she does, for three years. And in this she is aided and abetted by a lot of research assistants, and she names them. And I will unpack the surnames. The question of what 'S' in my name stands for will become more clear then. 'The gifted and generous Mrinmayee Ranade made this transition possible. She was my translator in the first six months of this project, and her deep intelligence, scrupulous ear, and warm presence allowed me to come to know the people of Annawadi, and for them to know me. Kavita Mishra, a college student, also translated ably in 2008. And beginning in April of that year...' So she had a research assistant for four months and then another research assistant who left, the first one left, there's a third one. I wonder why they all left. I don't know. That's not in the book. The third one is Unnati Tripathi, 'a brilliant young woman who had studied sociology at Mumbai University, joined the project as a translator. She was sceptical of a Westerner writing about slum-

dwellers, but her attachments to Annawadians proved greater than her reservations.' So she is giving away something about how people who worked with her had some reservations. 'She quickly became a fierce co-investigator and critical interlocutor; her insights litter this book.' So it describes in about eight pages the process of making the book. Why I am emphasising the surnames of these assistants is because all these three are what you would call high-class Brahmins, who would otherwise have little to do with that slum. So the slum-dwellers would be equally sceptical of a Ranade, which is top-class Brahmin, Mishra, another Brahmin, and Tripathi, which literally means somebody whose ancestor read three of the four Vedas. So all these names are going to be equally challenging to the Annawadi slum dwellers - as they are to you. And there are times when in a note she also says 'they opened up to me in a way in which they wouldn't even open up to their families'. Of course I would not tell certain secrets to my mother which I can tell a stranger absolutely over a drink, but that doesn't mean much as to why they confided in me. They confided in Katherine Boo through all these other named and unnamed researchers. That is all in the author's note.

I'll quickly read to you from Agee on this whole problem. Most of you here will have read Agee. He talks about how he's actually terrified about writing this book and it was rejected and people said: turn this around, you can't write like this. 'It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying, that it could occur to an association of human beings drawn together through need and chance and for profit into a company, an organ of journalism, to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science, of "honest journalism" (whatever that paradox may mean), of humanity, of social fearlessness, for money and for a reputation for crusading and unbiased which, when skilfully enough qualified, is exchangeable at any bank for money...' It's one long, unending sentence, I won't read the whole thing. So here is this anxiety, and whereas quickly in this book by Boo you'll see Amartya Sen, the Nobel-winning economist and Indian writer, saying: 'A beautiful account, told through real-life

stories, of the sorrows and joys, anxieties and stamina in the lives of the precarious and powerless.' The same words which bother Agee a lot, but here in *Boo* there's a certain surety: 2011 you finish your research, 2012 your book is out, you've got the American National Book Award in the non-fiction category 2012, and the chapter is closed. It can become a play, it can become a movie, it can be many things and that is the urban world's perception of slum-dweller reality in Bombay.

There was a critique of this book, a couple of critiques which really ripped the book to shreds and said: this is part of a liberalization agenda, all they want is for these slums to be cleaned up. My problem wasn't that bad. What bothers me are the other compromises here, other anxieties here are of more a moral, political nature. What do you do with these kinds of subjectivities which are involved? It's not as if everybody needs to put themselves in the book like Agee does. Or like Aman Sethi does. Sethi is a character in the book himself - it's about male bonding, the entire book. They smoke joints, they spend time together, they talk about women, they talk about life. And then this is the literary non-fiction thing and I'll just give you one more example of the kind of books that are being written about India. This is about the 26/11 Bombay Taj Hotel attack. *The Siege* it's called. I'll stop after this. 'This minute-by-minute account of the siege comes at you like a battering ram and takes your breath away. With a masterly control of its wide canvas, it marshals a cross-section of guests, security services and heroic Taj staff.' Another blurb says: 'I read it in what felt like three blinks.' So you need this racy, thriller account of a real event and real deaths, and this is done regularly. This is their second successful book based on reality; the first was about the kidnapping of five Western tourists in Kashmir in 1997. It's by Cathy Scott Clark and Adrian Levy and it's called *The Siege. Trapped inside the Taj Hotel. Run or hide*. It's almost like a Hollywood film poster, and it's packaged as a paperback, a trade paperback. They plan everything out as to where to market it, how to sell it, and it's going to be made into a film and it's got dramatis personae, faces, photographs and a short synopsis of their lives. I could read it in a day. I mean, that's a bad thing for me. Thank you.

Maarten Asscher – Thank you very much indeed. Some very interesting and original approaches to our subject I would say, to various subjects even. First of all this last book. Since you spoke about it last it is my first response. If all the marketing crap were left out, you would just have the text as the authors wrote it, so without all these blurbs and the commercial words by the publisher, just from page one to the last page without the advance quotes etc. That would already solve part of your problem.

S. Anand – It wouldn't really, because I didn't read this, what's called a trade paperback, this is easier to carry, so I managed to get a copy of this. The earlier hardback didn't come with that. And they'd already successfully done a book called *The Meadow*, set in Kashmir, and it was a book that deeply embarrassed the Indian government. I was all for that book because it told you certain things about how the Indian government was itself involved in the kidnapping of five Western tourists who ended up being killed, and it looked like the Indian government actually killed them, making it appear that Pakistan-origin terrorists had kidnapped them. So that was a very interesting book for me, but again it used the very devices which it's doing, just because it serves a certain purpose of embarrassing the Indian government it doesn't solve my problem, and when this book came out it was with the premise that they could pull off such a book that this book was marketed from the beginning as it was. And I did read this one as it came out.

Maarten Asscher – What I mean is, somebody has to write the story and then somebody else has to sell it. What would the right, so-called right way be to tell the story about the...

S. Anand – 26/11.

Maarten Asscher – ... about the hotel, the Taj Hotel?

S. Anand – I'm not here to say. I'm not the non-fiction police. I myself am teetering between two sides. I probably occupy this line in between. So for me it's not a question of how else can it be written? I don't know. I really don't have easy answers for that and I purely feel ill-at-ease when somebody writes such a book in terms of: it's fine, it doesn't really humiliate anybody or compromise anybody when you take it at face value, but it's the way it is told, it's

meant to be what it is, like a fast-paced thriller. It's a thriller and it wears the clothes of fiction very confidently in terms of recreating scenarios between a boyfriend and girlfriend before they landed in Bombay, to their death, based on conversations with their parents and so on. You create, we create, we always tell a story when writing, whether writing a small bio for this conference or anything else. We are telling some things about ourselves in 100 words, for instance. So for me the problem is not whether it's written about or not. It must be, somebody had to do this. I only have a proper critical engagement with the finished product. I'm not here to say how it has to be written.

Maarten Asscher – But still I want to try to get to the heart of this. If in your own words you would have to describe what is wrong with the narrative, so without the packaging, the packaging is lousy, I agree, but just the way they recreated the events. Is it too romantic, or is it too emotional, or is it too cinematographic?

S. Anand – Well it is cinematographic in the sense it's like... I'm reminded of what Baudrillard the French philosopher said about the Gulf War, the First Gulf War. He said it never happened, and people were shocked. It's about how much of this reality we see on television actually happened. I usually don't watch television news. It's very, very intimate to go there and show people falling out of buildings, trying to jump out, and it partakes of that sense that we are writing books in a time when there's so much televised reality and subsequently we have so much on internet, twitter, that everybody has a version of it, whether it's a quake in Nepal or it's a terror attack, a surfeit of information, and within that you have to package the story that you have to tell, and they're doing their job and they're doing it because of the genre that has been created, of a certain kind of racy narrative. This has more of a literary ambition, this has less literary ambition – there are various kinds in which they are being written. So I cannot really prescribe a way of doing things. Whether I read it with the packaging... There is no question of my reading it without the packaging. I'm sorry. It comes with the packaging and the content is determined by the packaging and both kind of play into each other. It's very difficult to distinguish or to subject these two threads, for me. The content is directed towards a certain market reality, these days. It's about what can be agented,

what can be marketed, what can be sold in many languages, what can be converted into a... You know people aren't so devious as to sit and think... There are writers who write thinking: this is my brief and I'm going to speak to this market. Increasingly I think, and especially with writing courses... Fredric Jameson wrote a long essay in about 2010 about what writing courses have done to the imagination, like the Iowa writers' programme. Most creative writers in the US are teaching creative writing and by now they are all the products of creative writing courses, and so it's a certain way in which openings have to be done, a certain way in which narrative has to be, how you write a short story. You're taught. I'm not saying these can't be taught, that they can't be learned, but once you have an over-production...

Maarten Asscher – Or there is probably a mimicry, a sort of conditioning of the imagination by the medium and the dominant medium is the visual medium. You are to be congratulated that you don't watch television.

S. Anand – I've given it up.

Maarten Asscher – But that is probably part of the problem. If you watched more television you would probably be less offended by the packaging. Because of the packaging is for the TV audience.

S. Anand – It's for the TV audience too, yes.

Maarten Asscher – You talked about two types of journalism: parachute journalists and immersion journalists. Can you elaborate a bit on that distinction please?

S. Anand – Well I have been a parachute journalist myself, because of my work with a magazine and a newspaper earlier, so there is something that happens. You go there, very quickly you try to assess things. Everyday reporting is parachute reporting. Suddenly the *Washington Post* correspondent lands in Kathmandu and then writes up things about a country they've never been to and which they don't totally understand, but you need copy within six hours, so you're writing that kind of fast-paced stuff. Most television journalists also do this, land somewhere, thrust your mike in someone's face and ask: 'How are you feeling?' After an earthquake.

So that is the kind of parachute journalism, and I was somebody who was a print journalist for about ten years, first at a desk and then the field. You fix things at the desk, because at a desk you basically rewrite, so that it sounds like in 380 words and a front-page anchor you managed to tell something which interests the reader to finish, to read all 380 words and not just read the blurb. So I have been there, done that, and then I started getting restless about how really compromised that was. For instance, even if I took a week to report when I was with the magazine, and sometimes I had the luxury of ten days, even then when the subject you are talking to says: 'What are you going to get out of it?' In rural India when I go out and say I'm a reporter, people would say: 'Oh, you're going to write about this.' They think you're a government official, they don't even understand what *Outlook Magazine* is, they've never seen it in their lives. *Outlook Magazine* for which I worked sold two hundred thousand copies at its peak, but India is a country of over 1.2 billion people and people don't read English necessarily, so you're constantly meeting people who are asking what you are doing there. And you're asking: what happened exactly, how did that person get murdered? And they ask you: how much time do you have? With Venkat that is the thing. I took three years and it's become a friendship, it was like not hurrying. He would say let's drink some local brew, local liquor, it's pure undistilled *mahua*, as it's called, it's taken from the flowers, and we would drink and he would say let's smoke a joint and I would say yes, let's do it, and so then the stories come. So I realized that I had to sit and let him talk, sure, talk nonsense and then come certain things. That is the kind of camaraderie I had to establish. Some people ask me: if it had been a woman would it have been like this? And I say: I don't think so, I don't know, I didn't yet work with a woman who wants to tell me a story. But there are things which happen and things which don't happen and this book is about that. So for me this is not journalism, which I have done, this is him telling his life through what he thought was a 20,000-year-old history that he represented.

Maarten Asscher – Would you say that parachute journalism, that's your second category of journalism next to immersion journalism, is perhaps more non-fiction literature, or narrative non-fiction?

S. Anand – You could say that, because Katherine Boo's also doing what is immersion journalism, and Aman Sethi's doing it, what Agee did with the Alabama sharecroppers was that, he stayed there, spent time, but for me the real issue is there's always the return, you're never going to live there, you're never going to be a sharecropper, unless it's like under the Chinese Maoist revolution where you go there and become something else, by force, by the terms of the state. Here it's a choice. You are relatively bored white man, which Agee was, and you have serious issues about art and how writing has to happen, then you go there and you go through a whole lot of things about what is the purpose of life and of course you die very young. Too much of that.

Lieve Joris – You have the return ticket.

S. Anand – Aman Sethi always had the return ticket. Katherine Boo knew when she was going back probably.

Lieve Joris – And the others know as well that you're going back.

S. Anand – Yes, so you're not there forever.

Maarten Asscher – I would very much like to hear Lieve Joris about the immersion, but we'll leave that for after the tea break if that's okay with you and then we have a cliff-hanger. I'll see you back in fifteen minute please, thank you very much.

Discussion

Maarten Asscher – Welcome back again everybody. S. Anand was talking among many other things about Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet* and he was saying that if you open this book at any given page you will never get at the truth about Pessoa's life. I would like to ask Lieve Joris, to start with, in a more general sense and speaking to her as a writer who writes about people all the time: is there something like the truth about a person's life?

Lieve Joris – When I said earlier that in the beginning we were quarrelling and I had to just forget, in the Damascus book, I had to somehow lay off the images and the books and the discussions back home, I think that my method somehow helps. Like after three

weeks of being from day to day with her in this small, rather tedious life, the little apartment, going with plastic bags to her mother's apartment and coming back, and finally going to the beach, which was like a big trip with the bus, and then stories, just listening to stories and after some time I really felt I was coming to the inside, but of course that is just coming near. You can't say that that's the story. It's just as near as I could get. I remember when I was five months in Damascus, in the small apartment with her and her daughter. Every month they would go to the prison and come back with his clothes from prison, wash them and then bring them back a month later, and five months after my arrival there was this Dutch Islam specialist, with his wife, who came. He is very tall, a little bit like a Diane Arbus man that came to our house, very big, and you'd look up at him and his wife, and he was looking at me and at Hala, as I call her in the book, and at Asma, and I just feel that he thought: 'What is she doing here, and for such a long time!' And at that moment Hala was taking a book from her shelf and showing him something and at that moment I felt I was on the inside looking out. I could see myself as I came in at the very beginning like an elephant with my two suitcases in this small house, just two people, with a jasmine tree out front and a fig tree at the back, and after some time that had become totally my world. I was in my late thirties when I did that book, but at the end of the street there was this little gang of boys with leather jackets, hanging out, and every time I took a taxi and came back home, one of them who was a little bit more good looking and a little bit more boisterous than the others would say something to me, and you know, I would sometimes hide and not go by there. So I had really become a woman living in a souk in the Arab world. But I went again last year, I visited Hala. She fled Syria and she's in Dubai and we spent two weeks quarrelling again. And one morning she was ironing, on the nineteenth floor in this beautiful apartment in Dubai with all these Syrian refugees who still have some money. She was ironing and she said to me: 'I thought you weren't interested in the Arab world anymore.' I said: 'Why did you think that?' 'Oh, but you made this big trip to Africa and China.' I said: 'But I've come back.' And she said: 'Well I wouldn't want you to write about me anymore.' And I must say that that shocked me a little bit, because she said it even before I really started thinking that maybe I would pick up the story again. But I also - of course, you can't but respect that and you can't steal somebody's story - but I

could understand it also and I think that maybe when I was in my late thirties I was a bit more naive, or I thought a little bit more that there was one truth for all of us. I don't think that it's that way anymore. It's different. I can maybe come close to it, but there are limits, and that's what the Congolese taught me. They know I have a return ticket. Hala knows that as well. She said to me: 'If you want to understand what's happening with Syria, go to a refugee camp in Lebanon or Turkey.' That was really: don't come into my personal life again.

Maarten Asscher – S. Anand, what does it take for a Western writer to immerse himself or herself properly and not become just a Katherine Boo passing by? What does it take? Is it time, is it mentality, is it political interest, is it cultural affinity? What is it?

S. Anand – Not being in the position I find myself in right now, because I sound like a policeman now: what can be done and what can't be done? I really am no judge of this because as I said, even the three women who were interlocutors there, if you are a person of a different class and caste in India and you visited a slum to which you don't normally belong, even then there are these anxieties. Even if you speak the same language, Marathi or Hindi, or the language that Venkat and I share, a kind of a mixed Hindi, even then there are going to be several unresolved issues. So it's not about how much immersion you can do. I'll give you an example I was telling Neil about yesterday. There was a British evangelist called Verrier Elwin who shaped the tribal policy of India. He comes in the 1930s and settles in the village Venkat comes from and he goes on to be naturalized Indian, lives there for thirty-five years. He married a Gond woman who was thirteen, as part of field work. So he did all kinds of things and he has written many, many books, and he was very interested... He was somebody who said he had never seen a woman naked until he was twenty-six years old. Then he comes and sees these tribals who have a dormitory system where young men and women are initiated into sexuality by just lying naked next to each other. So Elwin did field work in 347 such dormitories over five years. So is that the right thing? Is Boo the wrong thing? No. I mean there is nothing like that, there's no way in which you can ever say that if you do these things you can bridge this gap between the self and the other. That is never going to happen. You are you, and

the other person is the other person, and there are ways in which the interaction has to be. Anthropology has always been – and Elwin was an anthropologist eventually – is always about the powerful writing about the less powerful and the powerless. That's how anthropology as a subject came about. So it could be anything, it could be contract writing of fiction, it could be somebody who is doing authentic work, not fiction, and telling you the real story of how the Gonds live. Elwin wrote books about nearly seventeen tribes in India, the Baigas, the Gonds, and he went to the northeast of India and wrote about the tribes there and he became somebody who influenced tribal policy in India, so much that it changed the perception of their own selves, because sixty or sixty-five years of government policy shaped by Elwin's idea would have changed the reality of what it is to be a Gond today. There is so much stuff that Venkat doesn't know about his own ancestry unless he reads, or I read for him, Elwin's books and tell him these are the fables and myths which he collected, because it was an oral tradition, there was never any question of putting them down on a piece of paper until colonial ethnographers came, folklorists, specialists who wanted to record oral traditions. Before that it was a shape-shifting beast. People kept changing the songs according to the times. There would be layers of accretion over centuries, even with Kabir, for instance, until it got bookified, before that it was a free-flowing thing. Now you have something called the authentic Kabir text, which is published. I don't take my Kabir from there. I take it from, let's say, free floating. So this whole question of can a Westerner ever go to a different place... We don't really have the other way round, so Katherine Boo couldn't go to Harlem and employ only white informers to find out about black lives, but she could do that in India. That makes all the difference.

Maarten Asscher – Lieve, you said just now you could come very close to the inside of your real-life character, the woman behind your book's character, but not close enough, or you could not bridge all the distance.

Lieve Joris – I always hoped, because she herself wrote, I always hoped she would have written something about that period. That would have been very interesting for me, but as her daughter said: 'She's a lazy bum.' So she doesn't.

Maarten Asscher – But the question in terms of this conference is perhaps: could the remaining stretch of distance be covered by the imagination?

Lieve Joris – No, because then again I'm in my own imagination. In the sixties when I grew up it was like another world. We thought we could go towards the other and you could be one, and I think that in the times in which we live I have realized that we can't. So I don't think that imagination... Because again, the imagination will be my imagination. It's also about inhibition. For instance, there is a part in the book where Hala told me that she didn't want to marry being a virgin. Those were the days also in Syrian university campuses where they said: I'm not going to be a virgin. And whenever she met a man and thought they might be going to marry she said: well I'm not a virgin, do you want me to repair the hymen? If he said yes it was finished. So she told me this, but to write that down... That is... You can't, you know? In the end I did write it down, but it would be very difficult, because when you look back... As an Arab friend of mine said: the 'I' almost doesn't exist in Arab literature, the memoir, talk about oneself, without inhibition. So I'm the result of my whole tradition and my way of thinking. But I think about how to reach out and to try. For instance with *The Rebels' Hour* it was the same. There was this moment. There is something about him which I don't know, many things I don't know but one thing which I thought I needed to write: I didn't know how he got recruited. He's a student in eastern Congo and then suddenly he crosses the border, he goes to Uganda, he joins the rebel army of Rwanda and he comes back into Congo. And I never knew: was he already a spy – because later on he became a spy – was he already a spy when he was a student? One day I went to Rwanda and I went to the campus where he studied last. I had a big network; I had some people who were going to be able to inform me. We were sitting somewhere and in Rwanda they have this way of looking to the back, they look all the way around because they are afraid who is listening and suddenly I just sat like a butterfly. I thought if I move I'm going to burn my wings and I'm going to burn his, so I stopped. And in the writing I haven't tried to fill in that period, because it took forty years for us Belgians and for the world to know how Lumumba was really killed and it may well take forty years for me to know exactly how Assani got recruited. So I think sometimes, this void, you should just leave it, as

long as you're aware of it. I can't say I'm Hala, I can't say I've understood her completely because I haven't grown up in her conditions, and when I was younger I thought maybe that was less important than I think it is now. So I completely agree with Anand that it's the people who get out of there or don't come from there who are able to write about it, and that colours the story.

Maarten Asscher – What do you answer when journalists who don't know your work very well ask you: are you a travel writer?

Lieve Joris – I'm a bit unhappy about that. Earlier this morning when one of us suggested that we should have a special category – sometimes in France, for instance, in a Paris bookshop, I will go and look for a book by Kapuściński. Oh my God there are so many places you could find him. And it's the same with my own work. I'm a bit unhappy about it, but for instance in my German and French publishing houses the umbrella under which I often went out was in a travel series. That's alright as long as I can shed that skin at a certain moment. In Holland I'm just Lieve Joris and some people may call me a travel writer but my publisher doesn't frame it that way. I do often travel to be able to write, but I haven't... Sometimes I thought when I was in Syria if a camera could just see how little I move, you know? And it's true, I took a ticket and I am in Damascus but once in Damascus I'm not moving, at four o'clock in the afternoon I have my nightgown on, we're lying on the bed and telling stories and listening to the figs falling from the tree on the terrace. So I didn't move a lot.

Maarten Asscher – It's an interesting question where that negative association with travel literature comes from. Probably it comes from the whole idea of parachute journalism and people just flitting by and making cheap observations and then quickly going back by aeroplane to their Western homes, but there is also, let's say, the immersed tradition of travel writing, where people do take a serious and prolonged interest in another culture. What would you say is the condition of travel writing in comparison with journalism or literature on the other side? Are you uncomfortable with travel literature as such?

S. Anand – Not really. I mean if I were to put this question a bit more historically, some of the best writing on India has been by people who just came, observed and went, and recorded certain things. The first one was Xuanzang, who was a Chinese traveller from the seventh century and he went to Kanchipuram in the deep south; he talked about how Buddhism was being practiced. Then there was Al-Biruni, roughly I think eleventh century, who created this category called India. He talked of people of Al-Hind, those beyond the river Sindhu, as people of Hind, and the word Hindu originally meant a thief, so that's the way that Al-Buruni spoke of these people. So when the right wing say today 'we're proud to be Hindus' it means 'I'm proud to be a thief'. There has been a lot of travel writing, sometimes when a foreigner comes, and I have absolutely no problem with Westerners coming and writing about subjects in India because suddenly when you land in a new place you see a certain reality in a different way, a way that the locals are not able to see. For instance a lot of the untouchable classes in India, the Dalits, have felt that the British colonial experience was about the way they wrote and made laws when they thought there were no laws. The rule of law, the British are obsessed with that and they came and tried to tell people how to establish it there, and they did a lot of ethnographic and anthropological writing and some of them just travelled around the jungles and wrote general books there. There are severe problems with that kind of thing but that doesn't mean it can't happen. It happens and it does open up a new world and a new way of seeing. Are there problems with that way of seeing? Yes. But should there be a kind of a cultural ban on that kind of stuff, is there a correct way of doing it? Well no, no, no.

Maarten Asscher – Lieve, is there for you a difference in your immersion in the lives of real-life people that you want to write about on the one side and the research that any novelist would do for a new novel on the other side?

Lieve Joris – Well I don't exactly know of course what type of research a novelist does, but it's true that there is a moment in which you know: I've got the story now. You do the research and I think that's maybe what the novelist has as well, that you can suddenly can see the story. I remember I once wrote the story of the Malian singer Boubacar Traoré and the first time we met I found out that

whatever I wanted to know about his life he said: no, no, no, I don't talk about this. Then he suddenly said: 'My life story is so painful that the day I will tell you what happened to me you will cry and everybody who will read the story that you will write will cry.' Now, tell this to a writer... So okay, off you go. So tell me the story! Six months later I was just going further and further away because he said he believed in magic and he would, say, go to France and he said: 'I knew this American producer of music and a year ago he said he was very wild about me but this time he didn't even see me.' So he thought they had bewitched him so that he didn't... But I said: 'You know, this is how the Americans are.' He said: 'Oh really, so when I come to Holland you'll do the same?' I said: 'No!' He said: 'You know, if some people have some wisdom about something and their child is too stupid, they will never tell it this thing.' So I thought after a year: I'm not going to get this story ever, and the story I'm going to write is about how I didn't get it. So all the time you're there researching and at the same time you're building the story and then one day I knew. I found out his wife died in suspicious circumstances. And I found out that I should go to her tomb. That's where I should go and maybe when I go with him he will tell me his story. He didn't want to go and then I said: 'Alright, I'll go with your son.' 'Okay, I'll go with you.' And we came and suddenly the story came. So I think it's true that you work and search more. And then we were going to make a trip to eastern Africa, to travel for five weeks and do a whole tour, and he was so proud of this tour and he thought it was going to be in the book. But the truth was already in my head, it was finished, because it ended the moment when he took me to the tomb of his wife and on the way back he told me what happened. And then I knew why he was so unhappy and I was going to make everybody cry. Because he made me cry. So after that the story was finished and the only thing I needed to do these five weeks of travelling with him in eastern Africa was like what a photographer does. You just fix the picture. You say: okay, yeah, that's how he talks, yeah, I'm saying that right. And this is also why after I've written a book I will often go back. For instance if I go back to see Hala it's in the name of our friendship but it's also because I will understand the book better every time I see her and it will help me for the next book to know if my intuition was right, if it's 'in character' as they say. I will make the type of dialogue that Anand is maybe a little bit unhappy about, but it's because for instance this

Malian singer, I could just hear him talk at the end, I just knew if I said this he's going to say that and I'm going to say that. So that's because we've gone through that fifty times.

Maarten Asscher – Thank you.

S. Anand – Just to add a bit to that, I just remembered when I went with Venkat to the place where his whole art begins, it's called Patangarh, it's very picturesque, there's a river flowing there, there's a little green hill and about two hundred families in small places and great food and liquor and other things, so I said: let's stay here for a few days and maybe we can come up with... 'No way! You can't stay here, there's black magic, people are jealous of you and me, you know what will happen, as our car goes we'll just turn over like this, we won't have done anything but we'll die, so let's not take the risk of staying.' I was like saying: what is this guy trying to do? After we were finished most of the book I said: can't we just go back there now that we've done the book, spend a day or two and write the final conclusion or something. 'No no no, my other village we will go, but in that village, that woman you saw, she has a bad eye, if she looks at you she'll cast a spell.' So now I have to completely consider myself a very rational, ordinary person, and an atheist to boot, so when I have a person I'm writing about who fasts on particular days... Why does he do a fast, why does he break his fast with rum in the evening after fasting the whole day? It's not like a proper Ramadan fast, it might be only on Tuesdays. He'll do crazy things, like to make it a part of a book without really sometimes saying that he believed in black magic and the car in which we were riding would just turn turtle. So sometimes travel is also not possible in certain ways even if you want to. The writer decides he's not going to talk about something and with Venkat he talked about his first marriage in a very perfunctory way. He was forced into it when he had cerebral malaria; he was not even conscious. He goes back from Delhi to Bhopal and finally lands in his village like a wreck. He's got cerebral malaria and they give him some native medicine to cure him, and then they get him married to a woman he doesn't even see. That's the way the marriage happened. Then he comes back to the city, doesn't even consummate the marriage he tells me, and then after a year she dies. And news doesn't travel fast. A telegram reached him after three days and by the time he went there everything was over.

But I want to know more. Well, who can I talk to? Sometimes you just let go and you can't really get to the bottom of things all the time, it's not possible.

Maarten Asscher – In our morning session I think Neil Belton and Grégory Martin had a very interesting difference of approach. Neil Belton was speaking about the editor as an interventionist, as someone manipulating or coaching or even ghost writing or participating in the creative process, and Grégory was more talking about, if I may simplify, the publisher as a gatekeeper. With which profile of the editorial or the publishing role can you sympathize more?

S. Anand – Well in this kind of a book I'm in it as a writer, so it's a different project. If I were to talk about this other book, which I did with Jeremy Seabrook about the Bangladeshi garment industry, he's an excellent writer, he doesn't need rewriting or fixing of prose, he's a much better writer than I am, I mean he writes wonderful English prose, but sometimes it needs structure. He wrote it over twenty years, from notes, and sometimes it felt like diary entries, so there was an issue of structure. So I take the author into confidence and I explain – of course Jeremy is probably seventy and he doesn't understand what most editors and authors do these days with track changes on Microsoft Word and we restructure things more, he said he just couldn't get his head around it – so I had to write a huge explanatory note saying this is what I did. But with other authors I'm afraid that some amount of ghost writing I've done for a few books, but I don't see as... The writer can write. In fiction it's different but even in fiction I know a lot of publishers and editors who tell me that they have to... Mulk Raj Anand, one of the foremost writers from India who wrote a lot of books on the coolie, the untouchable – I was told he was extensively rewritten by editors. He's dead and gone, but the editors I met said you had to fix the copy. So this has happened. In a world where so many people want to be writers without really knowing how to be, knowing about the craft, the editor's role does become important. I don't see it as one way or the other between what Neil said and what Grégory said. I would more go with Neil since I have done such things and I don't think there is a line that I draw. Then I couldn't publish a lot of the books that I would love to publish. I have to get in there and say: let's

fix this. If the content is good and there is something to be salvaged there I will work my butt off because otherwise there's no book there. But I wouldn't go to the extent of saying there should be shared royalties for this process.

Maarten Asscher – And Lieve, do you see your publisher-slash-editor more as a creative counterpart or as a gatekeeper?

Lieve Joris – No, my publisher is involved usually quite early in the process of writing, even before the project is born and I start to talk. And not only my editor but there are always three or four readers in the first stage and then even more in the later stage when it's about very specific things like harvesting in a certain part of Congo. I mean I've had historians and different people read. I know that some writers don't do that but I am always very happy to, because I don't come out of a writing tradition, nothing made me become what I am, so I always feel I'm taking my first little steps and should be helped a little bit from left and right.

Maarten Asscher – I don't think that's unique to your method or to a writing method in the genre you work in. We were talking this morning about Flaubert, who for *Salammbô* went to the ruins of Carthage to sniff up the inspiration, who had three or four friends to whom he read all his manuscripts and when they didn't like the manuscripts he threw them in the fire, so between fiction and non-fiction I don't think there is a principle involved here in a working method.

Lieve Joris – I know my publisher works with fiction writers and with non-fiction writers the same way.

Maarten Asscher – Anybody who would like to join the conversation please?

Paulien Bakker – Lieve Joris, I know you knew Ryszard Kapuściński and I was wondering in which way you work differently from his way.

Lieve Joris – Oh, well, I'm another generation, I come from a different background, he's an Eastern European, there is truly a very big difference I think. And I think that at heart he's a poet. In

another society he might have become a poet, but then he found his way out. He often makes me think of a young missionary I met, a Polish missionary on the boat I took to Congo in '85. He had wanted to be a traveller and his mother was so afraid, so he became a priest and then he became a missionary. The destinies of people in the Eastern Europe that Kapuściński grew up in are very different from ours. I think it must have been a great bliss for him to be travelling as an Eastern European in an Africa that was colonized by the West. And he could say: look, my country has been colonized for much longer by the Russians. He's very different I think from Western journalists in general. I met him in '84 before I went to Africa for the first time, so he's been very important for me. We've never met in Africa, but we've met in different places and I've travelled with him to Poland. He's a totally different writer. But if I think of Kapuściński, I was somehow a little bit unhappy sometimes with the way after his death people have written about: is it true, is it not true? I live with a Polish guy so I know what these guys do to the truth, they colour it. My friend calls it that: 'I colour it a little bit.' I'm sure that Kapuściński did that as well. But again, it doesn't make it less true. I also think that travelling for him was a way to write about Poland. In a way that it isn't for me, I think. Even though of course I think that with all of us, even if we are non-fiction and not fiction writers, part of our autobiography is in these books, for sure. But with Kapuściński he told me that when Solidarność came about all the workers had his book on the shah under their arms, because in fact for them it was about Poland. So he's a very different man, which doesn't mean that he hasn't inspired me a lot. He's a humbling man. He was very humble, but he makes one, me, humble too, because he had a great talent I think, for writing especially.

Maarten Asscher – Who else? Yes, please.

Jannah Loontjens – I have a very different question, but it's also about the cultural colouring of truth and actually the fact that you started with a song. We were talking about this during the lunch because it's this idea of truth. You said that the song is actually expressing truth and I was thinking that this Western concept of truth is that something is actually really considered true when it's documented and written down, right? So when you've just heard it, it's not true, you have to be able to refer to a source. But I was

thinking about the fact that actually Western philosophy starts with the opposite, almost, because Western philosophy starts with Plato who claimed that the voice was expressing the truth whereas writing you should never trust, because the writer is absent and you can never know if you understand what the writer meant. So the voice is expressing the presence and truth. But this changed in history with religion, when it was written down and that became the truth, but I was just wondering how these concepts of truth travel, and how... Because you said: oh, I want to start with a song, also because it expresses truth. And I was just wondering: what does this mean for you as a writer also?

S. Anand – Plato ended up banishing poets, right, from the republic, so there was a problem. For me what the song does is about how the truth is unutterable. It begins by saying I cannot utter them with this tongue of mine, I have seen such truths. So it's a negation, saying I can't. Then it gives you the fact he can't help himself. So you're so drawn to what you have experienced that you want to try. Okay I can't, but let me try. So for me the fact that it began with a song was because the song was expressing a certain difficulty of grasping truth and the temptation to which you succumb, which is where I brought in Pessoa by saying I can't really possibly write down what I thought, but okay, it's an act of failure, it's an act of vanity when you finally write, because you think that you will be able to capture something. So you succumb to that. Of course this is Kabir and the other stuff that I'm talking about doesn't really partake of a certain Western idea of any kind of a perceivable objective truth. It's a kind of a shifting thing, and for me in this book what was the real challenge was the challenge of voice. The book got done piecemeal, it was never done sequentially, somewhere I would write something down, somewhere he would draw something else and finally it all came together. So it was not about a sequential way. I'll just read you a passage that tries to tell you this much later. There's a drawing that you see here. I'll just hold it up. This is me, this is supposed to be Venkat and this is an American art critic called John Bowles who introduced Venkat to me. This is his SUV in which we are travelling, this is the wheel, and the metaphor of the wheel is spinning, we're spinning a yarn all the time, we're spinning with the yarn. I'll just read a bit from here, with your permission. This is Venkat's voice and there are certain times in which an intelligent

reader can easily see that I am narrating and sometimes Venkat is narrating and sometimes we don't know who's telling what; there's a third person sometimes. 'When I was looking for a way to tell the story of my life, and the story of what's come to be called Gond art, John Bowles the art historian and my friend, introduced me to S. Anand, a publisher who seemed to be at odds with himself and with the world. I helped him connect with the selves that had died in him.' I heard him say this to a friend, that Anand never used to sing, he stopped writing poetry and suddenly all this is back, this book has changed him more than me, I mean I was just telling my story and then it seems to have gone to his head. 'I scripted his life as he scripted mine. We found ourselves in a clock where two hands moved in different directions and sometimes met each other. After a few false starts, on our road trip to Bhimbetka' – that's a place with the oldest rock art site in India, it comes earlier in the book – 'our road trip to Bhimbetka, Sijhora, Amarkantak and Patangarh, Anand and I found ways to tell my story through other made-up stories. We together learned to write, sing and speak of the many worlds that make us. We made up the world that makes us. The symmetry, the blossoms of silk cotton driven further with the setting sun, its green fruit shedding cotton wisps that speak to the stars that begin to emerge in the darkening sky; a glimpse of heaven.' So that's one of the passages early in the book which try to tell you about what is the process of arriving at a certain, well, of threading words together and colours. It is a book equally of images as it is about telling stories, and the pictures speak a different story, so the artist or the poet is not banished from this imaginary publication.

Christiane Burkhardt – I think it's interesting that we are talking of course also of the role of the narrator. You started with this song where somebody tries to put an experience into words and at the same time he says: I can't put it into words, it's sort of impossible. But we are trying. And in fiction of course we have also the unreliable narrator, often. I remember the book *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga for instance. It's a fictional book but there we have a very unreliable narrator with no big cultural background who is teaching us how things are sort of working in India. What do you think about this approach?

S. Anand – Well I did read Aravind Adiga's *White Tiger* when it came out and I felt, well at least here is a book which tries to tell you the story of being a driver in India and like somebody said, the whole book was written by somebody who – I'll give you one line which for me captures my idea of the book – by somebody who sat, Adiga that is, for a long time in the back of a car and had a diagonal relationship with the driver. You sit at the back of the car and you're being driven around and you have long conversations with your driver, because you're a *Time Magazine* correspondent and in India and a lot of people have servants, drivers, etc. So you have a diagonal relationship with the driver, it's right-hand drive in India, so you sit there, you sit behind and you have a relationship with the driver and you come up with a story. But it is kind of for me a significant book simply because it, however falsely, for me, it tries to get into the head of the driver's perspective. For me that empathy is pretty limited. The driver is quite a demonic person and if seriously all the drivers, all the labourers in India were to want to kill their masters then you would have had a revolution long ago in India. India doesn't have one, so it's a work of fiction but it gives people a sense of a certain poor person's life and reality, what it's like. It happens also, once in a while. The drivers look and talk a lot of the time and it's like they say: the person who robs the bank is more important than the person who makes one. It happens, but it's not for me satisfying.

Maarten Asscher – Lieve, is there something like a reliable narrator? And what then can we rely on?

Lieve Joris – Well, if we look at Kapuściński for instance, when I read *The Emperor* the first time I thought it was quite magical, the words are magical and later on we started to peel away at the book, because people started to say no, no, no, he can't have met them. So at the moment you have the book and you have the whole world around the book. I think even this morning we talked a little bit about the internet and all the ways which we have now to know what the voice is and what the reality is. Salman Rushdie was a bit angry at Kapuściński because the emperor didn't die the way he dies at the end of the book. And Kapuściński said: leave me alone if you want to talk about this. But at the time when Kapuściński wrote it maybe he didn't know, because in lots of his books there are lots of

rumours as well and that is something we haven't really talked about yet, but I think that the world in which I have travelled and travel is also very much the world of rumours, and it is very important to put them in there, I think, and to find a way to put them in there, because they can become very important. I was once in a refugee camp in eastern Congo and people were really in a very terrible situation and they had fled let's say 200 kilometres from their native village and some had gone. They were so unhappy where they were, and later on I went to the other village and there wasn't so much that was bad there, so I asked them: 'Why did you flee?' And they said: 'We fled fear. We were so afraid that we fled.' Maybe even if nothing happened there must have been lots of rumours and the rumours said you'd better flee, so there they were. So is that the truth? It's a motor that in the countries where I travel is very, very important, because people don't have these libraries. I remember when I was in Congo writing my second book, *Dance of the Leopard*, I lived with a Congolese woman and her Belgian husband, and every night when I came back from the city she would say: 'What are they telling you?' She didn't ask me: 'What did you see?' No, 'What are they telling you? What are they saying downtown? What's the rumour?' Because the rumour is going to show what the next thing will be.

Maarten Asscher – Do you recognize that?

S. Anand – Certainly. In fact when I worked on this other book that's lying there called *Bhimayana*, which uses art from the same tribe to which Venkat Raman Singh Shyam belongs. It's the Pardhan-Gond, Gond is the name of the community, and when I worked with them they used to tell me. Several of the Gond artists who have moved to Bhopal from the villages, there are about thirty or forty of them active, they all want the opportunity to be able to do the next big book, and there's a little industry of book publishing in India, especially for children's books. Some of you may have heard of Tara books and *The Night Life of Trees* and *Jungle Book* and these are books where the *adevasi* represents a certain known forest reality: birds, trees, flowers and mythical stories. Expectations are of that, and this book tries to move away from that and even that one is a political story about India's greatest civil rights leader, Ambedkar, who wrote the Indian constitution although he was supposed to be untouchable, Dalit, and that was not something that

the Gonds are supposed to do. But when I started working with them, there would be other Gond artists who would warn me against: 'Don't go to that guy, you don't have to work with him at all'. In fact some artists told me Venkat practices black magic, he's soon going to eat you up, so I never went to Venkat. I said no, right now I'm working on this book, I'm not going to Venkat. So when I was working with Venkat I would hear little noises and rumours. It's not just about the particular community to which Venkat belongs. In Delhi much of publishing uses gossip. How people are hired is through gossip and job opportunities, openings, other things all happen through gossip. As you will know from Harris, this new book *Sapiens* says that gossip is one of the most interesting ways in which humans have ever communicated. So it's all around us you know.

Maarten Asscher – We now have a new definition for this genre. We've been talking about true gossip and false gossip.

S. Anand – Gossip is always fiction, has elements of fiction.

Maarten Asscher – No, no, no, gossip is not always fiction. There are different kinds of gossip.

S. Anand - It's a higher truth.

Richard Nash – It's the unofficial truth.

Maarten Asscher – The unofficial truth, yes. That's what they said in the Soviet Union when something finally happened, they said: it's not only the truth, it's official. Marco.

Marco Vigevani – I think a lot about writing a book which is honest, which comes as close to the truth as possible, comes down to the author, of course, but also to our industry, how our industry, the publishing industry, is functioning, and I'll give you an example. Last year I met the great Belorussian oral historian Svetlana Alexievich, who has collected oral history of the people – living under communism, under Stalin, after perestroika etc. – for years and what she told me (there is no language barrier, because she is interviewing her countrymen and countrywomen and there is no cultural barrier because she is Belorussian, she's talking with other

people in Belorussia, in Russia etc.) but she told me when I want to write a book I need to go to these people to collect hundreds and hundreds of stories and not only stories. But when I ask them: 'How was life under communism?' they all tell the same old tale and it is not interesting. I have to get to know these people, have to sit with them for hours, for days to become intimate and then in the small talk the truth comes out, which means that when she was asking about make-up and beauty then the story would come out. So you need infinite patience and you need a lot of time to produce books like those of Svetlana Alexievich. I don't think that our industry is prepared to produce many books like Svetlana Alexievich, or perhaps Lieve Joris, because we are under pressure, we are always under pressure, and under pressure it's sometimes difficult to produce great works of fiction or also non-fiction.

Lieve Joris - Well it helps to live in a place like Holland where things are a little bit quiet and life is not so expensive. I couldn't do what I'm doing if I was living in Paris I think, because of the need to pay the rent and all these things, just to get lost for four years not really knowing what the story will be. But it's true. I was thinking about once I was in the northeast of Congo and I was staying in a house, just by accident, where a group of youngsters was living and they were living out of their suitcases, no furniture, no nothing. I was just wondering why at 06.30 in the morning they were already dancing on the terrace and I thought: what are these guys doing? And one day I was walking downtown and I saw them sitting in front of a self-made shop and that's where they were working during the day and I just sat with them and I stayed for three weeks with them, just sitting around and seeing who was coming and where the rumours were coming from on the inside and suddenly they said: oh we heard that on the lake near Uganda the oil is becoming more expensive, so we're taking our cheap oil there. And I went with them and there they sat again and people were coming to them and in Congo they have a saying, that in the villages they love people who know how to do nothing. And that's really the thing, just to sit. I think that what I know about Congo hasn't really come through the travelling, at least not that alone. My deep knowledge of Congo comes from the time when I wrote *Dance of the Leopard* in Kisangani, city of the interior, and I stayed there for eleven months. I saw the change of the seasons, and that's when I started to see the

Chinese coming in and the Congolese going to China. If I was travelling I wouldn't have noticed these things, but when I settled down I suddenly said: oh you go to a shop. Where does all that come from? Oh, from Dubai. And where do these Congolese go to all the time? They go to Dubai. And suddenly I started to see things which I wouldn't have seen necessarily if I was travelling.

S. Anand – Even if you are travelling... This is related to another question you asked earlier about when Westerners travel and see the Bombay slum and so forth. See, one of the things that couldn't have happened if you lived in the 11th century or 7th century is that the traveller comes, and it's different now, in that today most people who come would want bottled water, would want all kinds of things. Would they eat the food that is being given there, made in that slum by that person? If you eat you get a certain kind of a conversation. If you don't and if you've got a camera there and then you later find out what they ate, then it's going to be a different perception of reality. In India it's also all about breaking the caste rules: with whom you eat, what you eat, all these things. And if you have no taboos – most people have taboos of touch; the caste system seriously believes in a sort of pecking order or hierarchy. So equally with the three informants and translators Katherine Boo had, they would have issues sometimes, unless they are urban liberated people, I mean, I would go anywhere to meet anyone and I eat anything that moves, except humans. So there are issues which come up in terms of even when you travel, you put yourself there eleven months and that's good, but in terms of anxieties about eating the foods and all that, how does it work in the Congo? Whereas in India there would be writers both Indian and foreign who when they travel would say: no, I've got my own water, no, I've got my own food, or I'm going back to the hotel to eat, I can't really eat in this place, I might get a stomach upset. Back in the seventh century you couldn't say that, you took in the stomach upset for one month, you kind of adjusted to the material reality around you, and then there was no choice but what's called immersion journalism today. Today we've compressed ourselves into a world where we're all connected and we then travel faster than ever before. It took probably four months for Xuanzang to come all the way from China to India back then. So we live in a different reality but we've also become more and more parcelled into little identity blocks and we're very careful, we do it very

carefully: what if you get hit by something, what if you get some kind of bird 'flu?

Lieve Joris – One of the lessons Kapuściński gave me was: 'Eat what people offer you, because very often it's the only thing they have.'

Maarten Asscher – Do you feel that you work in a timeless tradition of immersion in another culture, living with people, being part of their lives for eleven months, or is there also a modernity involved?

Lieve Joris – In my way of working?

Maarten Asscher – In your way of working as a writer.

Lieve Joris – Well it's all together I think. Everybody invents his own ways. I think – and this is something I just discovered quite recently – I grew up in a family of nine and opposite our house my grandmother was living and because this family was so wild and too much for me I would just flee to my grandmother's house. Now that makes me a child of another time. My grandmother used to tell me about the First World War and the Second World War and all these stories that came again and again and again, and there I was sitting and she was praying for all the people that died and all the pictures of the dead were around her, so I feel that when I travel and people sometimes say: 'How can you stay there for five months? Nothing's happening here!' It's maybe the house of my grandmother that I come to. So in a way it's childhood memories, it's a pace that I have, but that's my way of doing it. I don't think it's the only way to do it. Other people are quicker, or they are more... I'm a village girl, I love to be in the countryside, I don't feel as much at ease in the city and others understand the city immediately, the artists of the city. If I see in Congo someone dance in a bar I say: 'Uh, uh, uh, where does this guy come from? Where do they have these kinds of dances that came to the city?' So I have to go to where this guy comes from, but another will say: 'Ah, this is city dancing!' So I think that we are all the result of where we come from and we shape our lives. I don't think there is one rule.

Maarten Asscher – If your next book were to be published in France and the publisher were to suggest to you that he put 'novel', *roman*, on the cover, would you object?

Lieve Joris – Well, because of the subject of my next book, I might not want to do that.

Maarten Asscher – Is that a big thing for you, to imagine this word on the cover of a new book?

Lieve Joris – Well, to answer your earlier question which I didn't answer about *The Rebels' Hour* – What did I learn? – if I look back on that experience, it's the furthest I ever went into fiction, by necessity in a way, and it went quite easily and it was quite fun, because the stand-in that I made is somebody that Assani knew. She was half-Congolese, half-Belgian. And then I just imagined the rest of it and put myself into it and it went quite well, quite easily, but it also taught me what I showed in the book that came next, that the 'T' form goes better with me. I think we are more influenced by the US and England than they are in France, for instance, and in the beginning my publisher in France was always saying: oh, one day you will write a novel. I always thought that was very unkind about the genre, but at the time in France that was the genre, the writer is a fiction writer, but it's starting to change. I myself don't very much look at what's inside, I don't even know what my publisher put on *The Rebels' Hour*, I think 'literary non-fiction' maybe, but I don't even know. I must admit that when I read Richard Ford's *Canada*, for instance, I'm just looking at: what is there of this guy in this book, how true is it? And I know that he researches a lot. I myself in my reading, I am reading Faulkner now, *The Sound and the Fury*, and there's Africa for me and I say: oh, where did he live? So you start to... The fiction writer does the type of research that we do as well, so I don't know.

Maarten Asscher – And the indication of a genre on the cover of a book or on the title page, is that for you, as an author, is that part of the work you have written, or is it part of the packaging by the publisher?

Lieve Joris – Well I would like to be as much as possible there when the publisher decides these things and of course in America, as it was with the prefatory note I wrote, it is different from here, so you try to understand why somebody would want... For instance in Germany I think that my first Congo book *Back to the Congo* was

called *'Ein Afrikanisches Tagesbuch'*, An African Diary or something. They needed a subtitle, so sometimes you're not there when these things happen and suddenly you see it and think: oh, that says something about them, yes it's the packaging. But in Holland my publisher won't do things that I don't agree with.

S. Anand – I was just looking at these genres in which... I don't usually take a book and look to see. Katherine Boo's book says 'non-fiction', this one very clearly says Penguin non-fiction, then I look at Agee: it says literature. I didn't see it till now.

Lieve Joris – So do you agree?

S. Anand – Well, Agee is literature.

Livia Manera – But that's because it's a classic.

S. Anand – Ah well they've put it under classics. I don't know when it was published but when they published it what was it? In the nineteen forties or whatever was it really classified? I mean are these labels...

Livia Manera – I'm sure it wasn't literature then.

S. Anand – I don't know what it was, I wasn't around in the forties or fifties and I don't have first editions to check, but I have a feeling these categories we're creating, like novelistic non-fiction and so forth...

Maarten Asscher – Perhaps some of the people in the audience can explain this from their cultural, professional background, but it seems that books are preferably sold as something they are not. Non-fiction is marketed as something that reads like a novel, and novels are promoted as a true story, based on fact. Is that a double lie that is inherent in the international book market? Or are there cultural differences that can be observed? How's that in Italy, Marco? Is it an advantage to use such recommendations from the other world?

Marco Vigevani – Short stories, when they are published at all, are published like novels. So we sell them as linked stories and then the

linked goes away, the stories also, and it comes out as a novel when it is published. And non-fiction, well, in non-fiction 'travel writing' used to be a forbidden word until very recently, now not anymore, but otherwise yes, sometimes, very often you say: well this is a novel where you can learn a lot, not just a story but you can learn because there is a true story behind it so you can learn about, I don't know...

Maarten Asscher – Three generations of Mexican drug mules.

Marco Vigevani – Or an amber cabinet or the Atlantic slave trade, whatever, and it's important that the novel teaches you something which is non-fictional. Nowadays. I don't know, maybe it will change.

Maarten Asscher – Other experiences? In Germany?

Nina Sillem – I'm just thinking that the interesting thing is that I've had several authors, non-fiction authors, who had a certain faith in their life that they wanted to write fiction, but I never heard a fiction author who felt the urgent need to write a non-fiction book. That's interesting I would say.

Maarten Asscher – Is there a sort of career hierarchy or a cultural ladder and on top is the Nobel Prize-winner for literature and at the bottom is the journalist doing hackwork with his parachute?

S. Anand – Take Marquez, take Garcia Marquez. He was a journalist and he found stories which he spun out into great works of fiction. Another problem I've been thinking about just now, and I've never classified my books as non-fiction although I publish a lot of non-fiction: it's a negative definition, it's like saying I'm a non-white. Why something that it's not? It's a negative definition. I'm completely uncomfortable with this category 'non-fiction'. Fiction I understand. Borges called it 'fictions'. So he's a bit of a guru for me in the sense that I used to read from Venkat and then I spin them in my own head like this and then it comes out in a different way, so that's what Borges did, he read hundreds of stories and then rewrote them in his own lovely way. Fictions with a plural. Non-fiction I'm not entirely sure is a positive way of defining something.

Neil Belton – I think the commercial holy grail in fact is ‘reads like a thriller’. The non-fiction equivalent of John Grisham. That’s what the publishing industry wants.

Maarten Asscher – ‘It’s a collection of sonnets but they read like a thriller.’ I’m reminded of a famous quote by Thomas Mann, who said: ‘Everything that is perfect in its genre becomes something else.’ Perhaps that’s what each writer strives for, to be a perfectionist to such an extent that you elevate what you have written to another level.

Samuel Titan – And you’re probably forgetting the most irritating label of them all, which is ‘inspiring’. Which applies to fiction and non-fiction alike. It’s a kind of plague and it’s colonizing the whole of the publishing world, or it is in Brazil. Everything has to be inspiring; a novel has to be inspiring.

Maarten Asscher – Inspiring you to do what?

Samuel Titan – I don’t know.

Marco Vigevani – Inspiring you to buy, probably.

Samuel Titan – ‘An inspiring story from the author of...’ And it applies to fiction and non-fiction alike. It’s kind of a self-help thing that’s colonizing all areas of writing.

Maarten Asscher – But is there in Brazil this hierarchy where literary fiction, by the literary community, by the writing community, is placed much higher than non-fiction, literary non-fiction?

Samuel Titan – There is, or there used to be back in the days when there was serious literary criticism going on in the newspapers. Now that newspapers are kind of, well, going away – at least that’s the case in Brazil – it’s harder and harder to distinguish, and you get to see really second- or third-rate authors being praised as something else, just because they’ve written this inspiring story based on true facts etc.

Maarten Asscher – Richard?

Richard Nash – I’m reminded by what you say of the fact that in the US there is a category called ‘inspirational fiction’ and it comes out of the Christian publishing, er, tradition, or ‘economy’ is maybe a better term than ‘tradition’, ironically. And as I understand it, outside of the kind of metropolitan area of cultural consumption in Brazil, Avon is the greatest distributor of books in Brazil, and it is typically of Christian inspirational fiction into rural households, brought by women and sold to largely women. And that then reminded me of the fact that really the greatest economic period in American publishing was sort of 1910 to 1940, as the second generation of immigrants entered the middle class and needed stories and instruction on how to become middle class. That’s when all the great self-help books were created and they were about somewhere a cross between inspiration and becoming. You were becoming a certain kind of citizen-slash-consumer. But of course that’s a story of publishing that isn’t necessarily a part of the *Belletristik* story of publishing but is a tremendous part of the actual social and economic lives of countries. You see that as the developing world also creates this massive creation of the middle class in to some degree Brazil, in Indonesia, in India, the idea of inspirational or becoming something greater than just a peasant, something greater than just a cog in an industrial machine but a sort of a middle-class sense of identity that is... I’ve no bloody clue how this fits with what we were talking about, but it’s tremendously interesting.

Maarten Asscher – And Richard please answer one more question for me if you will. When you look in the average American bookshop you see much more non-fiction than fiction, I believe. Lots of memoirs, biographies, self-help, advice, how to, nature books, sports books etc. etc. In the American literary professional consciousness of writers, is it still the case that to write a novel is the *nec plus ultra* of authorship? Whereas you can have such success with a good non-fiction book.

Richard Nash – I suspect that within a certain sector of US society that is true, but in other sectors of US society it is not true, that with the kind of relentless blend of capitalism, democracy, frontier society, success, the novel doesn’t quite fit, or the ways in which it fits have had to be reinvented and are being reinvented through self-

publishing and phenomena like *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the romance or the thriller that will make you a tremendous amount of money when it gets made into a movie. But the traditional literary novel probably no longer has – if it ever quite had – the purchase on the popular imagination. And I think that there's... In terms of what you're describing there are sort of two effects. One is that as a result it is acceptable for David Foster Wallace to write an incredibly dense and complex essay about Roger Federer, or for George Plimpton to try out for the Cleveland Browns, or to write about boxing, so in some ways that has an advantage in that it allows for a lot more – to use a racial term – miscegenation, intermarriage...

Maarten Asscher – Between high culture and low culture?

Richard Nash – Between high culture and low culture. In some ways there's a great excitement around high and low, and a kind of horror around the middle. But on the other hand it does also mean that there's a quick-buck problem, where the book is almost part of a 360-degree revenue strategy of a celebrity or a corporation, where a book is just one productization alongside the T-shirt, the tour, the fragrance – one way of monetizing a personal brand as a diversified revenue stream, and that is kind of bleak. But the flipside is that it then does allow for ways in which... I mean just two days ago during the riots in Baltimore, the chief operating officer of the Baltimore Orioles – a baseball team that had to play, for the first time in the history of major-league baseball, a game in an empty stadium because they couldn't open the stadium for fear that the riots would bleed over – the chief operating officer wrote a set of about forty tweets which give a very sophisticated political, social and economic analysis of the riots. A friend of mine said: 'Why the fuck do we have to get this in the sports pages?' And I was like well maybe it's better that we get the news regardless of whether it is in *The News* or whether it's coming from sports.

Christiane Burkhardt – You raised another very interesting subject before, the gender subject, of course, when you talk about rural housewives loving inspirational literature. I think it's very strange often that also in Germany one talks maybe about a sort of gender gap, that women are more prone to novels and men are more prone to non-fiction books. If they are reading in their holidays you'll see

the novel beside the woman and you'll see some non-fiction book beside the man. I don't know now, because of course women do read more than men, I don't know whether the genre of narrative non-fiction also is very sought after now by publishers because they want to reach a larger audience. I don't know, I think that's an interesting question.

Maarten Asscher – Lieve, who is your readership, do you have an image?

Lieve Joris – I am a non-fiction writer being read by women, I think. A little bit depending on the subject. My last book about China and Africa saw some guys coming in because that's an issue that interests them because they're doing business there. No, in general, mostly, when you have readings, I see women beyond forty-five. Youngsters as well. For instance with my last book, about China and Africa, you see these young people sometimes of mixed origin. A few days ago I was in Brussels and there was this young beautiful half-Congolese half-Belgian studying Chinese and coming towards this book because she felt that there might be something that she could learn. But I think there are many women readers of these non-fiction books I write.

Maarten Asscher – Have you read this book by Katherine Boo?

Lieve Joris – No, I was listening very attentively to Anand because of travelling a lot in the world which is not necessarily the Western world. I can understand that even my books are not necessarily perceived by people as books which they would write themselves or which they feel would represent them, so I'm sensitive to that, but in another way I can't be anybody but myself.

Maarten Asscher – But I think the ideal of the involved outsider is as high as the ideal of someone observing his or her own life. The one is not better than the other, or...

Lieve Joris – Well, look at us here, we might maybe have some African writer here besides somebody from India, we are quite a homogeneous group of people, so I'm sure that some writers from other parts of the world would have a lot to say, which maybe today

only Anand is saying and which I am aware of without being able to really come to the other side totally.

S. Anand – As someone from India, in terms of diversity it happened to me when I saw the participants in this conference, even though I knew it was mostly Euro-American and largely white. I don't know what has been the history of the last eight conferences, but it could certainly benefit by greater what you call these days, using an American word, diversity. But in terms of this book I've been told that in terms of marketing, selling, these tough things that I don't usually have to do with an enormous book like that. One big publisher looked at it and said: 'It's an incredible book but I hope you're willing to sell it as something exotic and tribal, like this you know? We can tick a lot of boxes.' And I said, well, the story is there, and he has done many things in his life and if you read it you'll get it, but I said I'm not going to package it as such, as something that would tick boxes. This question does immediately come up of: what is the genre, who is the reader for this? What is the genre? I don't know. One person said: oh, will you write a novel next, because this looks like you're getting into somebody's head and writing almost a novel. So immediately people want classification, which is what I've been trying to sort of resist.

Maarten Asscher – How do you package a book like this: *The Song of the Shirt* by Jeremy Seabrook, *Cheap clothes across continents and centuries*? Do you say on your website something about how the book is narrated? Or do you put the subject in front of everybody's attention? How personal do you make it, or how historical?

S. Anand – I'm just laughing at myself, because I've just read the first word on the front cover: 'Inspirational'. Well there are a couple of things. There's a cover which looks like it's a gift wrap. It's a quilted pastiche kind of work. I worked closely with a designer friend and then I thought: now how do I get the attention of a reviewer? If I tell you this book is about the shirt you're wearing, then people say: I don't want to know who sweated for this shirt. I really don't want to know. So you bring in Amit Choudhury, who is a well-known name in India, then there's Mike Davis: 'Brilliantly written jeremiad with an urgent moral message.' So the packaging part of the book I'm afraid I get into it simply because for me it's difficult to sell even a

thousand copies of this book, so you sell the US/UK rights. How did I sell the US/UK rights to Hurst in London? Initially they were sceptical. You know: another sad book from Jeremy about sad people. He'd just written something on poverty in Britain and again this, you know... Then I managed to get a review in *The Guardian* that said it's like Berger and George Orwell making out and such stuff. So immediately the publisher said okay, okay, okay, I'll try it. And then I tried to talk to an Australian publisher, I said: I've got a 200-copy order from there, from somebody working against clothes from Bangladesh being done the way they are and trying to conscientize people, so that Australian publisher said: 'But you've already sold those two hundred copies.' I said yes, because you're going to take another six months and they wanted it tomorrow so I sent it. So it's very difficult, even if you do 'inspirational'. There's a strong *Independent* quote saying something about Jeremy Seabrook's prose. Ha ha, I can't believe it's there. And I'll read you the whole thing: 'Seabrook beats any celebrity radical...' - I think: you mean Arundhati Roy, Tariq Ali, some people I like - 'Seabrook beats any celebrity radical in the art of speaking hard truths through fine prose.' So you sift through a lot of stuff. I Googled Seabrook's current reviews, past reviews, what do I put on the front? And actually I didn't have it here, I had it at the back and somebody said look, put it out here, then people will read your book, it's beautiful, and so finally I come down to that. I wear many hats, I'm writing a book, then I have to blurb it. So for this book I gave it to a very reliable couple of friends to copy-edit it for me and like you do, parts of this book are being read as they're being written, because there's poetry involved and music involved, so I test it out on friends. So it is tough.

Maarten Asscher - Have you tried to sell this in Holland, for translation?

S. Anand - Ah, well, here I am doing exactly that.

Richard Nash - I hear it's inspiring.

S. Anand - I have an author who is not somebody who is telegenic, who doesn't even send a mug-shot of himself, or one that was so low-res it cannot be printed in the magazine that wanted it, he's not

on Facebook he's not on Twitter, he's never going to get into that, he can't even understand track changes, you can imagine, the odds on him coming to the attention of anyone... These are the main tools, authors have to look good, they have to be willing to give many interviews, be asked silly questions and be patient when giving answers. If somebody says 'Are you a travel writer?' you shouldn't say: 'Just read my book.' You can't say that. Unless you're known already. Someone like Coetzee can come to India and say: 'I'm not on any panel. I'm going to read.' Because there are usually three people or four people talking; he doesn't want to talk to you or anybody, he just wants to read. But he can do that, he can command that, he rarely makes appearances and he can do that, and there are authors who don't even write under their own name and don't ever do interviews, so there are all kinds.

Maarten Asscher – Still, when it comes to the sale of translation rights, it is absolutely my experience that selling rights in non-fiction is much easier than selling rights in a new literary fiction author. Depending on the subject, of course, but at least then you have a subject. In that respect, perhaps Lieve Joris should think twice before changing colours from non-fiction to fiction.

Lieve Joris – No, well, I'm in the very, very early stages of thinking about my next book and I don't know yet how much, let's say, truth there will be in it. I will start out wanting the truth, but it might be that for all kinds of technical reasons it will be a bit more than this one. But no, no, no, you don't only think about how the audience will think, do you? I mean not at my age. I just want to continue my road and if my road leads to this, I will... *J'assume*, as the French would say.

Maarten Asscher – Okay. I think you wanted to say something?

Livia Manera – There was something I wanted to say and something I wanted to ask. I haven't read Katherine Boo's book either, unfortunately, but I know about it. And about her commitment, her mistakes in using the wrong translators, I just want to say something that I don't know if it's in the book, I don't think so and maybe it's gossip, but it's true, it's true gossip. This is a woman who has a very, very serious degenerative disease. Her

bones crumble, and she has had her joints replaced in plastic and she can't even hold a fork. If you go on the website of the *Financial Times* you can read a 'lunch with the FT', with Catherine Boo and she has to eat with her hands. So this is a woman who can't afford an infection. Nothing. And she took that subject and spent the time she spent in a slum, which she must have done to write the book. So I think even though she picked up maybe the wrong translators, I see a very great commitment there, which I respect. The question is: in your opinion who are the Western writers who have written convincingly about India?

S. Anand – Ah, well, I don't know anything about Katherine Boo's personal story. If this is true then it's an indication that she... Oh, well, now I will read that passage differently when she tripped on her dictionary and felt that she could do anything. And my comment about generally not drinking water and not being able to eat the food is more general, about a lot of journalists, a lot of reporters and a lot of workers.

Livia Manera – No, no, no, I understand.

S. Anand – I didn't mention Katherine Boo's particular case. Whereas in Aman Sethi's book you do get the sense that he did smoke, drink, eat, do many things, and he could; he's a young man who is probably unaffected by any kind of physical ailment. So with Boo I didn't know about this, and as a reader I don't know the biographies of writers and their personal stories unless they make it a part of the book. Somebody like Boo might have thought it's completely wrong for her to talk about her own ailments and then make it part of the selling part of the book.

Livia Manera – No, I just said it because you talked so much about her that it's an important detail that maybe was worth mentioning.

S. Anand – But in terms of European writers or Western writers writing about India, again I hate this business of saying this is what I approve, this is what I disapprove, this is what I like, this is what I don't like. I did say that a lot of such writing has happened. For instance I would give an example of a non-fiction essay. One of the best essays on Gandhi is by George Orwell. If anybody has not read it I would say: read it. It unmask the man in such a way only Orwell

can do. Few Indians would have been able at that time to take a critical perspective. Other than Ambedkar, who kind of shredded Gandhi to pieces in his own lifetime. There were very few people who did that, so there is no boundary as far as I see as to who can write about what. It's only that when Akhil Sharma writes a family life set in the US, where he's an immigrant, he writes about his own life, but when he supposedly writes a book about other people in the US, how does it work? If he's a Brahmin immigrant writing about it, it's going to be different, and if it were a Dalit from India who moves to the US and perceives a certain kind of US or UK reality then it's going to be different. So for me these things, right, you can't have any kind of policing on who can write a book about what.

Livia Manera – But who do you like? Not as a rule. Are there any Western writers who wrote about India that you like?

S. Anand – I named one, one essay from the past. In terms of contemporary writing, no. There is this whole genre which has come up in the last fifteen years in India which leaves me very dissatisfied, which is the foreign correspondent's book of India, so there'll be one foreign correspondent posted in Delhi, who usually uses a lot of interlocutors. And you know I'm not talking about Boo's interlocutors as good translators or bad translators, they were the people she used, they could have been good or bad, we have no way of knowing. I'm only making myself alive and the audience here alive to the problems that I have. But in terms of this genre which has come up, most publishing houses will contact a foreign correspondent and say: you do your India book, someone writes on cricket, somebody writes on just food, somebody writes about walking around Delhi. Some of them settle down in India, for instance William Dalrymple has produced a lot of non-fiction books, some of which I have read, but you clearly know it's a white person writing about India. One of his books is called *The White Moguls*. So there are lots of people who do write engaging books and some of them go on to settle in India, initially coming as... For instance there was a BBC correspondent who came and ended up, he is very well known, Mark Tully, who settled in India and more or less made a career there of writing. And I do have perspective problems with that, you know the way he wrote about the Hindu right, the rise of the Hindu right and all that, left me a bit disturbed,

but there are ways in which for instance even Naipaul – I consider him a Western writer with his perspective on India – in several places he half understands, misunderstands. He’s a fiction writer writing serious non-fiction. Using that word non-fiction here because it’s a helpful term. So there have been writers... And there are problems with this book that I have done. There’s nothing that is going to be perfectly satisfying for everybody. Let’s not... It could be good art. Like this morning Neil was talking about how he would still go back to Truman Capote, but can we write like that now, can we publish a book like that now? I think Neil would if he...

Neil Belton – I wish I had that choice.

Lieve Joris – Maybe it should be called a novel in that case.

Maarten Asscher – I think we should put a comma here. We’re more or less halfway between today and tomorrow. There was a quote by Anand this morning: if you eat you’re going to have a certain conversation. I would like to revive that quote and it also holds true for drinking, in my experience. Let’s hope we will continue our conversation during drinks and our dinner tonight and we will formally continue this session tomorrow morning, but for now I would like your warm applause for Lieve Joris and S. Anand.

Saturday, May 2

Personal essay, non-fiction novel and new experiments: the space between where strange things happen

Maarten Asscher – If you all have found your yesterday's seat again, then I suggest we pick up where we left off. The last thing I remember is Richard smashing his wine glass into his dessert. Welcome back. If you had any doubt as to whether you were here yesterday, you can check the Facebook page of the Dutch Foundation for Literature, where all Victor Schiferli's pictures can be found of you listening attentively. So he took your selfies for you and you are now famous on the Letterenfonds Facebook page. We have I think a very interesting morning before us, and it is perhaps useful to – in a very compact way – to reconstruct the road that we followed yesterday that leads up to this morning's session. This conference started from the premise that there is a line between fiction and non-fiction, a border as it was called in the programme, with a slash between 'non' and 'fiction'. I think Neil Belton, in a fine and almost essayistic overview, immediately showed us convincingly that this line rather than being a line is a whole land, a debatable land as he called it, porous and tricky territory. And the whole idea of a pure work of the imagination and of pure non-fiction at the other extreme: these are perhaps only tiny margins at the edge of an enormous stretch of an interesting, complex and conflicting domain in between. Nina Sillem, who unfortunately could not stay on for this morning's session, identified three very useful points of which one especially struck me: her idea of the cultural differences in the shape and the content of this debatable land in between the purity of fiction and the purity of non-fiction. Grégory Martin mentioned some of the French characteristics, for example, in this debatable land between fiction and non-fiction, and honestly confessed to us that the French rather like to call a book a novel out of pure marketing considerations, which sheds a totally new light on literary genres of course. And the irony then became, as the day progressed yesterday, that non-fiction supposedly is best sold when it reads like a novel and that a novel supposedly is best sold when it can be said to be based on a true story. That's a sort of

double irony in the fiction/non-fiction dilemma. In the afternoon, when we had this dilemma in all its complexity before us, Lieve Joris started very clearly by saying: reality is my material. That is: narrative non-fiction in her treatment, her vision as an author, starts from reality, but when she starts out on a journey for a new book she comes into conflict with two kinds of police, you might say, because the author's notes and publishers' notes that are intended to protect what she does with her reality, how she shapes her reality, ironically attract attention instead of protecting her text; the text becomes more vulnerable in between the literary techniques and the *Wahrheitsanspruch*, if that's the correct word, of her text. On the one hand there's the non-fiction police, who want to exercise control over whether the text is sufficiently true, and on the other side there is the fiction police or rather the literary critics who want to ascertain whether the text is sufficiently imaginative. That is a dilemma that can be problematic but fortunately it can also be very fruitful, as Lieve showed. In this rough and uninviting or inviting terrain between pure fiction and pure non-fiction, S. Anand distinguished two types of interventionist: the parachute author or parachute journalist and the immersion journalist or immersed author. Of course we all want total immersion, we want the truth in its entirety, but not only the life and work of Pessoa but perhaps every life and every work teaches us that there is no such truth. Still, the immersion is a way of trying to come as close as possible. This broad terrain between pure fiction and pure non-fiction, which we originally thought was just a borderline, turns out to be a whole world and this domain is broad enough for all kinds of complexities, crossovers, and that is what we, I think, are going to investigate this morning, this broad field of narrative non-fiction that is not pure literature or not pure imagination and it is not pure non-fiction in terms of factual reality. We have Richard Nash, Samuel Titan Jr. and Jannah Loontjens to guide us through these intricate complexities and these crossovers. I think Richard is the ideal first speaker in the sense that even his bio reads as a mix of different crossovers and elements. He not only smashes his wine into his dessert, he also smashes the future into the present, he smashes the digital media into news, experimental theatre into publishing and he will tell us now how, with his new imprint Sirens, another world is probable and fictions become real. Richard, the floor is yours.

Richard Nash: Fictions become real

Richard Nash – Thank you very much. I'll move these glasses as far away from me as possible. There we go. Safe. We've got iPads up here too, so. Well, first of all thank you very much for having me, it's an absolute honour and it's a tremendous amount of fun to be able to do this. It's also in many respects a tremendous amount of work, in terms of having a format like this where in many ways, especially today when we are at the end of the conference and we're thinking about all the things that were said yesterday, it feels incumbent on us to be able to respond to yesterday as we're presenting today. Which is another way of apologizing for the fact that I never write down my talks and to poor Lisa Grob, who asked me for my talk a week ago, I had to say: 'It's all up in here and unfortunately it's going to stay there.' But there's one way in which I try to come at this, and it is by relying on the American philosopher William James, who in *Varieties of Religious Experience* said: 'It always leads to a better understanding of a thing's significance to consider its exaggerations and perversions, its equivalents and substitutes and nearest relatives elsewhere.' And that's very much the approach I'm going to try to take here, to understand the exaggerations and perversions of non-fiction.

In some respects perhaps the most perverted instance of non-fiction that I'm aware of right now is one that I am responsible for. I have a project with a co-founder, an Iranian American man named Valla Vakili, called Sirens, and Sirens reports the news and culture. It offers a review of Dave Eggers' most recent essay collection, which he wrote, had edited, printed and then glued shut. A four-part true-crime investigation of a murder that occurred in the salt caverns beneath Detroit that have been squatted by people without enough money to live above ground. A sex columnist who writes about whether it is in fact cheating if a person uses her Vibra while talking on the phone with her boss. Another one involves a live tweeting of the assassination of Alexis Tsipras after he calls a snap election in Greece in late January of 2022, which hints at the underlying significance of this particular website: none of it is true. It is an imaginary news website reporting the news from exactly seven years in the future. There are salt caverns beneath Detroit, but they have not yet been squatted because above the salt caverns the

apartments are still cheap enough to live in. Dave Eggers has not – yet – written an essay collection of which he glued all the pages shut. That particular sex toy I alluded to, the Vibra, is not yet a device that connects a vibrator to your cell phone by Blu-tooth technology, allowing the voice of the interlocutor to define the rhythm and intensity of the device’s operation.

So why did we do this? When my colleague is asked why we’re doing this he simply says: ‘Weapons of mass destruction.’ That we cannot rely on the news to in fact tell the truth. We have many, many, indeed hundreds of years of newspapers not telling the truth, whether they’re not telling the truth about Iraq, or they’re not telling the truth about whether they hacked into the telephones of royalty, or they’re not telling the truth about the involvement of Spain in Cuba, culminating in the Spanish-American War of the late nineteenth century. We felt that it may very well be the case that you can use fiction to in fact tell the news potentially better than journalists can. Now obviously that’s a tremendous provocation, and I don’t exactly believe it, but I believe it enough to try. And we know we’ll fail, in many ways, but what we’re interested in doing is creating a database that catalogues our failures. We haven’t built the database yet, but we have a name for it. It’s just like a book where you’ve got the title but you haven’t written the book yet. The database is called Cassandra and it will track all the ways in which we are wrong, so we can preserve them, because effectively the site would become a retroactive history of the future, like the movie *Sliding Doors*, where there are forking realities that occur. We will maintain a reality in which Hilary is elected president of the United States in 2016 and one in which she is not.

It is in a certain respect what is called ‘the long con’. There’s a wonderful book called *The Long Con* about the development of con artists in the United States, an activity that now drives a great many films, especially ones written by David Mamet. The short con is simply one act of deceit, but the long con involves building offices, having two different people, the excitable person and the person who says: ‘Don’t, don’t do this, don’t do this, you don’t want to be a part of it, you don’t have the money.’ And in many respects non-fiction is an act of playing a long con but where the final goal is not to steal the money but to teach the mark about himself.

One of the things that we almost – and I think Anand basically said it yesterday, we almost got there – was: why do we call it non-fiction? I know that’s not the term used in every one of the language cultures represented here, but effectively what ‘non-fiction’ says is it’s defining itself by what it is not. ‘Non-fiction’ says: this is the act of not lying. And as any of you know who have ever dealt with a child who has broken a wine glass and said ‘It wasn’t me!’, you ask yourself when somebody says what they are not: what is it that they’re really hiding? And so there’s a kind of a bubbling anxiety that I think goes on in the subterranean depths of non-fiction where you’re continually worried about: am I lying? And the way I’d like to explore that a little bit more is by looking at again another set of exaggerations and perversions, a set that Neil described a little bit yesterday and into which I’d like to do a slightly deeper dive.

A very good friend of mine is writing a book that will be published in the US by Graywolf some time in 2017. This is in fact true. This is not a book that we’re just inventing for the purposes of reviewing it in Sirens. It will in fact exist. It’s called *Unoriginal Sin. How to spot hoaxers, plagiarists, phoneys, frauds, and fabulists*. I think an interesting way to look at non-fiction is to look at what happens when it gets fucked up really badly. That’s what my friend does. The interesting thing that he mentions in the very introduction is that he personally is usually only one or two degrees of separation away from the people who are the famous celebrity frauds, and I suspect that may be true at least of a number of people here in this room. One of the most famous journalistic frauds in the United States is actually my brother-in-law, a guy named Stephen Glass, who was made maybe slightly famous by the fact that there was a movie made about him, called *Shattered Glass*. (You can see that there’s a theme developing.) He was played by Hayden Christensen, Peter Sarsgaard was the guy who was convinced he was going to unearth the scandal, Chloë Sevigny was his boss’s girlfriend. It had a certain level of notoriety. He was a journalist for the *New Republic* magazine in the early 1990s and became their most successful, celebrated, popular and widely-discussed writer, publishing I think as many as five cover stories over the course of his two years writing for the magazine, all of which were fabricated. Fabricated in the manner of the long con, where he even at one point tried to build a

fake website for the fake company that he was discussing in his fake article about imaginary computer programmers at a fake conference. The interesting thing about the extent of that fakery is that while yes, it was an incredibly elaborate effort, every one of these things was ultimately with hindsight very transparent. The website was terrible, the business cards he faked up had a single voice-mailbox that no one ever answered, there was no evidence that this conference happened anywhere other than in his imagination, yet it all, and I will discuss a little bit later why, it all eluded the fact-checkers.

Another particular story of his involved a taxi driver, an African taxi driver, I believe Ethiopian, and there was a story about effectively the perceived fork between how first-generation African immigrants were working extremely hard in America, yet African Americans were quote-unquote lazy. They were, in the parlance of Ronald Reagan, welfare mothers, just sucking money out of the welfare system and doing nothing to better themselves. As it so happens, this happened to be a particular conceit that had been suggested to him by the editor-in-chief of the magazine, a guy named Marty Peretz, Martin Peretz, who was a history professor at Harvard and had owned the magazine for a number of years, and Peretz had over a period of time become closely associated with a kind of... I hesitate to use the term neo-liberal because it doesn't quite capture it, but he was associated with a phase of the 'reform', in scare quotes, of the Democratic Party in the United States somewhat similar to what went on with the Labour Party in the UK, where it was trying to separate itself from its affiliation with unions and the welfare state and be seen to become a much more business-friendly party.

This particular story hints at what was clearly the larger problem with these stories, which is that the reason he was so successful is people wanted them to be true. And it suggests something that it's really critical to understand about the hoax, which is that it tells as much about us as it tells about the hoaxer, because it relies on what we believe to be true, or almost want to be true, or assume to be true about the world. So he feeds on our own desire for a story, something that cognitive psychologists like to call 'confirmation bias'.

One of the reasons my friend is particularly – and he’s a poet, predominantly, this is his second book of non-fiction – one of the reasons he’s interested in this particular topic, though, is because of one of the things that often happens around frauds. It happened for example with the Howard Hughes biography that Neil mentioned yesterday, which is being reissued as a novel, and it happened with James Fry, where it’s sort of suggested that these things are novels. It happened also with an Australian book by a woman named Marlo Morgan, a book called *Mutant Message*, which is about a white lady who manages to get adopted by an Aboriginal tribe in Australia and reports about their purity and their telepathic abilities to communicate, enacting all the fantasies of the West about how these primitive tribes are possessed of this sort of tremendous wisdom, a phenomenon you will see in movies featuring the old African-American lady dispensing words of wisdom in a very beautiful voice, or in the case of a man, typically James Earl Jones, being the stable, wise person, something that you also see in anything around Native American representation in films and literature too. What interests him and angers him is: is turning it into a novel any less corrupt? Does it make it in any way truer? And what he’s interested in is arguing that it doesn’t. That simply saying ‘Okay, well I guess I made some of this stuff up but it’s basically true’ is the most pernicious lie of all, because what it maintains is all those cultural stereotypes, all those lies that we tell ourselves about the world, and it is the duty not just of the non-fiction writer but also of the poet and the fiction writer to be questioning those received truths rather than simply glibly surfing along them.

A nice example, again Neil mentioned it yesterday, is of a young woman who is in fact named Margaret B. Seltzer, but pretended to be part Native American, part African American, living in South Central Los Angeles, and it is again another example of where it would have been so easy to know that this was completely made up. Her dialogue is appalling. I’ll quote a little bit of it. She’s allegedly talking to a drug dealer at the side of the street and she says – they’re discussing whether or not she would be kind of a drug mule for him and she wants to be – and so she says: ‘He thought about it for a minute, then laughed again. “Aiight, sho nuff, you right. Ima take a chance on you. You meet me here tomorrow morning befo skool. You go ta skool, right?”’ And as my friend

continues: “The gap between the narrator’s “Standard English” voice and her use of slang is not only strained. Neither her story nor her vernacular is believable, resorting to clichés: hers is the distortion of Black English taken not from life but from plantation novels and gangsta cinema. Rather than a living language, these are the broad strokes of speech misheard, language as a bunch of missteps learned nowhere near “skool,” when in truth the vernacular is actually a varied, vivid commentary on language itself. Hence, the old joke: “You know the difference between a dialect and a language? An army.”

Speaking of armies, one of the things that also becomes clear as we look at the exaggerations and perversions of non-fiction and indeed fiction is a great hoax played by Virginia Woolf and some of her friends about six months before she made the famous comment about when modernism began, which is in late 1910, she says modernism begins, but six months before that she and her friends applied beards, in her case, applied black-face and a turban and showed up pretending to be a visiting delegation from the government of Abyssinia. They board *HMS Dreadnought*, which was the great battleship of the British Navy in the lead-up to World War I, and they are taken on board the ship. One of the officers on board the ship is in fact Virginia Woolf’s own cousin, yet he fails to recognize Virginia Woolf in a crappy beard and shoe polish. It takes a week for the hoax to be discovered. Why? Because it is very easy to believe what you want to believe about Abyssinia when you’ve never been there.

How can we deal with this particular problem? One of the challenges around all this is that what I’m effectively saying is that everything is fucked. That if the problem is not just how do we deal with the truth content of non-fiction but how do we deal with the truth content of any form of writing whatsoever, how can we proceed? I’d like to suggest that we could begin by looking at a very, very different book, a book called *The Black Swan* by Nassim Nicholas Taleb. The book is mostly focused on debunking economics, and especially bond traders and stock traders, by basically saying that humans have a very hard time understanding catastrophic risk. We’re good at figuring out the risk of missing your

train in the morning, or maybe the risk of marrying the wrong person, or the risk of dropping your iPad or...

Samuel Titan – Smashing a glass.

Richard Nash – Or smashing a glass. But what we are not good at figuring out is the risk of when earthquakes will happen or the risks of when an asteroid will hit our planet or the risks of when the stock market will crash. But one of the cognitive psychological attributes of our species that he zeroes in on as being partially responsible for this is something he calls ‘the narrative fallacy’. Consider the following statement he offers from E.M. Forster, who is attempting to describe what narrative is: ‘The king died and the queen died.’ Those are two facts. Compare that to: ‘The king died and then the queen died of grief.’ It is much easier to remember the second sentence because it takes two facts and turns them into a single narrative idea.

As a species one of the things we had to struggle with as we sort of became the kind of planet-dominating species that we’ve become is that we have to deal with too much information, we have to process large amounts of information and as you can see just looking at this room, we had to process a gymnasium full of books up until, you know, thirty years ago. Now we have to process vast terabytes of data on the internet and so how do we do that? We do that through narrative, because narrative helps simplify information. If you were to do a book that consisted of random strings of words for fifty thousand words, it would be absolutely impossible to remember. If on the other hand you had a book that consisted of nothing but a sentence that said ‘Richard Nash broke his glass in his dessert last night’ five thousand times, you would remember it very easily. Narrative is somewhere in between. Narrative is how our brains condense information and not just condense it but allow it to be remembered and allow it to be retold, so you can retransmit the information.

In Anand’s example of his song yesterday, poetry is even more powerful in doing that, and song, because of the rhythm. So rhythm also provides an ability to kind of condense and remember information. Effectively what happens, though, is that when you are

condensing and simplifying information you leave stuff out. Did the queen die of grief? Was the queen murdered? Was the king murdered by the queen's lover who then had a fight with the queen and then killed the queen? These are all pieces of information that get left out, because we are very comfortable with the idea that the king died and the queen died of grief. And so what Teleb asks us to do in a certain sense is something very simple and also very difficult, but also I think something that we in book culture as writers, as editors, as literary journalists have the ability and opportunity to do, which is to be sceptical, which is to start to not just look for a good story but to think about when a story might be too good. As much as it is so often our job to find the good story, the one that will sell, the one that has the right ending, the one that has a frame that will work, simultaneously it's our responsibility to look for where it is too good.

As a hint of how difficult this is within our own particular life, I'm reminded of the problem of proofreading. That's something we do understand, that proofreading is not just something that you do once, where it's the editor, the developmental editor, or the acquisitions editor, or the commissioning editor that does it - you pay somebody else, who is a professional proofreader, to do it. Why? Because there is a narrative fallacy that goes on in our brains and you've probably seen this. You know, the number of times the internet has produced a different meme where you look at a sentence and you're asked: what's the problem with this sentence? And you realize that the way the line break is, the word 'the' is repeated twice. Because we are very good at looking for patterns. Like narrative, which is a subset of patterns. Patterns are how we are able to condense information, but we are too good at finding patterns, we find causality where causality doesn't exist, we complete incomplete sentences, we mentally delete sentences that have an error in them, and so proofreaders will use little tricks, like covering over the words in the rest of the sentence so that they don't know what's coming next. So that their brain isn't looking for the word that should come next. And I would argue that that is something that we could then deploy in what we do.

If there was one thing that came out as another kind of undercurrent of yesterday it was about failure and learning to be

able to handle failure in productive kinds of ways. To not just repeat the same error again and again but to learn from it, to fail again, to fail better. Thank you.

Maarten Asscher – Richard that was totally splendid. Thank you very much. One of the most inspiring talks I've heard for a long time.

Richard Nash – You can't say inspiring.

Maarten Asscher – But it was inspiring, and I'd like to leave that inspiration intact and not proofread your inspiration, but still I think since we aim at the business of writing and the business of publishing, I should just ask you one or two questions to see how this wonderful image that you project of exaggerations and perversions in the field of narrative non-fiction, how we earthlings could try and use that imagination in writing, translating and publishing narrative non-fiction. For example, I ask myself looking at your project Sirens, this imaginary news website, the database Cassandra, the idea of the long con: how do you finish a project, how do you shape a project in a form that is, well, more or less transferable or even marketable?

Richard Nash – Yeah, it's been an interesting process, editing. I mean we've done only I think about fifteen pieces so far, and it's operating within... It's a classic challenge for any art form when you have this broad canvas. You have a situation where anything is possible. As you all know, when anything is possible, almost nothing is possible. We need rules to create, don't we?

Maarten Asscher – And constraints.

Richard Nash – Yes, you need constraints. The haiku, the villanelle: poetry is full of these constraints. Part of the power of the physical book is that it is something that doesn't make sense to produce at sixteen pages and doesn't make sense to produce at 5,000 pages but does make sense to produce at between 250 and 400 pages. We have built an entire mode of knowledge and entertainment around the arbitrary constraint of the manufacturing process of print. So in Sirens part of the challenge is that everything is possible, so we have to set up a few rules, and one of the rules that is useful is that it has to

happen exactly seven years in the future. But the other rule becomes a little bit more complicated and you start to get into the wheeze of figuring out how to function as a useful editor in these situations. One example I have is of a piece called 'Thirty-Six Hours in Detroit', which is modelled on a series of travel pieces that are done in *The New York Times*. Somebody spends thirty-six hours in a city and eats certain food or goes to certain restaurants.

Maarten Asscher – Parachute journalists.

Richard Nash – Pure parachute journalism, exactly. And so we're basically mimicking this particular conceit and he's going to Detroit in 2022 and the concept there is that Detroit, much like, say, Williamsburg or the docklands in London, is now super-hip. Everybody's gone there, there are nightclubs and there is Detroit's equivalent of the High Line, which is a park in New York City that was converted from an above-ground freight train line that those of you who go to Book Expo America will have an opportunity to go for a very pleasant walk along these days. We're pretending that this exists in Detroit in 2022 and the writer imagined that there was a Jeff Koons sculpture on this High Line of a naked reclining Lee Iacocca. Lee Iacocca was the iconic chairman of the Chrysler Corporation in 1980s, a kind of a larger-than-life businessman, and I had to say... I sort of looked at this, I was like... there may very well be a Jeff Koons sculpture on the High Line, but a naked reclining Lee Iacocca is too good to be true. Let's try a more boring version of the 1955 Chevy that's oversized and long. But that's so boring! Yes, I'm sorry. It will be truer. And that's the kind of... You know I'm offering an anecdote that shows me in a good light. I know that there will be times... At times I still wonder if that glued-together Dave Eggers essay collection is too good to be true. I'm desperately hoping he will actually do it, so that I turn out not to have been fooled by my own desire to have a fun story to tell and at a non-fiction conference in Amsterdam. But I think in some ways it's kind of the opposite of going after the exaggerations and perversions. You try to explore them in order to be able to see from 30,000 feet, but when you're down in the forest you have to kind of become very boring and pedantic and slow and kind of stupid. As a consultant I'm working on this crazy project where I'm the editor-in-chief of a biotech startup, the details of which I'm not going to go into but I

have to edit about a hundred different stories that are profiles of genes by popular science writers. I know nothing about this topic, but what I try to do is use my own stupidity as a way to be a productive editor, to always ask the stupid questions of the writers and not be afraid to ask the embarrassing question, and I do think that's useful. I think Anand's and Lieve's conversation yesterday provides all kinds of little examples of some of the tricks we have to use to create... To change frames, right? I mean, one of the interesting points that I do think is worth making is that yes, a Westerner can never understand the East, let's say, but also: does the self ever understand the own self? If you flip the self and the other, can it be said that your friend who's now in Dubai truly understands her own self? I think you have to be humble about how much you understand her, but I think you're entitled to a certain kind of super-careful arrogance around how you may have a perspective to offer that is not visible. We see that so much in our own interpersonal lives, and I think an editor or writer role can be very productive provided you're willing to ask a dumb question that makes it look like you know sweet fuck all about the Arab world.

Maarten Asscher – I have a very dumb question. How does Sirens earn money?

Richard Nash – Oh. So Sirens... Someone else asked me yesterday: what's a serial entrepreneur? And I said: someone who fails a lot. I know about failing, I'm not sure if I yet know that I've failed better. Sirens right now is not trying to make money. In a certain sense I often like to say a startup is like a book. You have to spend several years working on it before you can even publish it and start making money doing it.

Maarten Asscher – But do you have a projected business case?

Richard Nash – Yes, the hypothetical business case is basically a kind of arrogant one, which is that a lot of big brands are fascinated about the future, whether you're a consumer electronics company like Samsung or a massive Swiss or Munich-based reinsurance company, you have to figure out what's going on in the future and typically they hire economists, social scientists, technologists, to try to tell them about the future, but I believe the future is not

something that just happens to us and that you dispassionately predict. The future – we make the future. And I think especially writers and artists imagine futures and then technologists make it. There's a guy I know, an Australian guy, who was working for Google Creative Labs in Paris for a long time and he's now back in Australia, and he mentioned to me that half the engineers at the Google X lab, which is the project that does the driverless cars and the balloons delivering the internet and all kinds of other things, are simply trying to make things that they've read about in William Gibson novels. H.G. Wells of course was the first person to imagine a credit card, and so we believe that basically these companies will pay us to tell them about the future, will pay us to teach them how to make an ad that imagines what people will do in hotel rooms in 2022.

Maarten Asscher – Terrific answer. Thank you very much Richard Nash. We move over to your left-hand neighbour for his presentation, Samuel Titan, Jr., who perhaps more conventionally but with an equal degree of diversity in his life combines teaching, editing a literary imprint and co-editing a magazine, after taking his degrees in philosophy and literature in São Paulo. Samuel, please.

Samuel Titan Jr.: A desire for intelligibility

Samuel Titan – Thank you Maarten and thank you the other Maarten for the invitation. It's a pleasure to be back in Amsterdam and to be in such great company. It occurs to me that I'm the perfect guest for a fiction/non-fiction conference, since my name is a mix of them. Titan is pure fiction and then every day I'm brought back to the fact that I'm 'Junior', which is pure psychoanalytic reality and non-fiction, so I think I'm at home here.

My theme, much as Richard's, is the kind of compromises we are sometimes all too willing to make in order to believe the things we would love to believe. We are basically talking about the same thing but maybe from different angles. I'll start with an anecdote. I was walking one of these days, one of these weeks, in downtown São Paulo and – of course it's a vice – I ran into a bookshop, a second-rate bookshop and I had to stop in front of it. I'm sure it's a familiar experience to most of you here. So I started

taking a look at the titles on show and there was this one about Inês de Castro, who is a Portuguese princess of the middle ages who was made a queen after she was dead, and it's a fable-like topic which pops up every now and then in Portuguese literature and most famously in Camões' *The Lusiads*, the epic poem that is central to Portuguese literature. And I thought: 'Well, a new book about Inês de Castro.' Then I realized that there was a subtitle, and the subtitle said: 'As dictated by herself', to a psychographer or whatever. And I said: 'Oh, this is interesting'. Of course I didn't read the book, the cover was enough, but it somehow has to do with other topics here. The fact that we're eager for fantasy, maybe much more so than before, but on the other hand that we are equally eager to have some seal of truth, of authenticity stamped onto it. So we are all too eager to read about mediaeval Portuguese princesses that become queens after they are dead and so on and so forth, or *Game of Thrones* or whatever else we read, whatever kind of romance we allow ourselves to read when nobody's looking at us, but then we are also eager to have this seal of truth, of fact, of non-fiction attached to it, so this is my theme today.

More specifically, I'd love to invite you to think and discuss about this thing that comes often with the idea that non-fiction is central to our experiences these days. We don't just want to have great non-fiction books, we want to have great non-fiction books that read like novels, and this is the thing that attracts and annoys me at the same time. What does it mean that a non-fiction book or any book at all should read like a novel? It irritates me because I think that the standard non-fiction book that you get everywhere these days, like the one Anand had in his pocket yesterday, the one about the Taj Hotel and so on and so forth, is a non-fiction book or maybe a serious effort at reportage that looks at the novel as the kind of narrative model that will provide intelligibility to it all.

We don't just want facts, we want understandable facts, facts that will somehow add up to something, to a story, as Richard just put it, but more specifically we don't just want them to build up a story, we want them to build up a novel. And then I keep thinking: why should this be so? Why should we look at the novel as the model for understandability? More to the point: what kind of novel are we looking at when we wish books to read like novels? My suspicion is

that actually most of the standard non-fiction you get these days has a very, very conservative model of what the novel is all about, so the novel that most non-fiction writers have in mind is this more or less clear-cut plot with very clear-cut characters that develop two or three maybe four lines of plot, so actually not so many, that intersect at given points for given reasons and so forth. And I keep thinking: is this really the novel? Is this how the novel came into the world, as this sort of ready-made model for intelligibility? This brings me back to – I'm a literature professor, so it's another professional vice – this brings me back to the origins of the novel in European literature. When the novel first came up, and let's give it a convenient date, let's look back to 1605 when Cervantes published the first part of *Don Quixote*: has it really got to do, is the central theme, the central point about the novel that it should make things understandable? Actually it's the other way round. Is the point about the novel, the point about a book, a novel like Cervantes', or like *L'Education Sentimentale*, which you quoted yesterday, or *Ulysses*, or *Mrs. Dalloway*, or *The Waves*, or whatever else – what will be the Dutch novelist to quote? Willem Frederik Hermans, *De donkere kamer van Damocles* – is the point of these books to make things readily understandable, or is it the other way round? I have a feeling that the best the novel has brought to European, to Western notions and now to world culture has got to do with this sense that reality is there; it's a way for us to question it, to research into it, to examine it, but then it's ultimately unreachable. It will always be there as a kind of irritant element, a provocative element that keeps us moving away from ready-made fictions, from ready-made stories.

I remember the great literary critic, Canadian critic, Northrop Fry, who once said that, well, human imagination left to itself keeps churning out the same thing; it needs something, it needs some irritant to produce something, like an oyster that needs some small irritant, a grain of sand, to produce maybe a pearl or something like that. So I have a sense that the novel actually, the history of the novel, should alert us to the kind of thing that is being served up as the non-fiction novel or whatever else. It's got to do actually with the experience of limits, gaps, silences, provocations, and of wanting to go ahead and not being able to go ahead, and this is what happens for example in Cervantes. We would love to make sense of what it's all about and we never actually manage to reach a

point in the novel where the whole thing is made understandable from a single perspective. Is he a madman, just a madman, or maybe more than a madman? Is the world around him just prosaic and stupid and trivial or is it true life inviting us to take a fresh look at it? The same holds true for another great novel, *Madame Bovary*. Is she a heroine, is she really something we should admire, is she someone we might as well both admire and despise and so on and so forth?

It keeps repeating itself. This is the kind of thing that keeps repeating itself in the history of the novel. Take Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale*. He once described it in a letter to a friend – he was halfway into the writing process of the novel, which it took him seven years I think – and he said: this is going to be not just a novel, it's going to be *l'histoire morale de ma génération*, the moral history of my generation, and then when you come to the actual novel, to the final text of the novel, well of course it's full of innuendos but there's nothing like a moral you could pick up and out of the novel. You're brought back, you're in 1870 when he finally publishes the novel, and you're brought back to 1848 and to the sense of puzzlement that these things are happening just in front of your face without a tag attached to them explaining what this or that means or who this character is or might be. They're there, very beautiful, in a sort of heightened opacity, as a heightened riddle, offering themselves and provoking us as we read.

Which makes me think, to put it in a more general sense, that the novel is that genre that tries to bring non-fiction into the world of fiction and so it's fiction of course, we all know it's fiction, but then the distinctive thing about it is that it tries repeatedly to bring some sort of reality, raw reality into the world of fiction as a challenge to fiction, as a challenge to our need and desire for fiction. *Madame Bovary* would be a much easier work to read if there were nothing uncertain about who she is and about what she's doing to herself, to her husband, to her little daughter and so on and so forth. But then it wouldn't be *Madame Bovary*, it would be something much simpler, much less ambivalent and much less interesting I dare say. And the thing about the non-fiction that we keep reading these days is that it seems to me to look at the – well, I don't want to sound like a policeman, much as Anand I don't want to tell you what you should read and what you should write – but I have the sense

that the worst of what you get as non-fiction today has got to do with a conservative take on the novel. People looking at the novel are thinking of maybe in the best case *Les Misérables* and not of *L'Éducation sentimentale*, *Madame Bovary*, *Don Quixote*, *Crime and Punishment* and so forth.

On the other hand you have second-rate fiction being published all the time in all languages. It would be easy to say it's an Anglo-American phenomenon but no, it's everywhere. The great American novel is being published everywhere in the world in many languages, and it looks the same everywhere, as you know. But also you have this kind of standard novel being written with a certain appetite for the seal of authenticity, of fact and so on. Maybe, and here I'm going to disagree with Neil, maybe it's also the case for example with an important book by Vargas Llosa, which is *The War at the End of the World*. As you know – I hope I won't be too patriotic here – it's a novel about this uprising in north-eastern Brazil in the last years of the nineteenth century. It's based on a Brazilian non-fiction classic called *Os Sertões* by Euclides da Cunha. Vargas Llosa is of course a completely honest man and he's all too ready to confess his debt to and admiration for this book, but then when you read it, the problem about it, to me at least, is that it's good, it's too well written, it makes for such an understandable plot, view and version of what happened there that it all of a sudden loses all of its interest, all of its intriguing character. Imagine a messianic uprising in a kind of desert somewhere in north-eastern Brazil in the first years of the Brazilian republic. These people want the emperor back and the emperor you should know comes from an Austrian family, so all of a sudden these people who've never seen the emperor want him back because they have some millenarian beliefs about this or that and so on, and it all ends in a massacre. People were not just killed, they were slaughtered by the thousands and all of a sudden this becomes fully accessible, fully understandable, and at the same moment I think: well, what's next, what's the next novel I'm going to read? The whole interest, the whole violence and the shocking character of it all gets lost the moment it's so readily and so maybe cheaply understandable. It makes history as readable as any standard novel you get pretty much anywhere, in sharp contrast to Vargas Llosa's own first novel about his own childhood and young years in Peru. I'm thinking of the very first one, *La ciudad y los*

perros, 'The City and the Dogs', which is absolutely great. Also because, well, you've probably read it, there's a shocking event in the middle of it and nobody really comes out of the novel really knowing what actually happened and who was behind it all.

So I wonder whether we are not moving in many cases towards a sort of ersatz reality, whether we are talking about novels that look for the stamp of authenticity or whether we're talking about non-fiction works that look for the readability of a novel. This is the kind of thing that keeps coming back to my mind every time I stop to think about these things. I was going to mention a few French books, but we could leave this for later, I think I've gone beyond my time.

Maarten Asscher – Okay, thank you very much. Thank you Samuel. I have a few questions for you, but I suggest we first have a fifteen-minute coffee break for cigarettes and coffee and we will continue when we return. Thank you.

Maarten Asscher – Please take your seats again, friends. Samuel, thank you very much for your presentation just now. I rather liked your interpretation of the novel as an inspiration for non-fiction, for narrative non-fiction, not the conventional popular bourgeois novel but the artistic novel, going back to the original imaginative qualities of the world of novelists. But it provokes the question: if you accept these very high-ranking artistic novelistic examples, what direction does that suggest for narrative non-fiction? How should we nurture narrative non-fiction? How should we direct it towards those wonderful examples?

Samuel Titan – In general terms I'd say that Richard put it beautifully just now. The thing is not to take the novel for granted, which is probably something we do too often. So what would a great non-fiction work look like? Let me pick up another of Neil's examples yesterday: George Packer's *The Unwinding*. It's a very interesting book, very intriguing book in many senses and I think it owes, some of it, of course it owes a lot to his on-field research on his subject and so on but I think it also owes a lot to the fact that he had very much in his mind a work like John Dos Passos' *USA* or *Manhattan Transfer*, or things like this. Maybe it's just wishful

thinking on my part, but I think that looking into these examples of great narrative... I was going to say craft, but it's not just craft. One of the problems about this whole non-fiction topic is that it's too well crafted, it's in a sense I think too well written, but looking at these great models might suggest other and different and diverse takes on whichever subject interests you at the moment.

Maarten Asscher – But do you think that in this day and age narrative non-fiction writers should look towards examples of written culture? Isn't it, as Richard has suggested, implicitly perhaps, more the multi-media, complex realities of an unwritten sort that form the true models of inspiration?

Samuel Titan – Yes, maybe, but why not the novel, since the novel has always done just this? Think of a novel like *Ulysses*, or *Don Quixote* again, and these writers were taking a look at everything around them, from chivalric novels in the case of Cervantes, or the Greek epics in the case of Joyce, but also today's newspaper or tomorrow's website and so on and so forth. The thing about the novel is that it mixes everything up and that's been a defining trait of the novel ever since it came out. I remember Bakhtin saying that the distinctive thing about the novel is that it's everything that is around it, each and every genre, the tragedy, the epic, the lyric, everything goes or can go into the making of a great novel and this is very much behind it, behind most of the novels I quoted, for example. So why not take a look at websites, multi-media, the TV, rumours, but also the modernist novel and works like the ones we've been talking about. It's not really my cup of tea, but David Foster Wallace is an example that comes to my mind. He's probably one of the most interesting authors that have written non-fiction in recent years, and I think that the fact of the interest in his writing comes also from his obvious debt to, his obvious links with modernism, all sorts of high-modernist works.

Maarten Asscher – Thank you. We will continue with these points later on, but I think this is a very appropriate moment to switch to our third presentation this morning, by Jannah Loontjens, who is, like the two previous speakers, but in yet another, different way, a combination of personae, if that's the right expression: academic, non-fiction writer, fiction writer, and she for example succeeded in

re-working her PhD thesis into a book for a general readership, preserving the essential themes that had taken up the argument of that academic text. So she's confident in switching between worlds of writing. Jannah Loontjens, please.

Jannah Loontjens: Too good to be fiction

Jannah Loontjens – Thank you. Already before this conference I decided that I would not prepare my talk before having heard the others on the first day. I did not want to repeat a discussion that we had already been having. So the plan was that I would write my talk last night. However, last night I came home and thought: you know what? It's really better if I write it tomorrow morning, when I'm fresh and sober. It seemed a good idea, but my brain somehow had another plan. So while trying to sleep, my mind started preparing, in that weird half-awake way, half-asleep, with crazy associations, which can be inspiring for poetry, but not really for a talk on fiction and non-fiction. So I didn't really sleep well and today *I* feel a bit jet-lagged.

Maarten Asscher – Welcome.

Jannah Loontjens – However, here I am. Being a writer of fiction and non-fiction, I often get asked if there is a difference, and if so what the difference is, between writing non-fiction and fiction. I must confess I do not really care if my essays are sold as fiction, non-fiction, philosophy, autobiography, or even inspirational self-help, as long as the label helps in selling the book. However, while the labelling afterwards is not all that important to me, I must say that there is an important difference for me between writing a novel and writing a non-fiction essay.

My answer to the question what the difference is, is usually that in my non-fiction work I try to explain things. I've used anecdotes and observations, but I always analyse them and explain something, whereas in my fictional work I never explained anything. In fiction I'd rather let the reader feel, see, and experience the world. I take the reader with me in a stream of thoughts and experiences of characters, but I never start explaining by using arguments, statements or theories. While writing a novel I feel like a

magician. I conjure up this world, these persons that become characters in my story. I can think of anything, and it could become part of my story. I see a rabbit in the grass along the street and I think: oh, the main character should have this inner dialogue with a rabbit. She should confess to the rabbit. So, that is a very different way of thinking and creating compared to non-fiction writing. However, this does not mean that I'm not concerned with truth while writing fiction. In a certain way I even believe that I can be more rigorously truthful, more honest in fiction. But what do I actually mean by this?

Yesterday different kinds of truth seem to have been at stake: truth as truthful, as the real, the objective, the authentic, the honest, the correct. However, what kind of truth do I mean when I say that I feel I can be more truthful in fiction? If we look at how truth is analyzed in history – and here my philosophy background comes in – if we start with the pre-Socratics and Plato, truth used to be connected to a higher truth, to the good and the Godly. To strive for truth and truthfulness in one's life also meant striving for the good. One could say that searching for truth was connected to a very personal, subjective goal: transforming one's soul; becoming a better person. This is a very different truth from the scientific, provable truth nowadays. One can be a very serious scholar, trying to unravel some kind of particular scientific truth, and be a horrible person, let's say in a family situation. The idea that revealing truth in one's work goes hand in hand with the wish to be a good and truthful person in social life has been lost for a long time, perhaps since the sciences emancipated themselves from philosophy, or perhaps after Descartes, the philosopher who wanted to find the fundamental truth on which we could start building a trustworthy vision of reality and humankind, a true representation of life and the world. After doubting everything in his *Meditations*, even the reliability of our senses, Descartes found his basic truth: *cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am. Even if we are dreaming and nothing of our reality is really real, we still know that we *think* that we see things the way they are, or we *think* we are dreaming. That we know for sure: we think. Thus, we are. In short, on the one hand we have the moral, Socratic kind of truth, connected to becoming a better person; on the other hand there is the truth that is connected to

proof and certainty, Descartes fundamentals, A is A, B is B. The last is the more common meaning that we are used to.

So how does this relate to my statement that I can be more honest and truthful in fiction? This is interesting, because I definitely do not mean that I attempt to become a better person while writing fiction or to mould my characters as exemplary people from whom we could learn life lessons, so as to become better people as Plato wished. Sooner the other way round. When I say that I can be more honest in fiction I mean that I can be ruthless, always in a subtle way but nonetheless ruthless. I can portray the ugly side of people, I show how people delude themselves, how they are unfaithful to themselves and to others. I let them say things that I would never dare say myself. If my characters were based on living persons who were still alive, then I would not write this way about them. The empathy and the shame that I feel in reality is a fear while writing fiction. However, in this way I do portray a very truthful side of people today, I would say. So this kind of truthfulness is closer to Descartes' truth than to Plato's. However, it does not concern a factual reality and perhaps therefore this kind of truthfulness, the rigorous truth or the ruthless portrayal of people, is something that is accepted in fiction and less in non-fiction, especially when it concerns psychological insights, motives and rhetoric of the mind. Fiction can be very intimate. We can follow the protagonist under the shower or having weird sexual fantasies – things I would never write about in essays. Fiction in that sense is actually more like acting. I would never tell very intimate details about myself, especially not to an anonymous public, but when acting, when you're playing a role, another character, you can easily do that, you can easily tell these embarrassing things, and that's how it feels when writing fiction.

Actually in my essays I do use personal experiences, but not in such a personal way. So I do actually use autobiographical facts and experiences, but it feels less intimate. I can write in such an intimate and revealing way in fiction because it's not really about myself. So now I'm thinking of another duality concerning truth, the duality that Virginia Woolf pointed out. (Virginia Woolf comes up this morning for the third time.) In two of her most anthologized essays, 'Modern Fiction' and 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', Woolf

attacks realism, arguing that the novelist should no longer attempt to describe the world as objectively as possible. Instead, Woolf holds, the novelist should be concerned with the spirit. This does not mean that she does not want to be truthful in her descriptions of reality. In fact she tries to achieve a more authentic engagement with the real than realism could possibly attain. This distinction that Woolf makes could be described as a distinction between inner and outer truthfulness. The reality that we can observe is the outside reality, which Woolf actually characterises as materialist – she calls realism materialist – but the inside reality is the reality of thoughts, afterthoughts, associations, feelings and memories. It is the truth of this inside reality that interests me when writing fiction.

Maarten Asscher – Thank you Jannah. A very interesting, very auctorial credo that you have formulated here. Still I’m asking myself: can I honestly say that fiction is not really about myself? Is it reasonable to maintain that? Is it a tenable position to maintain that you are in a way two different persons, one person that you are really and the other that is acting? Is that how you feel it?

Jannah Loontjens – Yes, that is how I feel it. But I mean, of course all fiction in a way is autobiographical, and all autobiography is fictional. Because when you’re writing fiction you’re using all these observations and all these thoughts that are all part of you, of course, but it doesn’t mean that the main character, the protagonist, is you. That’s something else. The book is part of you, but you’re not the protagonist.

Maarten Asscher – But narration, is that not also a form of acting? And autobiographical essay writing is also a theatrical dimension, in a way.

Jannah Loontjens – That’s true, that’s true. And actually I didn’t mention the whole point that I was going to mention, that’s in the booklet, which is that that actually sometimes experiences from my life, I think they are too good to be fiction. So not too good to be true, but really too good to be fiction, because if I used them in a story they would lose their power. So this is kind of interesting. I just wrote an essay and I started it with the anecdote that when we’d just moved to the Netherlands my mother fell in love with this man

who was carrying always a metal saw with him, because he was claustrophobic and he wanted to be able to saw his way out of any space that he could maybe get trapped in. This anecdote is great to describe the spirit in which I was brought up, but if I were to use that anecdote – and it’s a good anecdote – but if I were to use it in fiction, I’d have to make something else of it. This metal saw would become a metaphor. Why would you have a man with a metal saw? It has to tie up with all these other things happening in the fictional story. So this fits better in non-fiction, and it’s good because it happened, because it’s true. So it’s actually weird that you have things that are too good to be fiction.

Maarten Asscher – I also very much liked your definition of outside truth and inside truth – is that what you said?

Jannah Loontjens – Yeah.

Maarten Asscher – The inner truth and...

Jannah Loontjens – Well that’s something, if I can just react to that, because I was also thinking of Lieve, because that’s something that you do as a fiction writer, you do imagine what people are feeling and thinking. This is like the privilege of being a fiction writer and this is also I think what people found troublesome, right? When you actually start inhabiting the inner truth of someone in *The Rebels’ Hour* that you were talking about. That is maybe an important, er, yeah, borderline: inner and outside truth.

Maarten Asscher – I’m wondering how, Richard, how do you look upon these fifty shades of truth? Are there for you different degrees of truth, or is everything a lie except maybe one thing that you will not disclose?

Richard Nash – I’m very drawn to trying to focus on truth not as an outcome but as a process. And I know maybe that’s easy, but in practice it’s not. I mean it’s a glib answer in a panel discussion, but in terms of how you actually have to enact it in your daily life, your professional life, your personal life, your creative, artistic life, it feels like something that is asymptotic. It’s not something you get to but it’s something that you try to approach. I’m reminded – speaking of using actual personal examples – of conversations I’ve had with my

psychotherapist, and my attraction to these anecdotes of my childhood that I repeat again and again is that they've started losing truth content. I think there's a little echo of what I'm describing I think in the question of the saw, in that they become these things that you just repeat over and over again with girlfriends, with best friends, with strangers sometimes in some, you know, distant land where you feel like you can talk to anybody but also with yourself and with your shrink, that the truth starts kind of dripping out of them and it falls away, and all you're left with is a container that has factual truth but no longer has any truth value. What is the value we derive from the truth? And I think less of trying to get at truth along a continuum of factuality but rather as this struggle that we're continually in, redefining truth in order to get at it better, coming at it one more time. I'm reminded of how novelists who've done ten or twelve novels are terrified they'll never be able to write another novel, it's the last one, it's never going to happen again and then after two months, a year or five years they think: fuck it, I'm doing it again, I'm going to try one more time to actually get this stupid thing right, relative to all the other times I've failed before. I know that doesn't help very much with the truth of, let's say, politics. Unemployment rates are unemployment rates and inflation rates are inflation rates and I don't want to be glib around that stuff, but I also feel like we can still think: is the employment rate going up or down because of fourteen different reasons and all kinds of political explanations?

Maarten Asscher – And as you know, employment rates are a question of definition.

Richard Nash – Right.

Maarten Asscher – Because whom are you counting? From what age on? Are you counting the female population, or are you counting up to sixty-five, or up to sixty-seven? So even there I think the rates are a matter of insight.

Richard Nash – It's like Samuel was saying: the kind of truth that we're after here is a truth that is about making assumptions more complicated. It's almost like running away from a certain kind of

truth to get at some other truth that's a better truth than the truth that you've traditionally stuck with.

Jannah Loontjens – Not the simplified truth but the layered truth.

Richard Nash – Yeah.

Maarten Asscher – Samuel, could you perhaps from your mountainous top of the artistic novel enlighten us about the kind of truth you would like us to strive for?

Samuel Titan – Well some sort of truth that does not look like romance. I think we are talking here about the rise of non-fiction as a publishing, cultural and literary phenomenon, but the overwhelming phenomenon these days in publishing to my mind, and not only in publishing, is the rebirth of romance. We were brought up to think that we would be the heirs to modernism and we would do great things with that, but what we get in every sphere of life is romance. It can be soft-porn romance, as in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, it can be fantastic romances in *Game of Thrones*, but it's actually the same, the same thing. It's the same little quest story that ends up after a series of ordeals with some sort of happy ending. I have the feeling that we're reading the same story everywhere, or we're watching the same story wherever we go. It doesn't really matter whether it's *Fifty Shades of Grey* or *Harry Potter* or whatever, it's the same. So I would be happy to find, or to feel, that we are heading towards some sort of truth that has nothing to do with just that, with this epic quest for whatever it is.

Jannah Loontjens – If I may react, I found it interesting that you said of non-fiction books of which it's said 'it reads like a novel' that it's the conservative novel. And actually also that they don't refer to a novel as a work of fiction but they just refer to a novel as a well-written, compelling story, right? Whereas this whole idea of what a novel should be – it's not only about fiction but it's exactly about trying to find novel ways of telling, of narrating. That's been lost in a way, I agree with you.

Samuel Titan – Unsettling ways. We've been quoting Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet*, another possible translation would be 'The Book of Restlessness'. I would love to have restless stories and restless hints

at truth, not stable modes of truth taking over the scene. When you think that there are things like ‘reality shows’ – this should be a contradiction in terms. Again we take it for granted that it’s something that shows something about anybody, but it doesn’t show a thing about anyone.

Maarten Asscher – So I think there are already a few directions that are being suggested from this conversation on this side of the table for the direction that narrative non-fiction might take in the future and truth as a mentality, you might say, rather than as a goal, escaping categories, not trying to conform to what is already existent, so books that immediately make a difference as in Nina Sillem’s phrase of yesterday and what you just mentioned, unsettling ways of narrating, mirroring the imaginative qualities of the novel rather than the conventional storytelling. Are there perhaps out of the other participants other directions that you could suggest or authors in the audience or literary critics who would propose more windows in this future development of narrative non-fiction? I will now hand over the microphone, so I can’t say anything anymore. Who?

Annette Wunschel – I just wanted to add immediately to what you just said, that novels, non-standard novels, are about new ways of telling. I would add only that they are not just about new ways of telling but about integrating what can be known at the moment, that they are about knowledge, knowledge and the ability of man to handle what he can know at the moment. So that’s especially the case in the twentieth century, but it starts much earlier, even with *Don Quixote* or in German with Stifter’s *Der Nachsommer*, which is the first time that the weather doesn’t function any more as a medium between the individual and the outside, and taken up by the big novels in the twentieth century, Robert Musil in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, *The Man without Qualities*, which is a novel about war but also about mythology, which is knowledge that is no longer available for man. I think that is something which is changing at the moment, that knowledge is dispersed in all directions and it’s extremely difficult to integrate something that could be in the middle of life, a model of something. So I just wanted to say that novels were laboratories, I would say, on what can we know and how can we tell it, or in the German word *darstellen*,

integrate, in a way which can fit into a hat. So Borges is the opposite with his alphabet, telling the world in an alphabet which is never ending. It's always about what other reality is integrating in language also, to make it representable, and that is kind of a framework, a laboratory framework. It's not just about telling anything, it's about telling what we can know.

Jannah Loontjens – But why would the form then be more conservative now compared to a hundred years ago?

Annette Wunschel – I find it wonderful to say: don't take the novel for granted. It's very dispersed, what can be known. It started with the sciences, the revolution of science. Disciplines went apart. Nobody can now know everything. Which was different two hundred years ago.

Jannah Loontjens – But why would that lead to more conservative novels now?

Maarten Asscher – Perhaps that has to do with the fact that novels are being compartmented more and more, to suit the supposed tastes of certain audiences, who like novels with doctors, or novels with travellers, or novels with soft porn, or novels with whatever. That of course does no justice to the full imaginative potential and the stylistic potential of the novel. Please.

Christiane Burkhardt – Well I think because of the internet and all the information that is available for us in theory at every moment, there's too much information. It think that's why we strive for somebody who can explain things to us, maybe also in a very, alas, simplistic way. That's why these genres are selling well or why publishers try to sell answers in the end. And I think it's something, if I think of films again, it's like a bit of scripted reality, you know? They have these formats with scripted reality, it's a sort of mockumentary or whatever. And what you are doing, Richard, is also a sort of a fantastic scripted reality. You are trying to foresee the reality and you script it, but it may well turn out very differently of course and we know that it's scripted reality, whereas in scripted reality formats, often people don't really know that it's scripted, they take it for granted, and that's a big difference, I think. We shouldn't take it for granted.

Richard Nash – Yeah, I mean Sirens in a certain sense is designed to be a conceit that is perfectly transparent. It's built in. It has to question its own truth because it has to be fiction, unless we're time travellers. So it does become this kind of act which purports to be an answer but is obviously disclosing that it is really a question. And I think in some ways that's the kind of truth we're talking about or that we're trying to counterpose to cliché or to conventional form or to received wisdom. The process of truth as a question rather than truth as an answer, and publishing always has a problem with that, because of course answers are frequently more commercial than questions.

Maarten Asscher – But is there a fundamental difference, Richard, between the fiction of Sirens and say the fiction of Aldous Huxley, George Orwell and Ray Bradbury?

Richard Nash – I don't think so. I think they are partaking of the same thing. They're an effort to build a new world out of the world that we have, out of part of the world we have right now, using the world we have right now as a scaffolding to imagine another world that you try to make as reasonably complete as possible, with its own internal logic, and then create internal arguments within it and the reflection then on our own time is designed in some kind of dialectical way to suggest choices that we as individuals and as a species have to make. It tries to draw attention to agency, that we have agency: we have choices, how are we going to use them? I think that drives a lot of the most sophisticated science fiction too.

Maarten Asscher – The purpose of this conference as I see it is not only to explore all these interesting elements but also to suggest how narrative non-fiction could move forward, what new forms, what new shapes and ideas could foster its advancement. I'm still hungry for more ideas and suggestions as to how we can move narrative non-fiction forward in its development by the examples that Samuel has given of the truly great artistic novels, or the example that Richard poses with his website-cum-conceit project, the long con, the hoax. What is the narrative non-fiction equivalent of this imaginative approach to fictional writing? Is there an artistic pendent, a narrative non-fiction pendent to the artistry that goes

into what Samuel and Richard are describing? Could you write such a book?

Jannah Loontjens – Now I'm working on a book of essays, and essays are also a sub-genre of non-fiction, right? But it is combining descriptions of historical reality, philosophy, theory, autobiography, so it is in a way experimental, but I think this is also maybe hard to label and therefore people, or really bookshops, will find it hard to sell. Where to put it? So that's... I don't know. In a way I find experiments always interesting, but they're not always applauded by reviewers, they will say: ugh, what's this, where should we...? And also not by the market. So that's actually sad, but what to do? I don't know.

Maarten Asscher – Still, if books are sufficiently original, they become quite a craze, even if they have a most unlikely format. I remember this book about a broken relationship in the form of an auction catalogue auctioning all the remains of that relationship. A fantastically well-made book. That is perhaps not narrative non-fiction, it is anti-narrative non-fiction, but in an inverted way it nevertheless tells a story. Does such an example appeal to you, Samuel?

Samuel Titan – Yeah, in a way. Since you want names it occurs to me that one of the French books I was going to mention and one of the books that really struck me recently is a non-fiction book by Marcel Cohen. It's called *Sur la scène intérieure*. It was published by Gallimard in 2013 and Cohen is a great writer. He's published a number of travel books and novels, conventional novels I must say, but then he comes up with this book about his parents, his family that was deported and gassed in 1943. He only escaped because his nanny decided to take him for a walk in a nearby park. They come back in time to see the truck going away and so he is left with very few actual remembrances of who his parents, his little sister and his grandparents were, and he's also left with just a few objects that come to his hand a few years later and so it's an attempt at reconstructing who these people were. He has tiny shreds of childhood memories and he has these few objects that were left behind by accident. And then he starts by thinking: this is a non-fiction book because it would be indecent to presume that I can

know what my parents felt or thought or whatever as these things were going on. So this is one example of what a great work – to my mind at least, my taste if I may – what a great work of non-fiction might be. As I say, it's a book from 2013. On the other hand we're talking about the way non-fiction writers sometimes tend to take the novel for granted, but the other important thing is that a novelist shouldn't take reality for granted. That's as important. And another name for you and one of the striking books that have come out of France recently is a novel, it's described as such, by Jean Echenoz, it's called *14*. Grégory and I were talking about it yesterday. It's a very short novel allegedly based on a diary, a journal left by an ordinary World War I soldier, a French soldier, and it's a diary of what a day in the trenches looked like and it's not epic at all, of course. I mean, most of it consists of just waiting to see what comes next, and sometimes nothing comes next because everyone is waiting to see what comes next, basically, until a bomb strikes their trench, and that's it. So the great thing about it is that this could have been turned into a bad epic novel about the First World War published in time for the centenary and so on, but no, you barely manage to see the war and to absorb the great outlines of where these people are and what they are doing. It's a very honest attempt, fictional attempt, to get into the boots of this soldier, with lots of non-narrative chapters. Indeed one of the most striking, we were talking about it yesterday, is a whole chapter dedicated to describing what a typical soldier's backpack was. And what is it? Fiction, non-fiction, I barely know. It's absolutely frightening. So here's a second name for you.

Maarten Asscher – Okay, thank you. Any more examples?

Richard Nash – Yeah, I just realized, forgetting I was once a traditional book publisher. There were two books that I did, one in 2003 called *Jane, A Murder*, and it is a book-length poem that is a non-fiction essay about the murder of the author's aunt in the late 1960s, believed at the time to have been one of multiple murders by a serial killer who was murdering women in Ann Arbor, Michigan, near the University of Michigan. Her aunt was murdered before she was born, but her aunt was a very forward-thinking, progressive woman. She had argued with her parents about wanting to go to law school, she'd been able to go to law school, and the author grew up

with this idea of her aunt, this sort of almost romantic idea of her aunt as the woman who never got a chance to be all that she could be as a professional, creative, emancipated woman. She, the author, her name is Maggie Nelson, always thought that she could go ahead and live the life that her aunt never lived. But the interesting thing is that the book, the poem, goes into analysis around whether or not the woman was in fact murdered by the serial killer, or was she murdered by somebody else, and the poem goes into complicated things around witnesses, lazy police, forensic evidence, and crazily enough about three months before the book was published her family was called by the Michigan state police to be told that the case was being reopened, thirty-five years after the murder had happened. They had found a different person and forensic evidence had in fact linked it to this other person. The American crime TV show *Twenty-Twenty* did a big story around it and then one of the commercial publishers asked her to do a book about the experience of having written a non-fiction poem about that, but ironically that book fell much more into the kind of traditional true-crime structure and completely failed, whereas this poem was a finalist for the Pen Award for the art of the memoir. The more conventional memoir completely died a death of the sort of boring usual true-crime bullshit that gets trotted out with a bloody red cover, whereas the poem has gone on to have a real life. It's funny, her mentor is a writer by the name of Wayne Koestenbaum, who is a novelist, poet and literary critic, and he's done a lot of very complicated stuff at the edges of fiction and non-fiction, but the most extreme case was a book I published also called *Hotel Theory*. And *Hotel Theory* is two books in one, one book is a non-fiction book of cultural criticism and philosophy about hotels, and the kind of Baudrillardian way in which a hotel is a simulacrum of a home, and it's structured as an abcdarium: A is for ... B is for Baudrillard, you know it goes through the whole thing. But parallel – so this is a split, it's like a bilingual edition – on the other side of the column on each page is a novella, set on top of a hotel in Los Angeles in what appears to be the near, almost apocalyptic future where the Chinese may be about to drop a nuclear bomb on the United States and the sort of corpulent, cheesy operatic... I'm spacing on the guy's name, a famous singer who played piano and dressed up extravagantly...

Maarten Asscher – Liberace.

Richard Nash – Liberace and Lana Turner are hanging out by the hotel swimming pool and having this extended debased conversation about whether or not he can get an erection to fuck her. So a novella and a non-fiction book functioning as a weird very, very, very strange simultaneous translation of one another. So there you get two. To take the exaggerations and perversions example, the most exaggerated and perverted example.

Maarten Asscher – Samuel, is this the kind of narrative non-fiction aspiring to the artistic novel that you are referring to?

Samuel Titan – Maybe let's say that Cohen's book for example... It's unthinkable without Proust, but then it's a Proust without the madeleines. Of course there are moments in it when you almost wish there were something like this kind of resolution, but no, there is going to be no madeleine scene in which all the past comes back and shows itself in its perfect form and so on. So it's Proustian in a sense, but then it's decidedly non-fiction.

Maarten Asscher – Jannah, would this be too wild a road for you to travel as a writer? Or do you feel at liberty to use your imagination to such heights and breadths?

Jannah Loontjens – You know the book that Richard was talking about is also, it's almost like conceptual art in a way, it's commenting on what literature is or what it can do and so I don't know. Personally I'm not really interested in writing such books, because really when I'm writing I like to describe this world that has a certain coherence to it somehow. But this is the kind of writer that I am, so it's not that I don't think it's interesting. I just said that I like experimenting, but I was just thinking: what is it that I want to experiment with and in between which boundaries? Because I don't like it when it's too experimental and it's actually just complicated or trouble to read. Then I might get irritated or can think: uh-huh, well, it's an interesting idea.

Samuel Titan – Then it becomes Dave Eggers' glued-up essay collection.

Jannah Loontjens – Yes, it's a fun idea, or interesting, but do you still want to read it? So yeah, well, there is a boundary there too.

Maarten Asscher – A contribution from Neil Belton.

Neil Belton – Thinking of the purity of genres of writing, it's interesting that nobody has mentioned Roberto Bolaño in this discussion, with his marvellous novel whose title has gone completely out of my head, which is partly a pursuit of a mythical German writer but also turns into...

Maarten Asscher – 2666.

Neil Belton – Yes, which turns into an extraordinary almost forensic recreation of the circumstances in which thousands of Mexican women have been murdered and disappeared in the border zones between Mexico and the US. It's an extraordinary piece of writing. That's one example, and there's another, poetic example, he's now being revived, the work of Charles Reznikoff, an extraordinary poet who wrote epic poems that are based on trial transcripts. They're like a poetic history of American violence through trial transcripts of the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century, with records of violence against unions, blacks, lynchings, violence against women, domestic violence, and they sort of vanished and they're now being I think rediscovered. He was an extremely interesting writer. But I've been inspired by Samuel to commission a non-fiction book which follows a single character in encyclopaedic detail through a European city in the course of a day, which will be confined to twenty-four hours and which will attempt to... It will be a non-fiction *Ulysses* in fact.

Samuel Titan – I'm happy that you mention Reznikoff. We were just talking about him. Again, is he a great poet, or are his books great books? In a very important sense, no. It's hard really to say 'I love Charles Reznikoff'. But then you can't bypass them. That's the thing. And I'm happy that he's now going through a revival. The same for Bolaño. What is this? It's certainly not the standard Latin American novel that you can expect every summer from Isabel Allende or someone like that. It's the best piece of writing to have come out of Latin America in recent years. I wish there was something like this in Brazil but no, there is nothing like this. I'm really happy you mentioned this one book.

Maarten Asscher – Grégory?

Grégory Martin – I just wanted to respond to a question about the future. I would like to introduce a point I discussed with the other Maarten while he prepared the conference, which is about the next readers of non-fiction, because if we talk about the future we need to talk about who will read books in the future. So let's consider teens and young adults today and maybe they're fond of TV series, the American TV series, which are very good in their narrative. And maybe we should try to build bridges between what we are doing and the kind of narrative they are aware of and familiar with and love, because maybe entertained brains are made by what they see on the TV and if we don't offer them products that fit with his kind of narrative we will fail. So if instead of thinking about what will be the next narrative non-fiction writer we should think of who will read us next. It will be partly the youngsters. Sorry, that's not really a question. It's an observation about: what should we do to find a new audience?

Maarten Asscher – How do we find a readership for these interesting experimental new narrative non-fiction ideas that we are discussing now? I think that's a very practical consideration that especially the people here from publishing houses and bookshops cannot escape. I was also reminded by our discussion just now of a remark you made yesterday, Grégory, because we are exploring the boundaries of, well, the new narrative non-fiction, you might say, and there seem to be hardly any boundaries if I listen to all the creative experimental vistas that are being painted for us, but there is a slight problem, and the problem is called the non-fiction police. We discussed it yesterday. The police is always listening in on us and they are now, and I just got a call. For example, imagining Daniel Pearl's thoughts in the moments before his execution may be very interesting from the point of view of innovative narrative non-fiction writing, but it is completely unacceptable. It cannot be done. And imagining Assani's living habits and movements when he was alone in his room without having witnessed these yourself as a writer is not acceptable. So how are we, apart from the business model and the readership, how are we combining all the things we would like to do in non-fiction with the assumption, which the non-fiction police is guarding for us, that what we write should have at least a sufficient basis in truth? Because otherwise we are deceiving the world.

Richard Nash – One thought is that we need to get the non-fiction rebel alliance to start taking out the non-fiction storm-troopers. You could combine these two questions and say: well, given that there is a significant democratization of media, the ability of anyone now to be able to in some ways publish their opinions about what they are reading as opposed to just the people who are allowed to write for newspapers, the question came up yesterday that Livia mentioned which was: well, can we make other categories? And it occurred to me that one of the things that you have seen very much in social media is the evolution of what you could call folksonomies as opposed to taxonomies. Hashtag culture. Generally speaking the categories that we have are categories generated by publishers, booksellers and librarians, and they are somewhat circumscribed by the tyranny of the shelf. There can only be one shelf. There can only be one number in the library catalogue that says: Where is the book? And so what you start to get now are hashtags that describe... The best example that I can think of that is relevant to this particular case, and it's a broad one, is something that's just called #longreads. That is an effort for people to take something that might have appeared in a GQ or something that might be on the sophisticated American sports website *Grantland* or in a literary review like the *Virginia Quarterly Review* and make all that accessible to anyone who is interested in deep dive five- to ten-thousand-word writing about things, and that starts maybe to get a little bit at both dealing with the non-fiction police, who say that, well, *Grantland* can't be doing sophisticated writing about the economics of the Qatar World Cup and no one's going to read an article in a 500-copy circulation literary review, and could start to build from the ground up both the sense of readership and also ways to defend against the handcuffs and the paddy wagons of the non-fiction police.

Samuel Titan – I think the non-fiction police is just part of the game. We have to live with it and we're talking here about debated, contested territory, so in a sense it's a good thing the non-fiction police is there, so that we can fight it and expand our territory and then recede and so forth, that's how the thing works.

Lieve Joris – And they will change as well, I think. I mean, supposing they could be here today or had been here yesterday, they

might change their views as the non-fiction police. They're not fixed necessarily.

Jannah Loontjens – I just wanted to add that literature is an art form. And non-fiction is maybe not yet seen completely as an art form, it's still connected to journalism or to reportage. Whereas when it's emancipated enough and seen as an art form there will be also more liberty in how you can write and there will be less policing. It could be.

Christiane Burkhardt – Also, talking about policing I think it's also very important who does what. If we're talking again about the fact that someone imagines the last hour before the death of Pearl, then what would have happened if his widow had written the very same thing? I think that it would have been viewed completely differently, because maybe she has the right to talk about her husband, and if she is doing it herself she's not hurt by anyone but maybe by herself, so it's a completely different perspective. Like in Germany often if you want to write a critical book about Israel or Jewish orthodox religion or whatever, you can do it if you're Jewish because then you're not suspected of being anti-Semitic or something like this. So I think it's always also important who does what. For some people they're allowed to do it and others maybe, for a moral debate, they aren't.

Maarten Asscher – Marco.

Marco Vigevani – I wanted to go back to what Grégory said. I think he has introduced two very important and until now uninvited guests to this conference, which are Mr. Plot and Mrs. Saga. These are two very important popular forms that come from TV series, as you said. The narrative is going this way and the book narrative is being pushed also this way. To cope with this tendency, which is huge. I mean the TV series are a mass product and I think this is also maybe part of the explanation of why there has recently been a disaffection of the young public for books, because while books have tried to be more imaginative, more literary, they lack what we call narrative drive. The other part is inspiration. There is inspiration, then there is narrative drive. If there is no narrative drive you can forget about the book. So we have this strong push in

one direction and of course we are trying to cope with it, to deal with it, but at the same time we are trying to defend another idea of literature, more imaginative, more challenging. So I think this is a big, big question about books nowadays, and about the competition between books and other forms of narrative and also of non-fiction narrative.

Maarten Asscher – I would say that these are the two truths that we have to address. The outside truth of the market, the business model, the form in which you reach a new readership, and the inner truth that asks the question: can truth ever be an art form or can truth only be the truth and there is nothing else? You have truth and non-truth. I think your statement just now gave me that idea. That is possibly the 30,000 dollar question: can truth ever be an art form or can it only be the truth or not the truth?

Jannah Loontjens – And then there's truth in the Cartesian sense of a provable reality, facts you can check. I think actually that's a good conclusion. When you really have to deal with the truth and also really a truth that is important to a larger public, so not only your personal truth, because your personal truth is always kind of subjective and fictional, but when you're dealing with the truth of what's going on in Syria or, I don't know, the earthquakes in Groningen or something like that, it's difficult to find an art form maybe, or to then deal with the truth. So it's not only outer and inner truth, it's the truth of a general or a larger world or a larger environment. Maybe that's difficult, if you want to make a reportage, to also make it into an art form.

Maarten Asscher – Well, Samuel and Richard have suggested that respectively the grand artistic novel and the long con are ways to cope with the truth as art form, so not a momentary truth that can be checked by the police but a sort of eternal truth that can be envisaged as a vision, but that is not for all writers to accomplish. As we are constantly referring to those ten brilliant novelists of the past 500 years, then there are perhaps also not more than a few dozen of such really great narrative non-fiction writers to guide us into the future.

Samuel Titan – Well yes, maybe we will have to live with the fact that you don't have a Cervantes every, every...

Maarten Asscher – 500 years.

Samuel Titan – Every 500 years. We have to be a bit more patient. But still, I think that this kind of great writing oozes and drops down to other forms of writing. But asking everyone to be a new Cervantes or a Flaubert, that would probably be very unrealistic.

Maarten Asscher – And the idea of TV series. Does that appeal to you?

Samuel Titan – Let me go back to your first observation. Maybe the new thing will be a strange, impure but very interesting crossbreed of Joyce's *Ulysses* and a new take on the narrative form of TV series. I don't know. This would be entirely in keeping with what the novel has been doing over the past 500 years, mixing everything up. I could put in a few Brazilian writers no one knows anything about and that would still be the case. I mean, great writers working on the frontier between journalism and the novel and the short story and memoir writing and so on that produced great bodies of work. But I think yes, maybe the kind of narrative drive you get in TV series will nurture some new form of book.

Maarten Asscher – But if we want to keep the non-fiction police out, shouldn't we as a literary narrative non-fiction community set our own rules more clearly? What we think is acceptable as a way of treating the truth or enriching the truth or using literary techniques within a non-fiction environment. Because if we have these rules and we live by them, that is perhaps the best protection against outside interference from the non-fiction police. Grégory?

Grégory Martin – I would think a short undertaking that would truly underpin the truth, which will make the truth more entertaining but without lying. That's my key, that's how I perceive it, just making the truth more entertaining but staying the true truth, if you see what I mean.

Maarten Asscher – No, sorry, you'll have to repeat that please.

Grégory Martin – My key point is entertaining, like a TV series, but entertaining may be lying, so we should keep the entertainment on the true side. So maybe the point would be truly entertaining the truth, by making the truth more fun, more interesting, more enriching, but without betraying it.

Maarten Asscher – But should there be some kind of... You could think of a sort of oath as in a courtroom. You say: I declare that I will speak the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth. There is the form of the oath in the entry pages of a book saying all similarities with existing characters and so on.

Lieve Joris – Which is a lie, after all.

Maarten Asscher – Which is always a lie. But is there a possibility of self-regulation, artistic self-regulation, to preserve maximum liberty of imagination within a non-fiction environment?

Richard Nash – If the Hippocratic oath is ‘do no harm’, then probably the oath here looks something like: ‘Don’t lie’. But a larger issue is that we have effectively to allow ourselves to police one another, like the conversation we’re having here right now.

Maarten Asscher – Yes.

Richard Nash – I’m not sure we can do a kind of ten commandments, but what we can do is the Talmud, we can write texts, we can interrogate texts, we can interrogate one another, we can propose and argue, and I feel that it’s in that process that we will find something that anchors – not one great big anchor but a million little anchors.

Jannah Loontjens – Can I just come in?

Maarten Asscher – Yes, Please.

Jannah Loontjens – You know, when I just said that oh, perhaps reality when it’s presented as truthful is in contrast with art. Now I’m thinking: no that’s not possible, because art is really in itself very truthful. It’s actually more truthful than entertainment and often more truthful than reportage or news, right? But I’m just thinking

actually, this is again what I've tried to unravel a little by looking at Socrates, Plato and Descartes. I think we're using truth in so many different ways and that's really confusing, because you know really to be truthful or to be authentic or to have a real authentic take on something – almost all great art does this – that's a very different kind of truth than A is A, the facts, which are actually also not always reliable. So I don't know, I'm just thinking that somehow we should get away from this idea that we know what truth is. Actually I think that the genre of non-fiction... There are other codes for essay writing and other codes for reportage, other codes for journalism, other codes for academic writing, and they all also function along another idea of what truth is, or what reference is. So it's actually just very complicated.

Maarten Asscher – It is. I am reminded of an example that Marco Vigevani gave to me in a conversation about a completely different subject. Marco, you were referring to a book, an anthology of letters written by Italian resistance men and women during the German occupation of Italy on the eve of their execution by the Nazis. Imagine that book as fiction, as, say, imaginative narrative non-fiction, an epistolary book that purports to be a collection of such letters, beautifully written, it really gets you very close to the truth of how it was when you were expecting your day of execution the next day, but all the names and the so-called exact places have been fabricated. Is that acceptable as an artistic starting point to convince readers of a higher truth? Or is it simply a fraud?

Marco Vigevani – Well, that's a very difficult question. In fact these letters, which are... Some of them are really marvellous.

Maarten Asscher – Yes.

Marco Vigevani – And they are fictional in a way, because these people are presenting themselves to their public, to the future, to their sons and mothers and fathers and lovers, and their comrades etc., in a light which is absolutely fictional. I mean they try to put into them their deaths and their feelings in their lives – and they are very well written. So this is also already difficult, to say whether it is a work of fiction or non-fiction, because the origin is non-fictional, because there is nothing more non-fictional than your own death,

but the quality is fictional. But this reminds me of another thing that we discussed with Neil this morning at breakfast, just like that, like a trifle, which was the unfortunate Wilkomirski episode. I published Wilkomirski in Italy, because I found it was a marvellous piece of writing and it was exposed like a long con. It was a long con because this man had imagined all his life etc. etc. I think you are all familiar with the Wilkomirski affair. Now how would we consider Wilkomirski now? Is it possible to publish it? Do you publish it as...? The intention – with this I come back to your question – the intention behind the book is also important, because it would be possible to publish Wilkomirski without a psychiatric explanation of *der Wilkomirski Fall* or without a historical explanation of what it meant to write a hoax in a period of negation and so on. I think the intention behind the book is still something that has to be taken into account. I'm not answering your question...

Maarten Asscher – Well, in a way you are, because the question then becomes: is it possible to declare your intention as a sort of oath, to be excused from checks by the non-fiction police or the fiction police for that matter?

Richard Nash – It's funny, I have a temptation in that particular case to want to say: this is not... As you describe it, this is not... The classic thing is to say: oh, we'll call it a novel. It's not a novel, it's a lie. What you call it is a document. It is a document of the liar.

Marco Vigevani – The Wilkomirski?

Richard Nash – Yes. That's the interesting frame to do, it's not to do as it's done with a lot of these things: oh, we're now going to call it a novel. Because there's still a deep, deep lie at the heart of it. But instead this is a document of a massive act of other- and probably also self-deception, and that becomes kind of interesting, doesn't it?

Livia Manera – Except, sorry, but I remember Wilkomirski's book.

Maarten Asscher – Fine.

Livia Manera – Except that it becomes also unreadable. When you know he made it up. If you read the book.

Richard Nash – Okay. I've not read it, so yes, I see. Interesting.

Livia Manera – No way.

Maarten Asscher – No. More interesting is the book that Eleanor Lappin wrote about the Wilkomirski affair.

Livia Manera – Absolutely, that is interesting.

Maarten Asscher – It becomes compelling again.

Livia Manera – That is interesting, but the Wilkomirski itself I think becomes unreadable.

Richard Nash – I see.

Samuel Titan – We've been talking about the non-fiction police and part of this derives from the fact that criticism is disappearing. We're being left with just the non-fiction police, whereas maybe what we need most right now would be serious cultural critics, literary critics, people who can reflect on things, like the Wilkomirski *Fall*, under different minds and this is what is disappearing, I think. At least this is my experience in Brazil. In most cases you get your book to be announced but that's about it, there is no serious discussion. I mean I don't need to know if you loved or didn't love the book, I want you as a serious critic to discuss it, and this is what is disappearing, and when you write a complex work of non-fiction and the only thing that a newspaper seems to care about is whether this is a factual truth here or there, well it's kind of disappointing in many senses.

Maarten Asscher – It's not that bad yet in the Netherlands, I believe.

Samuel Titan – Good for you.

Maarten Asscher – Anand.

S. Anand – I think what Jannah said earlier about conceptual art and the way that things are moving there. I've always been a sceptic of conceptual art and my entry into seriously engaging with art happened after I started working with artists that I knew, and one thing I wanted to think about in terms of where we are headed is

that what finally it's about is 'to tell is to sell', whether you want to do narrative non-fiction or fiction or whatever. When I was working with these artists what I realized was that only since the mid-80s did this art transform itself from walls, where it was completely immutable in the houses where they lived. So they would do something completely abstract, conceptual, and then it would disappear within three months, within four months. It was not meant for an audience, it is something that you lived with. So that idea that you even attach a signature to it started happening only after it made this journey into galleries, which happened in the eighties and nineties. One of the foremost Gond artists who happens to be the uncle of Venkat, the artist I've worked with, ended up in the Georges Pompidou Centre being called one of the hundred magicians of the earth and subsequently he goes to Japan and commits suicide, on a remote island where he's been commissioned to work. So I'm also thinking of that kind of art which is meant to be evanescent, which doesn't really seek an audience, which exists for itself, maybe somebody like Emily Dickinson tried that and later got discovered. What if we did not ever get to read Kafka? If you think of culture as always... I mean Arundhati Roy is a friend who wrote a book, but I also keep thinking of Chomsky and various figures who have to critique the very beast which is going to consume them, the sense of their resistance to capital. One of the things that Venkat is very afraid of with me is that: look we've got this wonderful book. He once told me 'you and I are the perfect audience' and then he quoted what he called a jungle saying, in fact the book begins with that epigram: 'The tiger lives in the forest hills, smells his own fart, feels a thrill.' So you are your own best audience and you think: 'Wow, what did I do? It's so good.' And you don't want anything more than that. Then what do you do with that kind of art which does not seek an audience? Whether it's fiction or non-fiction, let's leave these categories which I find beside the point, it's just that the line between them is what I want to occupy. So where do we move if we do not want to be read or seen? I have found that Venkat is very attracted towards conceptual art, of which I've always been a sceptic, and for the last three months in Delhi there was this Raqs Media Collective, which is three artists, and I used to find it a joke that they called themselves artists because they don't draw or make things with their hands and for me that is an old-fashioned sense of

art that I've had, but now I find that Venkat wants to collaborate with me and do conceptual stuff and he says this book should be a vehicle towards something in the arts. And I kind of say: oh god, I'll have to pimp it a bit more than I'm already doing. So leave me with this thing of: what do we write for? This business of truth, the inner truth and the outside. You have to confront this external reality of packaging and selling. Because formlessness... Kabir, the singer I talked about, is constantly considered a *nirgun*, without form, it's also about a God who doesn't have a shape, about formlessness. Finally Kabir writes in this amazing metrical rhyming words that can be memorized. So finally he falls to form. And of course he never made any money out of it, he just sang these things and he was again chanting it along with him. So for me it's a larger kind of unresolvable thing, especially when I'm in the business of producing books even if they don't make money.

Maarten Asscher – Thank you very much Anand. I have the feeling you are already sort of drifting into a metaphorical conclusion over this conference and I can very well subscribe to how you phrase this. In the end authors are not writing their books for the shelf in the bookshop, or the ISBN Number in the publisher's catalogue but, well, perhaps not to smell their own fart but to assess themselves, to express themselves, to speak out. You were the one to let us hear how a writer's voice can sound also in that metaphorical iTanpura way, and I think that metaphorical idea of a writer's voice can guide us very well in developing the ideals of narrative non-fiction into the future. Some of the wild and perverted and exaggerated and visionary ideas that have flown across the table here this morning can be put to quite practical use if you see them more as metaphors than as concrete elements of a business model. The idea of a hashtag community is not so different from the idea of a publisher's imprint. It is what I think publishers should do to combine all these voices of narrative non-fiction or literary fiction authors into a list that is, well, a reflection of the world as the publisher sees it. So while I would not like to explain all our problems away, that would do an injustice to all the effort that has gone into this conference, I think there is a lot of hope for the kind of experimental, innovative, original, literary narrative non-fiction writing as we have discussed it these past few days, as long as we keep in mind that we should make a difference with each book, that we should not be afraid of

unsettling ways of telling our stories, that it is for publishers and booksellers to decide on categorizing. Originality supersedes such compartments. We should not excuse ourselves with publisher's notes and author's notes; that only attracts the attention of all kinds of vigilantes. We should trust rather our own intention and in the end, what I believe most in is what I once read in an essay: imagination serving the truth. I think if we can hold onto that we are safe from any kind of police.