

MATTHIAS BUCHINGER: "THE GREATEST GERMAN LIVING" by RICKY JAY  
MARCEL BROODTHAERS: MY OGRE BOOK, SHADOW THEATER, MIDNIGHT  
ADAM PENDLETON: BECOMING IMPERCEPTIBLE

uncommon books at the intersection of art & literature www.sigliopress.com siglio

# BOOKFORUM



DAILY REVIEW OMNIVORE PAPER TRAIL CURRENT ISSUE INTERVIEWS SYLLABI READINGS VIDEO ARCHIVE ARTFORUM

[subscribe](#) [advertise](#) [about](#) [contact](#)

[sign out](#) [laurakipnis](#) [follow us](#)   

[search](#)

## CURRENT ISSUE

SEPT/OCT/NOV 2016

### Thrall of Mirrors

Kristin Dombek's adventures in the world of contemporary narcissism

LAURA KIPNIS

Since we live in an era of compulsory self-disclosure, there's no way I can avoid confessing that I read Kristin Dombek's short book, *The Selfishness of Others: An Essay on the Fear of Narcissism*, in a frenzy of narcissistic injury. The reason is that for the past several years I myself have been working fitfully on a short book about contemporary narcissism (maybe I should say *had* been working on), except that I kept writing myself into corners and putting it aside. Still, in my own mind I owned the subject, or at least I owned the book-length essay on the subject, meaning I read Dombek's short book with the anxiety and umbrage that someone had been poaching in my pasture.

Additionally: Had Dombek not read, *or simply not cited*, my *Harper's* piece "Me, Myself, and Id: The Invention of the Narcissist" from a couple of years back, where I previewed some of the ideas and research from my sort-of-in-progress book (ideas and research I felt occasional quivers of in *The Selfishness of Others*, though I suppose two similarly disposed writers can dip into the same obscure sources and come to similar conclusions)?

Unread or uncited: Either way, I was injured.

I suppose such experiences aren't unusual. I was grouching about pasture-plundering to a writer friend, a novelist, who listened sympathetically then related that he'd been sent a galley to blurb a few years ago, which went on to become a *huge* best seller, which had arrived on his doorstep accompanied by an effusively praise-laden note about how much my writer friend's previous (hardly as successful) novel on much the same subject had shaped the blurb-seeker's approach. I was meant to understand that he too had been plundered. But it's *not the same*, I thought, as my friend moaned on. No one owns *that* subject.

And now we arrive at the theme of selfishness—our own and the quantity ascribed to those putative "others."

That Dombek's is in many ways a better book than I would have written is doubly painful. She's certainly more graceful on the page, and often more empathic, especially toward the suffering multitudes who've sustained lasting injury (they proclaim) at the hands of narcissistic bosses, bad boyfriends, selfish parents. The terrain she covers is necessarily broad, since apparently narcissism is everywhere and on the rise. That "apparently" is the



SEPT/OCT/NOV 2016 CONTENTS

Joe Conason's biography of Bill Clinton

*American Heiress: The Wild Saga of the Kidnapping, Crimes and Trial of Patty Hearst* by Jeffrey Toobin

*Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School* by Stuart Jeffries

*The Bitch Is Back* by Cathi Hanauer

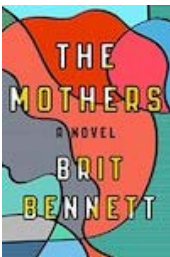
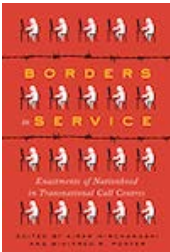
*A Mother's Reckoning: Living in the Aftermath of Tragedy* by Sue Klebold

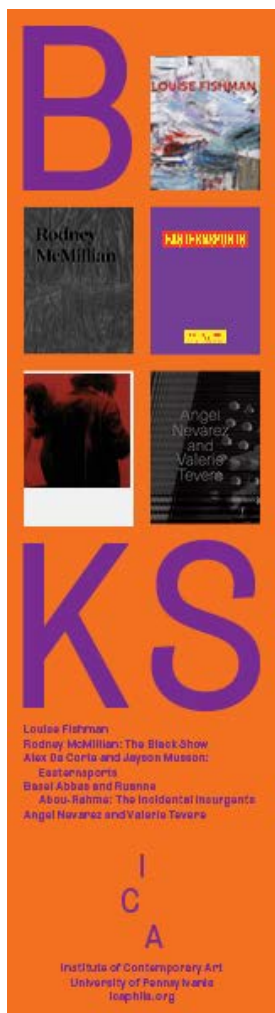
**SUBSCRIBE**

- Sept/Oct/Nov 2016
- June/July/Aug 2016
- Apr/May 2016
- Feb/Mar 2016
- Dec/Jan 2016
- Sept/Oct/Nov 2015
- June/July/Aug 2015

[more past issues](#)

## ADVERTISEMENT





key to the book—the critical doubt widens and narrows from page to page as Dombek slides and sashes in the messiness of her subject.

One of the big questions for an essayist writing about contemporary narcissism is: Whose psyches are you going to enlist to prove your point? Research psychologists can administer crude personality tests to captive college students (“Check one: I like to look at myself in the mirror, or, I am not particularly interested in looking at myself in the mirror”), then bend the data to suit alarmist agendas. A clinician has patients to draw on, sufficiently disguised, for case-study material. Amusing footnote: Philip Roth once found himself thus transposed, in a journal article on narcissism and creativity by his own thieving analyst, and so thinly disguised as not to be disguised at all. It embittered him toward the shrink for years until he hilariously transformed the episode into “fiction” in *My Life as a Man*.

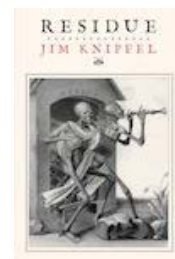
We essayists typically don’t have patients. You can pillage your social circle for data—no doubt there’s plenty—but will your friends ever talk to you again? How about your intimates: lovers, mothers (see Ariel Leve’s recent *An Abbreviated Life*—mom is the poet Sandra Hochman)? But then you risk becoming a memoirist, and people are still going to be pissed off.

Dombek’s solution is to transform the “self-help Internet,” where narcissism’s victims congregate to share their plights, into a research archive. She shuts herself in a small windowless room and goes full-on immersion, trawling the thoroughways and back roads of what she names the “narcisphere,” which has the same temptations as doing fieldwork in a crack den—meaning Dombek’s not averse to an occasional puff on the pipe herself. When she reports back on the “4 Warning Signs You’re Dating a Narcissist,” or how starting a “recovery journey” will help you understand why your mother couldn’t love you, it’s with the double consciousness of critic and fellow sufferer. She takes a similarly immersive plunge into reality TV, especially the show *My Super Sweet 16*, which became iconic in the annals of contemporary narcissism when one teen demanded that a stretch of Peachtree Street in Atlanta be closed down for a parade in her honor, diverting traffic and ambulances from a hospital located on the same street, since they can just go around, right? It was *her* day to shine.



Because Dombek is a lot smarter and more interesting than much of the material in her archive, these forays are sometimes awkward. No doubt it makes me sound like some decrepit Arnoldian—value is an outmoded category, to be sure—but there’s a lot of space handed over to cultural sludge. My view is that if digital capitalism thrives by monetizing attention, ignoring stuff can be a form of activism, as well as self-protection—immersion in cultural sludge can leave you feeling tarred, like a dying seagull in the neighborhood of the Exxon Valdez. (Environmental destruction and the selfishness of others aren’t entirely unrelated categories, after all.)

By contrast, Dombek’s method is to strand us in the narcisphere, and speak from deep inside its structures of belief. “We know the new selfishness when we see it,” and we recognize the same cold smile on the face of a bad boyfriend and the serial killer who mowed down sixty-nine people at a summer camp then complained about the choice of PlayStation games in his prison cell. It might take *you* a while to realize that the narcissist is not merely selfish—they don’t actually have a self. On the subject of “your” bad boyfriend



turning away: “There is nothing you can do, now, that will turn his whole face toward you.” Which is doubly unfair, because “it’s not something you would ever do to someone. Some people have called you a saint.” This is deliciously ironic (assuming you have an ear already tuned to the self-exonerating lull of the narcissphere), though sometimes the dizzying whirl of immersion, pronoun play, irony, and switchbacks can leave you a little critically rudderless.

I get that the subject is itself a dizzying whirl, and that Dombek is forcing us to inhabit the conceptual mushiness and infinite stretchability of “narcissism” as currently deployed. This speaking from inside the belly of a cultural thing or contradiction sometimes reminded me of the anonymously written “Intellectual Situation” pieces that lead each issue of *n+1*. Dombek herself writes the thoughtful and often funny *n+1* “Help Desk” advice columns, a mashup of Ann Landers and Kierkegaard for troubled hipsters with life dilemmas. I’m an *n+1* admirer and personally fond of many of its sad young founders, but the immersion thing can be bet-hedging, especially in combination with Dombek’s affinity for the subjunctive mood: “If more and more people are now more evil and fake,” “If narcissism has become more fluid and widespread . . .” I’m a big user/abuser of the subjunctive myself, and fully understand what a convenient pal it is when you don’t want to be declarative, but it can lead to confusion about what you yourself actually think, like say about whether narcissism really *is* a thing.

As when Dombek rehearses the premises advanced by Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, authors of *The Narcissism Epidemic*, a deeply stupid book that advances a lot of specious metrics about rising levels of narcissism, then borrows the scary moralizing plague language of AIDS-HIV bashers to promulgate fear of contagion, and which Dombek seems to, unaccountably, take seriously. “It’s easy to see how the traits of a personality disorder can spread through a culture like a disease,” she echoes, adding that you catch narcissism by seeing others around you obsessed with their hotness and becoming likewise obsessed with your own, and soon you’re carrying the virus, too. Had she herself caught the plague of epidemiology idioms, I wondered? Elsewhere we get the diagnostic criteria for “Narcissistic Personality Disorder” (NPD) enumerated without comment (“A pervasive pattern of grandiosity . . .”) right after an anecdote about an annoyingly conversation-hogging male memoir theorist. Is Dombek diagnosing the guy as an NPD sufferer, or sending up the American Psychiatric Association, from whose diagnostic manual she’s quoting the NPD criteria? Does she believe NPD is a “thing”? Or doesn’t it matter?

Only many pages later does Dombek emerge from immersion and excoriate the self-confirming social-psych research of *The Narcissism Epidemic*, and point out the self-canceling contradictions that structure the narcissphere. Once the layers of irony are peeled back, she turns out to have an aptitude for penetrating the bullshit social psychologists have been peddling under the guise of personality research, which leads to some fascinating philosophical questions: If the idea is that narcissists are fakers who are empty inside and imitate having a self, then “who or what is it, inside of him, that is imitating having a self? If he is nothing but a performance, who or what is doing the performing?”

Of course, Nietzsche and Judith Butler spoke to such questions a long time ago—there’s no doer behind the deed, we’re all performing all the time. Which doesn’t cancel out the eloquently put epistemological question at the center of the book: How can we even know others at all? Is there even a “them” and an “us”? As Dombek shrewdly observes, doesn’t the universal wisdom on how to deal with the narcissists in your life—flee, block their calls—replicate the coldness and failed empathy that supposedly marks the narcissist’s own inner life? (If in fact the narcissist *has* an inner life.)

By the end of the book the onus has indeed shifted to “us” and *our* “narciphobia,” neatly presented as a list of symptoms, of course—paranoia, splitting the world into good and evil, catastrophizing. Maybe the selfishness of others is actually something in yourself that just can’t be satiated, a rage at your own dependency on others? Guilty as charged!

---

*Laura Kipnis's upcoming book, Stupid Sex/Higher Ed, will be published in 2017 by HarperCollins.*

[f](#) [t](#) [g+](#) [r](#) [p](#) [e](#) ..... PERMALINK ..... ADD A COMMENT

[DAILY REVIEW](#) [OMNIVORE](#) [PAPER TRAIL](#) [CURRENT ISSUE](#) [INTERVIEWS](#) [SYLLABI](#) [READINGS](#) [VIDEO](#) [ARCHIVE](#) [ARTFORUM](#)

[subscribe](#) [advertise](#) [about](#) [contact](#)

[top of page](#)