

Lying: a metaphorical memoir by lauren slater



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*, Lauren Slater attempts to create a new kind of truth called metaphorical truth: emotional truth explained using metaphors instead of facts. She confuses fact and fiction even though it is a memoir and thus creates a convoluted tale of herself where she may or may not be epileptic. Initially, the readers believe that she uses metaphorical truth to make them understand the essence of her life.

By the end of the book, they begin to also believe that she wants to ask them, as a last resort, to help her in her healing process by the following: giving her much needed attention and through that, letting her clear her conscience of guilt over the wrong acts that she had committed. They feel that she is successful in this aim because of the use of metaphorical truth. Firstly, this metaphorical truth gives rise to two different emotions within groups of readers that motivate the same overall action of them helping her. Secondly, it acts as a leverage to ensure that they cannot critically judge her.

At first, the readers think that Slater only wants them to understand the essence of her life for which she uses metaphorical truth. Throughout the text, she continuously contradicts herself by telling them something and then denying that it's true. She presents a range of possibilities in her account such that there is no clear, definite sense of factual truth anymore. And yet, being a memoir, it has to be true in some form at least. So she brings a little more clarity to her account by explicitly expressing her need to tell her tale to the readers, the tale of the emotional truth in her life.

She suggests that she could be inventing diseases that she was never afflicted with but only because her mental state is best explained by the metaphor of the disease. She first suggests this when she says, “ I have epilepsy. Or I feel I have epilepsy. Or I wish I had epilepsy, so I could find a way of explaining the dirty, spastic glittering place I had in my mother’s heart” (5). This stance is further validated in her note to her editor and the publishing house’s marketing department in which she detailedly explains how she is using metaphors to sketch an emotionally accurate self-portrait (162).

The readers clutch at this reasoning because it is the only one that makes sense in light of such a convoluted tale. As they are finally presented with a way to interpret the text that blurs the line between fact and fiction, they accept that way and believe that Slater is doing so only to make them understand the essence of her life. Once the readers are dedicated to understanding Slater’s life, they begin to equate the emotions presented with the emotions that she experiences in reality and believe that she not only wants them to understand her life, but she also wants them to help her in her healing process as a last resort.

Since she promises to maintain emotional truth in the narrative, they can rightly believe that the emotions presented in the book relate to the emotions that she experiences in reality irrespective of whether the events described took place in reality or not. They, then, draw parallels between the emotions in the book and the emotions in reality and realize that what they thought she wanted from them was not only what she had explicitly stated but also included a greater plea for aiding her with therapy as a last resort.

This belief is resonated when she talks about how she had tried to heal herself but had not been successful: What, I wondered, would fill the silence, the space in me? What would make me real? I had tried stealing, sickness, the lovely links of languages, none of it had worked. I needed something more direct, like life support. Hook me up, please. Put me on a breathing machine, pump me full of fresh oxygen, fresh bags of blood, dialysis, cardiac cuffs, my heart has stopped, I need resuscitation.

The readers think that Slater wants them to help her by giving her attention and by means of it, letting her clear her conscience of guilt over her wrong deeds. This belief is supported by the text throughout. Firstly, she displays an attention-seeking behavior. It appears to stem from the lack of attention that she receives from her mother. Although she hates her mother for not treating her right, she continues to devise new ways to please her and come under her notice. When she realizes that her mother will never be that source of comfort for her, she turns to external sources by using deceitful means.

She seeks it from the nuns at Saint Christopher's and the nurses, both at her school and at the various hospitals where she faked seizures. Her relationship with Christopher is characterized primarily by her need to receive some affection for which she initiates writing to attract him. Similarly, she starts attending AA group meetings only to receive some comfort from its members even though she is not an alcoholic and she acknowledges that it is dishonest to be posing as one. She looks for attention from so many people, but with no one else to turn to, the readers feel that she is ultimately asking them for it.

The strongest evidence is presented when she says that writing is a way for her to reach out to others, encouraging readers to continue pursuing this line of thought (173). Moreover, the readers feel that by receiving this attention, Slater wants to clear her conscience of the guilt of all the sinful deeds that she had committed. When she first tries to admit that she is a liar, an exaggerator and hence, a sinner to Dr. Neu, he dismisses her confession by justifying those acts as consequences of her diseases. She then attempts to come clean by performing the “ fifth step” with the AA group: confessing all of your secrets to someone (192).

And yet again, she fails. Her ineptitude to relieve herself of her guilt manifests itself in the book when she once again turns to the readers as a last resort by saying, “ It is my fault. There is something I can claim. My fault. My split. My guilt. Here. Here is where I am. / Thus, myself. My memoir, please...” (215). She is finally claiming her guilt through the book. Thus, she strives to accomplish the “ fifth step” with and through the readers. The readers feel that Slater is successful in making them complicit in her healing process because of the usage of metaphorical truth.

By using both fact and fiction, she openly challenges the reliability of the memoir itself and leaves the answer upto the readers. The readers can then be divided in two minds: those who believe that the account is mostly factually true, and those who believe that the account is mostly fabricated. To those who believe that the account is mostly factually true, the narrative elicits sympathy. This is because they can relate to her situation, knowing that diseases can deeply affect a person. This sympathy makes them true

aides in the healing process because they can then understand and appreciate her need to use them as vehicles.

To those readers who believe that the account is mostly fabricated, the narrative elicits sorrow and pity for Slater. That she had to concoct a story conveys her desperation to receive an aiding hand and her ineptitude to express her emotions using simpler and more direct means. But the fact that she had to invent such a complicated and sad story about illness insinuates the gravity of the instability of her mental state. It is this fact that makes this group of readers feel sorrow and pity for her. Their sorrow and pity moves them to help her; the emotion is not sympathy, not empathy, but a longing to help someone whom you feel bad for.

So they want to aide her in any way possible and when they believe that she is looking for a particular means, they want to try their best to support her that way. The result is that both the categories of readers would be willing to be her aide, though motivated by different reasons, in sync with what they feel that she wants from them. There is a secondary way that the metaphorical truth works in achieving what readers believe Slater seems to want. As previously explained, she encourages a positive reaction from the readers.

Moreover, she also provides leverage against a negative reaction by using metaphorical truth in place of factual truth. If the narrative was completely factually true and readers could get a clear understanding of the truth, they would have been able to delineate between what was right and what was wrong on her part. There would have been a possibility of them judging her

critically and perhaps, not feeling any endearing or positive emotions towards her. By using both fact and fiction, she confuses the readers and provides no scope for them to judge her negatively at the very least.

This way the metaphorical truth not only makes the readers want to help her but also ensures that they cannot have any negative reaction towards her. It is arguable whether the author intended for metaphorical truth to work in this fashion or not. But, we have seen how it works in her favor more than what factual truth probably would have. Does factual truth matter then? Would this book be an equal success if it was labeled as fiction? Perhaps as long as readers perceive some emotional value in a book, they will attempt to make the book work for them as much as they can.