

Based on a True Story: *Young Tambling* by Kate Greenstreet and *door of thin skins* by Shira Dentz
2300 words
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Young Tambling by Kate Greenstreet is named for a sixteenth-century Scottish ballad in which a young woman called either Janet or Margaret wanders into the woods, plucks a double rose, and is immediately confronted with a handsome young man who demands to know why she thinks she can pick roses without his leave. She answers that they're her woods—her father gave them to her—so she doesn't need his leave. In response, he has sex with her without asking *her* leave. When the deed is done, she turns to ask “her true love's name,” but he's already gone. Realizing soon after that she's pregnant, she returns to the woods for a bitter herb to induce an abortion—and there he is again. He asks, “why do that when you could have the baby, and me, and a whole new life” (3).

Turns out that Young Tambling—also known as Tam Lin or Lyn or Line or Lane or even Tom Linn or Tomlin—has been kidnapped by the queen of the fairies and needs help escaping. To bring him safely back to his world and her own, Margaret/Janet must drag him off a horse when he rides past her in a fairy parade at midnight on Halloween, then hold him fast as the fairies turn him into all manner of vicious beasts. When he finally turns into a naked man, she covers him with her cloak, knowing she has saved the father of her child and bested the evil queen.

Greenstreet's *Young Tambling* and *door of thin skins* by Shira Dentz are cross genre

memoirs about trying to hold onto slippery, dangerous things—the truth, stories, identity—even as they slither, squirm and metamorphose, after having their way with you and leaving you fundamentally changed. The works these writers have constructed are likewise hard to hold onto. They do not proceed “As if realism = truthfulness” (120) in Greenstreet’s words; the truth is not just verifiable events but the slipperiness they inevitably entail and the frustration of trying and failing to grasp them. Fail to convey that, and you fail to convey the truth.

The table of contents of Greenstreet’s book lists on six sections, most about 30 pages. Each section is composed of prose, verse, and black and white photography, generally of paintings. Individual works are typically untitled and even when such titles are provided, they’re not listed in the table of contents, supporting the sense that discrete components don’t matter nearly as much as the whole they contribute to.

Despite beginning with a fairy story, the book is grounded in the real—though not, as I mentioned, in realism. Truth, coherence, consistency might elude us, and we might find ways to enter worlds other than our own, but that sort of imaginative effort is not the same as escapism.

We shouldn’t tell ourselves stories
about a better world

It’s just a life
What you find around you (49)

the text tells us, and the stories here are all about this world and the lives we find around ourselves. The back of the book announces simply that the work is “Based on a true story”—or, more accurately, true stories. If “Young Tambling” is not a true story, Greenstreet’s hearing it for the first time seems to be. Same for the story of getting a job at a dry cleaners, a place where “although I interacted with people, I didn’t have to try to be one of them. It was different from school that way” (35-36). When business is slow, the narrator reads—especially 19th century

novels, so that “The time I was living in while reading wasn’t the time I occupied writing down N S for ‘no starch.’ Shifting between the world of my book and dealing with whoever walked through the door was immediate and natural. Like any double life” (36).

But while there are moments in the text drawn from Greenstreet’s own life—the likely sense, given that the Vietnam war raged when she came of age, that she “would marry a soldier” (58), or the fact that she “liked taking the body of Christ right into [her] mouth” (68)—she lets us know that such details are most definitely not the point; the work is “Not autobiography but ABOUT biography” (159). These stories matter not because they are unique but because they are all attempts to get at the same thing. The narrator—who shifts as much anything else in the text—tells us, “Every day I rewrite the same poem. Now the town is gone, the girls are gone, ‘stay with me’ is gone” (140)

The point, then, is not to give us a clear narrative of Greenstreet’s life but to consider the value in being human and the value of the things humans produce—art, for instance. Art is not transcendent in this work; it is very decidedly human and physical—and that’s one reason it matters:

In the museum, I look for a long timer at a piece of art—it would be called minimalist—and I wonder about the day, the room, the light—what was the temperature as it was being made? My affection for the work is partly based on imagining the making, my empathy for the maker. Is empathy the word when you feel another’s joy? (151)

The imaginative work involved in understanding the events of one’s own life is very much like the imaginative work involved in understanding someone else’s life. Because of this desire to empathize with artists, questions like

Who can be represented by art?

Who can be involved
in the making

of art? (14)

are not abstractions but instead are aware of their political and social weight. Poetry, for instance, is valuable in part because “It makes me feel that being human is a good thing. Being human, and even just being the way I am . . . I’m not completely alone” (10). But the connections established through poetry are not permanent, in part because so much of art is not permanent. Pages 166-167 comprise a two-page photograph of every page in the book—except pages 166 and 167—taped to a wall. An empty chair stands before the assemblage of pages; a caption reads, “Although I was thinking in two-page spreads, at some point I realized that I wasn’t actually (physically) making a book. I was making a big rectangular piece of temporary art” (166).

Thus we see that the goal of the book has shifted, turning into something the narrator didn’t intend. But by steadfastly holding onto the project even as it metamorphosed into things that might be shocking or disturbing or, at times, even plain old disappointing, she discovered something fundamental about it. Since any story that doesn’t evolve and surprise us is likely to be boring and worth neither telling nor hearing, everything about *Young Tambling* becomes a metaphor for how we interact with art.

A slippery tale by most standards, *door of thin skins* is shockingly straight-forward compared to the many shifts and twists of *Young Tambling*. Dentz’s memoir, a fractured hybrid of poetry and prose, tells the story of a 21-year-old woman who begins psychotherapy with Dr. Abe, a 60-year-old “man the size of a Macy’s Day balloon” (15) with “fingers incongruously refined, long and sculptural” (17) who is “President of the psychoanalytic division of the A.P.A.” (4) The narrator leaves her first meeting with him “on an exclamation mark: he’s convinced I know more of the true and real than I think, and that he can convince me. I smile as

if I have a lollipop. Later, his claim I made everything up” (4). What he claims she made up consists of years of transference, emotional abuse, and exploitative sexual behavior.

Dentz announces her work as having “a beginning, middle, slope and end; and end” (29). The slope, of course, is slippery, what the narrator stumbles down to arrive at the rupture that constitutes the first end, while the second end is a coda that helps explain why documenting and scrutinizing this relationship is so necessary and so difficult. The various parts of the narrative are mixed up; once Dr. Abe and his office, which contains “nothing truly rare, unusual or exotic” (3), have been introduced, we move to the coda: the narrator has filed a formal complaint against Dr. Abe and consequently

lose(s) the privilege of silence....
All my secrets filed
with the State,
Office of Prosecution....

The shames I'd confided to Dr. Abe reverberate back for his defense.
To undermine my credibility, declare *delusion*.
The sexual things she says happened with me, really happened with her father.
She's mixed things up.

The investigator wants details (20)

which the narrator then provides, for the investigator and for us. If she doesn't, only Dr. Abe's version will be officially acknowledged.

Dr. Abe tries to take command of the narrator's sex life, commanding her to date men in the group-therapy he runs. He is astonished by her refusal to sleep with a married man she carools with. And when she ends a relationship with a man she has dated only because Dr. Abe badgered her into it despite her lack of attraction to the man, he tells her, “*At least your life was more human when you had a boyfriend*” (49).

Eventually he takes a more hands-on approach, telling her, “*You need a boyfriend...or I*

wouldn't be doing any of this" (18). Because he is

*so uncomfortable
with my being
so uncomfortable
and withdrawn,*

Dr. Abe convinces the narrator to sit on his lap

*to provide with me
with a reparative
nurturant experience...
saying, You think
I'm doing this for you,
but really
I'm doing it for me (34)*

which explains why he's willing to keep fondling her naked breasts even as she cries.

There's plenty more bad behavior: Dr. Abe belittles her art, her clothing, her writing, the decor of her room at the downtown Y, the way she washes his dishes (yes, he expects her to wash his dishes) and puts a roll of toilet paper into a holder. He insults her family after they go to see him as part of her therapy, and announces his own transference issues, telling her "*no one's loved me unconditionally like you, except my mother*" (50) and "*You remind me of my dead father who never actualized himself, already having told me I remind him of his mother, his wife, and two daughters*" (18)

But while the work could not proceed without those details, just as in *Young Tambling*, such details are not the point. This is not one of those books you read in order to find out what happened; knowing the end doesn't spoil one single thing that comes before, because suspense about the plot is never the point. Surprise here comes from ways the narrator weaves the story, from the insights, images and sounds that emerge as she juxtaposes its elements, as we watch her

*think about things he said. They run through my mind, a piece of yarn
unwinding so far until gnarled at a knot. I sit and ponder the knot.*

Like Young Tambling and Dr. Abe, people and events in our lives will do to us what they will, often without our leave; and what they do changes us. When it turns out that Dr. Abe's young patient becomes something he doesn't care for—someone who says “no” to him—he resorts to “Breaking things because [he] couldn't hold onto them” (Greenstreet 75), something Greenstreet announces she's done, something we've all done. These books challenge us to move past that, to hold and support things as well as we can while they shift and surprise us—or else to just to let them go. The giant piece of art Greenstreet put up on her wall was, as she noted, temporary; Dentz will never regain some of the things Dr. Abe took. But both artists have held onto the truth about loss: that it feels like *something*, not nothing, that it happens without our leave, and that it doesn't want to let *us* go.