

What's up with Dave Eggers 'novelizing' the stories of others?

David Hayes: Eggers conducted hundreds of hours of interviews, but this time he's written a conventional biography in the third

The Monk of Mokha

By Dave Eggers

Knopf Canada; 327 PP; \$36

**Book Review by David Hayes,
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Dave Eggers is an eclectic literary figure, an experimenter, an impresario and an activist with a progressive agenda. He emerged in 1994 as co-founder of *Might*, a satirical magazine loved by cool 20-somethings who nevertheless weren't a large or rich enough readership to sustain it. It died in 1997, but three years later, Eggers published his first book, the bestselling *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*.

Ostensibly a memoir about Eggers bringing up his eight-year-old brother after their parents died of cancer, it was anything but conventional. Filled with fantasy sequences and stream-of-consciousness narration, it included a 40-plus page preface with a chart, footnotes and helpful advice for reading the book, including "...many of you might want to skip much of the middle section, namely pages 239-351, which concern the lives of people in their early 20s, and those lives are very difficult to make interesting..." Eggers also merrily admitted that some of the content was fictionalized.

That self-consciously post-modern approach made Eggers a celebrity, and he has gone on to write more than a dozen books (both fiction and non-fiction) and several screenplays, as well as launching the celebrated literary journal *McSweeney's*, and creating the literacy non-profit 826 Valencia and the social justice non-profit Voice of Witness. He's won or been a finalist for dozens of awards, including a Pulitzer, and was named both one of the "50 visionaries who are changing the world" by *Utne Reader* and one of *Time* magazine's "100 Most Influential People."

The always-unorthodox author's three works of nonfiction since AHWOSG (his chosen acronym) have been autobiographies – essentially ghostwritten by Eggers but with his name on the cover. One of them is even classified as a novel. Oh, but maybe they all should be called "nonfiction novels," given Eggers's delight in blurring that boundary. In 2001, he said "the two genres – literary nonfiction and fiction – are like fraternal twins. You can barely tell them apart."

In *What is the What* (2007), Eggers told the story of Valentino Achak Deng, one of the Sudanese "lost boys" who came to the United States as a refugee. Achak Deng told Eggers everything he could remember about his journey, and Eggers then researched as much as he could to authenticate details and put the story in historical context. After living through Sudan's civil war and 15 years in a squatter's

camp in Ethiopia, Achak Deng experiences other, first-world horrors in the U.S. despite making it to university. Eggers is deep inside Achak Deng's head, replicating his voice, a tragic and staggering tale minus the po-mo affectations.

In *Zeitoun* (2010), Eggers again inhabits a voice other than his own, that of Abdulrahman Zeitoun, an entrepreneurial Syrian-American who stays in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina to help survivors, only to be interned as a suspected looter and terrorist. Again credited to Eggers on the cover, it's another autobiography without the auto.

As if realizing his strength, Eggers's latest book follows a similar pattern. In *The Monk of Monkha*, he immerses himself in the life of his friend, Mokhtar Alkhanshali, a Brooklyn-born, San Francisco-raised Yemeni-American who grew up poor and became obsessed with bringing Yemen's coffee, once among the world's best, to the West. Despite the obstacles – a civil war (pitting the Islamic Houthis against forces loyal to the government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi), Saudi airstrikes, widespread corruption, and no coffee production infrastructure in the country – he succeeds against all odds, and his coffee is sold in upscale cafes.

Eggers explains everything you wanted to know (and for some, perhaps more) about coffee in a part of the book that reads like that genre of artful histories of ordinary things, including Mark Kurlansky's *Cod*, Henry Petroski's *The Pencil*, Laura C. Martin's *Tea* and Dava Sobel's *Longitude*. The rest recounts Alkhanshali's odyssey and its many wonderful moments, such as when Alkhanshali visits one of Yemen's coffee-producing regions and, trying to appear an expert, rubs the leaves of what he thinks is a coffee bush. When told it's an olive tree, he says, "I know that. But the vegetation around the coffee plants affects their health." As Eggers points out, "He had made this up on the spot and only later discovered that it was true."

Once again, Eggers apparently conducted hundreds of hours of interviews and tried to corroborate the details through research, but this time he's instead written a conventional biography in the third person. As he puts it, "This book is a work of non-fiction that depicts events seen and lived by Mokhtar Alkhanshali."

More accurately, it's a work of creative non-fiction, although some critics use the term as a pejorative for fiddling with the facts so much that, really, who can tell what is true and untrue? (Sometimes, in the wrong hands, this is true but I don't diss a genre because of the failings of some.) The book is filled with vivid scenes, reconstructed by Eggers, which easily fall into a venerable debate in the world of journalism. Eggers wasn't there – he's mainly relying on the memories of his subject – so how certain can anyone be that things really happened that way?

In the 1960s, Gay Talese said of this kind of work, "it is, or should be, as reliable as the most reliable reportage although it seeks a larger truth than is possible through the mere compilation of verifiable facts." It's non-fiction that reads like fiction, which can be accomplished in the right hands, although there have been many, many examples proving how often writers prove unreliable. (Among the scandals, Greg Mortenson's *Three Cups of Tea*, James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, Vivian Gornick's *Fierce Attachments*, John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil: A Savannah Story* and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*.)

Although there's no evidence Eggers is guilty of these sins here, there is a weakness with his non-fiction, no matter how entertaining his execution and how well-intentioned his motives. His larger-than-life characters with their larger-than-

life stories tread close to, and often over, the line separating journalism from hagiography. After all, Alkhanshali is a friend, not merely a subject. And while Eggers presented Zeitoun as a heroic figure in a happy marriage, three years after the book is published we learned that Zeitoun had been charged with attempting to murder his wife and, while in prison, for trying to hire a hitman to succeed where he had failed. Was no hint of the man's dark corners evident when Eggers did his extensive research?

And I have another misgiving about Eggers's nonfiction. In *What is the What*, *Zeitoun*, and now *The Monk of Mokha*, he addresses the 21st century American dream. In his words, they are about "U.S. citizens who maintain strong ties to the countries of their ancestors and who, through entrepreneurial zeal and dogged labor, create indispensable bridges between the developed and developing worlds, between nations that produce and those that consume." It's a high-minded goal, but it also glorifies exceptionalism at the expense of all those immigrants whose opportunities and talents are more modest.

In the end, it comes down to expectation. Eggers is clear in *The Monk of Mokha* that he and Alkhanshali are friends; that he has relied to a large degree on his friend's memory. So, readers, you have been warned, *caveat emptor*. Every narrative is, ultimately, a version of events as they are understood to have happened – by the subjects who experienced them; by the writer who is recording and interpreting them. In the creative non-fiction of Eggers (and others), we're left to trust that writers have done their best to produce a work that is experientially accurate, and tried within the limitations to fact-check the details, to mine what Talese called "the fictional current that flows beneath the stream of reality."

