

## **After Autofiction: Rachel Cusk's Parade (2024)**

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“Tiresome,” is the word that Rachel Cusk has used to describe the frequent question she is asked about her latest novel, Parade (2024). In the novel, the first-person narrator is attacked at random on a street in Paris. A key figure in the 2010s resurgence of autofiction in anglophone literature, Cusk has drawn extensively from her own life in previous works. But she does not want to be asked whether she herself was the victim of such an attack.

Wanting to know whether an event described in a novel really happened to the author can be a matter of idle curiosity, but it can also reflect a desire to confirm the author's entitlement to write the story. Traumatic narratives belong to those involved, if they are to avoid the “psychic plagiarism” that Camille Laurens sees in narratives written without personal experience. For some, a writer is not entitled to relate a story of experiencing violence nor demand an empathetic response if it is entirely made up or recast from the experiences of others.

In Cusk's case, the reasons for expecting her novels to be reflections of her own life are even more pronounced. In the context of her Outline trilogy, nearly universally understood to be autofiction, Cusk noted, “I'm not interested in character because I don't think character exists anymore.” In one interpretation of this enigmatic claim, Cusk rejects the possibility that an author can create a subjectivity psychically independent of herself. The “ethics of alterity,” theorized from Henry James to Dorothy Hale, envisions a practice of allowing the fictional character the space to develop free of the writer's own sense of self. Cusk's skepticism takes the form of an entitlement challenge: the writer cannot write anything but herself.

However, Cusk, like many of the anglophone autofictional writers of the 2010s, has gravitated to other, less autobiographical, forms in recent years. This paper will argue that the narrative form of Parade finds unique solutions to the entitlement challenges that Cusk herself leveled at the novel form. Neither a chorus nor an ensemble nor a mass, Cusk's “parade” of artist figures features both intersubjective continuities and distinctive biographical elements from various sources. The parade exhibits and undermines narrativity and the organizing operations of the narrator: the artist figures are differentiated while unsynthesized into a single story. Their distinctiveness in experience contrasts with their naming: they are all simply “G.” These defamiliarizing strategies obscure whose story is whose, the relationship between individual experience and general significance, and the author's roles as maker of stories and scribe for others' experiences.

These strategies, I will argue, might not satisfy the reader who wants to know if the central violent incident really happened to the author. But deflecting the question of real experience, Cusk's post-autofictional novel focuses on what Amy Shuman sees as the problem larger than who is entitled to represent whose experience, namely, “the packaging of suffering as sentimentality.”