

Local Fictionality within Global Nonfiction:  
Roz Chast's  
*Why Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?*

James Phelan  
Ohio State University

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**Abstract**

This essay deploys a rhetorical approach to fictionality (defined as intentionally signaled communication in narrative) in order to analyze Roz Chast's various uses of local fictionality within her graphic memoir about her parents' end-of-life experiences. In so doing, it extends the contribution Chast's memoir makes to the understanding of the many facets of end-of-life experiences for patients and their families by unpacking significant details of her exploration of her own experiences. The essay also contributes to conversations about the fiction/nonfiction distinction by (a) highlighting the presence of the narrative audience in fiction and its absence in local uses of fictionality in global nonfiction and (b) showing that the presence of local fictionality can enhance an author's communication about actual events. Finally, the essay offers a preliminary and partial taxonomy of fictionality within the genre of graphic narrative.

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**Keywords**

Fictionality; fiction/non-fiction; rhetoric; audience; graphic narrative; Roz Chast

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**Contact**

phelan.1@osu.edu

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In her blurb for Roz Chast's graphic memoir about the end-of-life experiences of her parents, *Why Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant*, Alison Bechdel speaks for many readers when she notes that "the lines between laughter and hysteria, despair and rage, love and guilt are quavery indeed, and no one draws them more honestly, more [...] unscrupulously than Roz Chast." In this essay, I shall discuss how Chast creates such powerful responses by her handling of two other sets of lines that often intersect in her narrative: the ones between the verbal and the visual elements of her telling and those between the modes of fictionality and nonfictionality. This analysis offers two main and related contributions to narrative medicine. First, it extends the contribution Chast's memoir makes to the understanding of the many facets of end-of-life experiences for patients and their families by unpacking significant details of her exploration of her own experiences. Second, if, as the mantra of narrative medicine has it, narrative competence enhances medical competence, then this essay seeks to enhance narrative competence itself by highlighting the crucial roles that fictionality can play within nonfictional narrative.

I begin with a few points about the rhetorical theory of narrative and the rhetorical understanding of fictionality. Rhetorical theory defines narrative as "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purposes that something happened" (Phelan, *Narrative as Rhetoric*). This definition shifts attention from narrative as a structure built out of the components of story and discourse to narrative as an action that seeks to

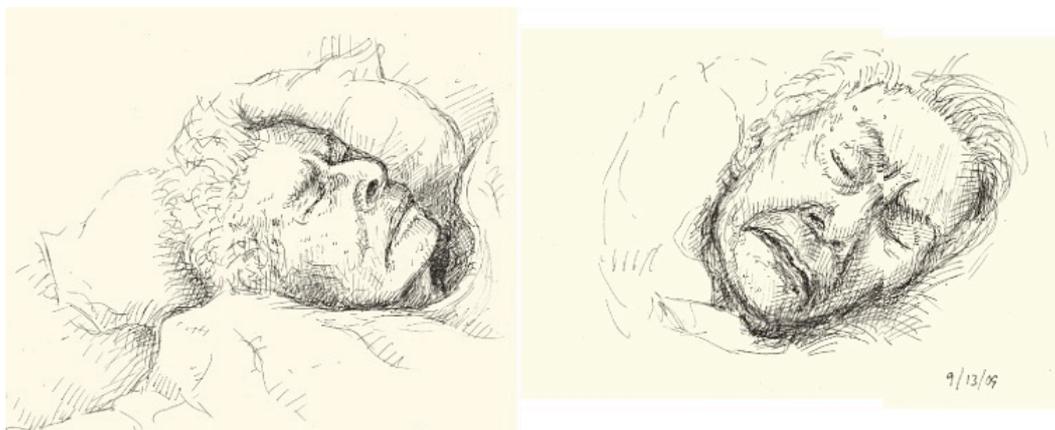


Fig. 1 (pp. 218 and 219)

accomplish some purposes. In short, the rhetorical approach puts more emphasis on tellers, audiences, and purposes than it does on sorting elements of narrative according to the story/discourse binary. As a result I have proposed the ARA model (Author—Resources—Audiences) as a better alternative to the story/discourse model because it provides greater explanatory power of how narrative creates its multifarious effects on audiences (Phelan, *Somebody Telling Somebody Else*). I turn now to consider how Chast uses some of the resources at her disposal.

Chast uses three main visual modes of representation: photographs, sketches, and comics. She uses the photographs and sketches for nonfictional purposes, and, indeed, Chast bookends the memoir with a family photograph taken during her childhood and several very powerful sketches of her mother on her deathbed (see figure 1). In this way, Chast reinforces the paratextual identification of her narrative as nonfictional.

The photographs and the sketches do highlight the constructed quality of Chast's comics with their similarity to caricature. Nevertheless, within that overall construction, Chast moves between nonfictionality and fictionality. Consider, for example, the middle panel of figure 2, where she depicts her parents as babies. This representation, like so many others in the memoir, is both humorous and serious: humorous because of the incongruity of the bonnets and the glasses, but serious in capturing her parents' similarity throughout life and her own perspective on them as practically twins and as always already grownups.

These two figures also help clarify the distinctions among representation, construction, and fictionalization. The photographs, the sketches, and the comics are all modes of representation and all provide a certain selection and perspective on the actual people



Fig. 2 (p. 7)

and events they depict—though of course the comics and the sketches emphasize Chast’s constructive agency more than the photographs do (that’s one difference between the camera and the pen). From the rhetorical perspective, though, it is worth distinguishing between foregrounding construction and fictionalizing because construction can be in the service of either reporting actual states of affairs or inventing non-actual states. A little reflection on Chast’s sketches supports this point. In those sketches, Chast gives us a clear construction, something very different from a photographic image of her mother, but she is obviously communicating a nonfictional representation of her. I view Chast’s comic style, then, as something that (a) foregrounds her constructive activity and (b) establishes a baseline of nonfictional representations that she deviates from as she moves into the inventions of fictionality.

Figure 2 also helps clarify what I mean by fictionality and why I think it’s important. Here are four interconnected theses: (1) fictionality is, as Nielsen and Gjeverlesen define it, intentionally signaled invention in communication: “intentionally” reflects the rhetorical orientation toward a speaker’s purpose; “signaled” distinguishes fictionality from lying, which is not fictionality but defective nonfictionality; “invention” indicates the discourse’s concern with non-actual states; and “in communication” specifies the broad domain in which fictionality occurs. I will have more to say about this definition shortly. (2) Generic fictions such as the novel, the short story, and the fiction film are genres characterized by global fictionality and our focus on them has obscured our recognition of the larger mode of fictionality. Of particular interest for my purposes here, scholars have not addressed the relation between the global fictionality of generic fictions and local fictionality within global nonfictional discourses. (3) Fictionality is pervasive throughout discourse. Think of all the times we say “what if?” or “I wish that” or engage in elaborate hyperbole. Fictionality is also a key tool in multiple disciplines—via thought experiments, models, hypotheses, and so on. (4) As these examples suggest, fictionality is not an escape from the actual world but an indirect way of engaging with it. (For more on these theses and others, see Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh).

Let me anticipate a few objections to these theses. The first is the objection from philosophy and particularly from epistemology and ontology. How can one draw a neat line between the actual and the invented? Given all the philosophical issues related to the question of the relation between percepts and concepts and those related to the issues of “what is the real?” how can one blithely posit such a clear distinction between fictionality and nonfictionality? The objection returns us to the importance of the rhetorical perspective. From that perspective, all that’s necessary is that speakers and audiences operate with a working understanding of the distinction between reporting (and its related speech acts such as interpreting and evaluating) the actual and departing from such acts to explore the invented, the imaginative, the speculative, and so on. This point does mean that a decision to take a given utterance as fictional or nonfictional is rooted in a foundational, invariant understanding of the real and the non-real but rather in an interpretation of a speaker’s intention to be using fictionality or nonfictionality. In other words, the basis for a claim that a given discourse deploys fictionality is not a bedrock belief about the clear difference between the actual and the non-actual but rather an assessment of how a given speaker views the relation between her discourse and the actual or non-actual. In this way, the decision to read an utterance as fictional is a hypothesis subject to testing and revision in the same way that other interpretations are.

The second objection comes from the domain of psychological or subjective truth. Isn’t one person’s fictionality another person’s psychological nonfictionality? Chast’s im-

age of her parents as babies is a good case in point: why not say that the image conveys her actual understanding of them as always already adults? From this perspective, labeling the image as an instance of “fictionality” is misleading, if not downright pernicious. This objection also takes us back to the rhetorical perspective even as it highlights thesis 4, namely, that fictionality is not an escape from the actual but an indirect way of engaging with it. The objection also helps understand the import of the term “invention” in the working definition of fictionality. The rhetorical perspective invites us to ask about the humor generated by the image and its relation to the hypothesis that it is a psychological nonfiction. That humor comes from Chast and her audience sharing the knowledge that her parents were once actual babies and that they never simultaneously wore their adult glasses and baby bonnets. The humor, in other words, comes from the shared recognition between Chast and her audience that the visual representation is not actual but invented. At the same time, that fictionality becomes an indirect means of communicating the nonfictional psychological truth of Chast’s perception of her parents.

As for “invention,” this example helps us recognize that a turn to fictionality often has its motivation in the actual rather than in the imaginative—or to put it another way, that the inventions of fictionality often depend upon an interaction of the actual and the imaginative. “Invention” is rarely, if ever, the construction of something that floats free from the actual. This point will have consequences for our understanding of the difference between what I will call embedded and non-embedded fictionality.

The four theses also help me position rhetorical theory’s take within the larger ongoing debate about the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, a debate that includes the issues of whether the distinction should be eliminated or maintained, and if maintained, whether there are what Dorrit Cohn has called “signposts” of fictionality. Rhetorical theory believes the distinction is productive because it helps identify a fundamental difference in the reading of the two modes. Writers of generic fiction implicitly construct two audience positions that they invite their actual audiences to move into: the authorial audience, a position that includes a tacit awareness of fiction, and the narrative audience, a position that buys into the illusion that the characters and events are real. Writers of nonfiction construct only an authorial audience. As for signposts, the rhetorical view is that there are no textual markers that always indicate fiction. Instead, rhetorical theory locates fictionality and nonfictionality in the intention of its user. This view underlies the position that Chast’s comic style is not in itself a marker of fictionality, but rather something that she uses to establish a baseline of nonfictionality from which she moves into fictionality. Furthermore, rhetorical theory believes that attending to fictionality adds an important layer to our understanding of the relation between fiction and nonfiction, because it acknowledges that global nonfictions can be shot through with fictionality—and as this essay contends, such fictionality can play a major role in a nonfictional narrative’s achievement of its purposes.

In going forward with the analysis of Chast’s memoir, I will focus on the relation between fictionality and nonfictionality as it gets mapped on to the relation between the verbal and the visual. Several kinds of mapping are possible. Both the verbal and the visual can be nonfictional or fictional; the verbal can be fictional and the visual nonfictional, and vice versa. Furthermore, within a visual use of fictionality, dialogue/thought can be nonfictional. Similarly, within a visual use of nonfictionality, dialogue/thought can be fictional. In addition, within a visual use of fictionality, dialogue/thought can also be fictional. These relationships should become clearer as we look at specific excerpts.

I wish that, at the end of life, when things were truly "done," there was something to look forward to. Something more pleasure-oriented. Perhaps opium, or heroin. So you became addicted. So what? All-you-can-eat ice cream parlors for the extremely aged. Big art picture books and music. Extreme palliative care, for when you've had it with everything else: the x-rays, the MRIs, the boring food, and the pills that don't do anything at all. Would that be so bad?



Fig. 3 (p. 164)

Figure 3 shows the use of fictionality within both the verbal and the visual tracks of communication, and not surprisingly they reinforce each other.

There are some important nuances to the interactions here. First, the verbal track deploys *embedded fictionality*: Chast makes a serious proposal about changing the actualities of end-of-life care, even as that proposal depends on her "invention" of the alternative. This link between the actual and the invented is tighter than, say, the one operating in the visual image, since that one skips over any embedding and places Elizabeth in a fictional temporal and spatial realm. That fictionality adds humor to the interaction but together the verbal and the visual powerfully communicate Chast's thematic point about changing the norms for end-of-life care.

Second, the fictionality of the visual track, by putting Elizabeth in a non-actual spatial and temporal frame, foregrounds the thematic component of her character: she represents the larger class of people who are "done." Chast uses Elizabeth's mimetic character both to add humor to the page—the Elizabeth depicted in the rest of the memoir is not one to be taking drugs—and to highlight the distance from current practices to her proposed ones. But the overall emphasis is on her proposal for changing end-of-life care.



I was aggravated that they hadn't dealt with their accumulated back when they had the ability to do so. That instead, when they decided to leave, they simply packed a couple of little bags and walked out, leaving me the task of cleaning out their apartment

Fig. 4 (p. 106)

Figures 4 and 5 are examples of verbal nonfictionality interacting with visual fictionality. In the visual images, Chast draws on well-known fictional figures, the Grim Reaper, and the screamer in Edvard Munch's *The Scream* to create some different effects.

The Reaper sits on the couch in her parents' living room, comically signaling their denial of the inevitable, while Chast overlays Munch's figure on her own portrait as a way to capture her distress at the news that her mother had fallen and been taken to the hospital in the middle of the night. Chast's overlay demonstrates the way in which fictionality can offer a "double exposure" of the fictional and nonfictional: the image is a version of Chast but it is also a version of *The Screamer*. In such double exposures the link between the actual and invented is very tight.

Figures 3-5 provide the basis for some initial hypotheses. From the perspective of the audience, local fictionality within global nonfiction works substantially differently from global fictionality. In global fictionality, the actual audience occupies two positions—that of the narrative audience who believes in the actuality of the characters and events (the narrative audience suspends disbelief) and that of the authorial audience who knows that the characters and events are invented. Chast does not construct a narrative audience for her local fictionality but instead overtly shares the fictionality with her audience. She does not ask her readers to buy into the illusion that Elizabeth with her hookah pipe, the resting Reaper, and Roz the screamer are real but instead invites them to recognize their fictionality and its relation to her nonfictional purposes. To put this point in general theoretical terms, where global fictions typically rely on the actual audience's double-consciousness that follows from joining both narrative and authorial audiences, local fic-



It was a Life Alert sort of person. Duh. My mother and father were at the emergency room at Maimonides Hospital in Brooklyn. An ambulance had brought them both. My father couldn't be left alone, and he didn't know how to drive.

Fig. 5 (p. 60)

tionality within global nonfiction does not depend on such double-consciousness, because it does not create the illusion that its inventions are real. Instead it flaunts its fictionality in the service of altering the audience's understanding of the local and global nonfictionality.

Furthermore, the interactions among fictionality and non-fictionality as well as those between the verbal and the visual create some fascinating—and different—relationships among Chast, her narrating-I, and her experiencing-I. For example, the narrating-I is aware of Elizabeth with her hookah pipe, but does not seem to be aware of The Reaper in the living room, and Roz the character is not at all aware of him. The larger point here is that ultimately the most important communications are between Chast as implied author and her own audience. She uses the narrating-I and experiencing-I in various ways depending on her needs at a particular point in the narrative. These points should become clearer as we consider her target audience(s) and her purposes.

Chast's first target audience is people who are or are about to be in the situation of dealing with parents who are facing the ends of their lives. She occasionally engages in direct address narration to this audience: for example, "A friend of mine has an excellent rule when it comes to cleaning out your parents' house: if you don't think your kids are going to want it, don't take it" (p. 129). Chast is also directing her narrative at a more general audience, including the elderly themselves and those who take care of them.

Chast has several purposes, some mimetic and some thematic. She wants to give the target audience a thick description of her experience of her parents' last years so that they have a narrative to compare their own experiences with. She also wants to work through that experience for herself and to pay homage to her parents in an honest, non-sentimental way. Chast's ability to achieve her purposes depends on the texture of the narrative itself—page by page, panel by panel—and her forays into fictionality are inte-



Fig. 6 (p. 22)

gral to that texture. More generally, Chast's memoir provides a powerful model of how fictionality within nonfiction can be a valuable means of coping with both grief and mortality. Not all of us are as funny or as inventive as Chast, but all of us can recognize how her turn to fictionality—often humorous fictionality—provides a salutary way of gaining perspective on her actual experiences. In this way the fictionality becomes a means for Chast to leaven the difficulties faced by both her parents and herself—and, indeed, it is often a way to come to terms with those difficulties. Consequently, the fictionality does not provide a denial or an escape from the actual but rather a richer, more nuanced way of both representing and dealing with it.

Chast's forays into fictionality affect the texture of the narrative by influencing her audience's understanding of and responses to multiple core elements of the narrative, especially plot and events, time, place, and character. These responses to the core elements alter the affect and the ethics of the narrative and further influence our understanding of the implied Chast's ethos. Fictionality introduces multiple kinds of humor into the narrative, even as it deepens our sympathies for Roz and her parents, and influences our hopes, desires, and expectations. It also heightens our anxieties and provides some relief from the grim realities Chast depicts. Fictionality influences both the ethics of the told, putting the character-character relationships into sharper relief, and the ethics of the telling. Strikingly, Chast uses the fictionality to highlight not only her parents' ethical flaws but also her own. This dimension of the ethics of the told carries over into the ethics of the telling as Chast communicates with candor and honesty about the difficulties she and her parents face. Above all, the fictionality contributes to Chast's handling of the multiple relationships among author, narrating-I, and experiencing-I that cumulatively construct her as an aesthetically powerful and ethically admirable implied

Here's what I used to think happened at "the end":



What I was starting to understand was that the middle panel was a lot more painful, humiliating, long-lasting, complicated, and hideously expensive. My parents had been in pretty good health for

Fig. 7 (p. 148)

author. I turn now to illustrate these points by looking at how Chast's fictionality influences her audience's understanding of plot, character, and temporality.

In figure 6, we can see Chast embedding fictionality within nonfictionality as she introduces the larger issue of a plot for her parents' last years.

Chast projects a wish-fulfillment plot, but she has already given her audience enough information to indicate that her wish will not be fulfilled. In this way, the embedded fictionality gives a poignant quality to the situation of the experiencing-Roz, because the audience is aware of the gap between her wishes and her reality.

In figure 7, we see Chast using the interaction between verbal nonfictionality and visual fictionality to highlight her realizations about the actual plot she is living through.

The visual fictionality depicts one masterplot for the end-of-life. The fictional Old Mrs. McGillicuddy (and note how "old" moves from an adjective to part of her name across the panels) dies relatively painlessly within 3 or 4 weeks after becoming ill. The verbal nonfictionality provides the sharp contrast: "the middle panel was a lot more painful, humiliating, long-lasting, complicated, and hideously expensive." Among other things, the interaction works in the service of Chast's thematizing of her experience: the new understanding of the middle panel applies not just to her but to so many like her.

In figures 8-10 we see how Chast uses the interaction to depict character, more specifically, the characters of Elizabeth and George. Figure 10 visually literalizes Elizabeth's metaphor of George "walking around with his feelers out" even as it conveys his typical thoughts and reactions ("why did X say that?") so that the image itself effectively deploys both fictionality and nonfictionality. The result is an efficient depiction of a key component of George's character.

And, more important, he was kind and sensitive. He knew that my mother had a terrible temper, and that she could be overpowering. She had a thick skin. He, like me, did not. She often accused my father of "walking around with his feelers out."



Fig. 8 (p. 31)

Figures 11-13 show how Chast uses fictionality in the representation of her own character as experiencing-I. In figure 11, another good example of the double exposure that the turn to fictionality sometimes provides, Chast adapts the fictional trope of Goofus and Gallant from *Highlights for Children* magazine and sets up a remarkable relation between fictionality and nonfictionality: in each column, Chast highlights extremes, a move that indicates that she is combining fictionality and nonfictionality. In other words, she is neither wholly Gallant nor wholly Goofus—even if she does not try to specify the exact nature of the blend. But Chast's openness about being at least partially "Goofus" and admitting her flaws—ones that her target audience will generally be able to find understandable—adds to her admirable ethics of the telling, and, indeed, her admirable overall ethos.

In figures 12 and 13, we see Chast setting up interactions among temporality, image,

and text as she adds to her own characterization and her sense of herself within her family. Reflecting on her childhood struggles in the nonfictional verbal narration in figure 12, she links her character with her father's, but the fictional temporality of the thought bubble gives her a kind of self-insight and wit that we never see George possess.



Fig. 10 (p. 198)

Figure 9 uses the visual image to construct the metaphor of Elizabeth as a large, looming figure—almost like a storm. Along with depictions of her mother's own announcements that she would give someone a "Blast from Chast," the page effectively captures Roz's sense of her mother's powerful temper, something that influences so many of their interactions. Figure 10 shows Chast building on these depictions of her parents' characters as she uses the visual fictionality to show Elizabeth making the Grim Reaper back off and the verbal nonfictionality to draw the contrast with her father's condition and behavior at the end of life.



Fig. 9 (p. 35)

In figure 13, Chast uses the photograph to depict the gap between her parents' happy twosome and Roz's feeling of being on the outside. She further underlines this gap by the humorous, fictional temporality

of the thought bubble, an addition by the mature Chast to highlight her unhappiness at age 12.

Strikingly, Chast ends the memoir with a return to embedded fictionality solely within the verbal track: her account of her recurrent dreams about her parents, dreams that capture so much of her actual feelings about both of them as they faced the end of life (figure 14). Again the embedded fictionality makes a tight link between the invented and the actual. Finally, Chast's choice to restrict herself to verbal narration emphasizes the actual absence of her parents from her life, even as the dreams themselves indicate that she is still working out her relationship to them, especially her mother.



Fig. 11 (p. 146)

hospital every few months for X-rays. I didn't walk until I was 18 months old - about half a year later than average.



It was determined that there was nothing wrong with me. Nevertheless I was probably not a fun baby. I had one cold after another, and from the time I could speak, one anxiety after another. I was my father's daughter, not my mother's. I can sympathize.

Fig. 12 (p. 177)



Me at 12.

Fig. 13 (p. 179)

For as far back as I can remember, I felt far outside my parents' duo. There were many times, from when I was a little girl until just a couple of weeks ago, that I was sure I was adopted. I have to admit, though: if they had adopted me, they had done a sensational job of covering their tracks. Adoptees or not, they were my one and only set of parents, and now they are gone, a fact that feels indescribably strange, even four and six years after their deaths. They still appear in my dreams. In the ones with my mother, I usually am about to go somewhere with my friends or my husband or my kids, but suddenly, she begins to collapse and I have to take care of her. My father usually appears sitting at our kitchen counter, drinking tea, and reading the newspaper, and he is not worried.

Roz Chast  
June 17, 2013

Fig. 14 (p. 228)

This examination of how Chast's use of fictionality affect affective and ethical responses to core elements of her narrative—and indeed, to Chast as implied author—could be extended much further, but I believe I have presented enough to draw some conclusions. First, Chast's practice provides the basis for an initial—and partial—taxonomy of kinds of fictionality within the graphic memoir. This taxonomy focuses on the visual side but it's relevant to the verbal side as well.

- Straight Invention, sometimes of the Counterfactual, e.g., Elizabeth with the hookah pipe
- Use of an Established Trope: The Grim Reaper
- Adaptation of a Trope (with double exposure): The Scream, Goofus and Gallant
- Literalizing a Metaphor: "feelers out"
- Embedded imaginings, dreams
- Temporal play between fictionality and thought/speech

As I hope the analysis shows, there is no one-to-one correspondence between a kind of fictionality and its effects. Instead the effects depend on the specific deployment of

the kind in its particular context. In addition, Chast demonstrates the power of overt fictionality in nonfiction: rather than constructing a narrative audience and asking it to buy into the illusion of fiction, she asks the authorial audience to share both the invention and the knowledge that it's invented. This strategy constructs a more direct relation between author and audience than we find in fiction and contributes a great deal to Chast's construction of her own ethos. The rhetorical approach to fictionality gives us worthwhile insight into Chast's strategies for engaging with the actual events of her parents' end-of-life experiences. Without the fictionality, the memoir would be far different—and I would suggest a far less powerful narrative.

Finally, as noted earlier, Chast's memoir provides a telling example of how fictionality can be a powerful tool to come to terms with the often difficult experiences of mortality and mourning. Fictionality can provide perspective, salutary humor, and compelling, albeit indirect ways, of dealing with the actual. In capturing her own experiences in such a distinctive and engaging manner, Chast provides a model that others can adapt to the specific exigencies of their own experiences.

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