

Roland barthes and  
kiese laymon: can the  
author truly 'die' in a  
memoir?



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Devoted to the concept of text, or *écriture*, French theorist Roland Barthes departs from academic criticism's emphasis on the author (Leitch 1317) in his essay "The Death of the Author" and reorients his focus on the construction and content of the written work itself. Barthes insists that it is impossible for readers to know who is speaking in a text. He argues that "writing is the destruction of every voice, every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the writing body" (1322). Throughout his work, he reiterates the idea that "it is language which speaks, not the author" (1323), claiming that the author has no control over a written work after it is constructed and that, therefore, searching for the author's intention is futile. According to Barthes, by accepting the metaphorical death of the author, the reader becomes free to examine a work without the constraints of the author's predetermined meaning. This action, in his view, transforms a text from "a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning" to "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (1324). Barthes presents this theory as a method for reading all types of writing. However, the application of his concept to Kiese Laymon's memoir *Heavy* calls the universality of Barthes's model into question; while one may temporarily remove the author to explore this story in a new light, the permanent 'death' of Laymon has serious repercussions when applied to the work as a whole.

Kiese Laymon's *Heavy* is a collection of shorter stories that construct his memoir. His introduction, titled "Been," relies heavily on personal

statements and highly specific memories of his life. However, Laymon can still, in theory, be removed from the work, according to Barthes' principle that language knows a grammatical person, rather than an actualized person: "the author is never more than the instance writing, just as I is nothing other than the instance saying I" (1323). When put into practice, this notion allows the author to be separated from the piece. For example, Laymon writes that "every time you promised, I believed you" (Laymon 3). This statement becomes reflective of the reader, rather than the author, when one accepts that "I" is nothing more than a grammatical instance. Instead of wondering about the author's experiences, the reader is encouraged to think about his or her own life. Both "I" and "you" push the reader into his or her own conscience to produce a reaction to the text that is unique to each person that approaches it. The intention of the author is not important and the writing is no longer "an operation of recording, notation, representation, 'depiction' [...] rather, it designates exactly what linguistics, referring to Oxford philosophy, call a performative" (Leitch 1324). Barthes argues that when restricted by the existence of the author, a written work is fixed in time; but, when the author is removed, "there is no time other than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now" (1324). This alters what Barthes refers to as the "temporality" of the text (1324), allowing the writing to change for each new reader or even each new reading.

However, the removal of the author from "Been" is not entirely successful, being that some of Laymon's text is too integrally related to his personal identity to be separated from himself. For example, Laymon writes about

how his mother forced him to “ read, reread, write, and revise in those books” until he “ would never be intimidated or easily impressed by words, punctuation, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and white space” (Laymon 9). He states that “ in that space, I learned how to assemble memory and imagination when I most wanted to die” (9). If one was to remove the author from this moment of the work, it would lose much of its meaning being that the content is so personal. Laymon’s statements are brutally honest, as implied by his repetition of the phrase “ I wanted to write a lie” (1), and are powerfully influenced by the experiences that he shares. As a result, the reader’s understanding of these lines is shaped by the details Laymon has previously disclosed and the manner in which he presents them. The reader’s experience with his or her own mother is of no value here, just as his or her interpretation of the text is limited. Despite Barthes’ conjecture that the author loses all power over a text after it has been narrated (1322), Laymon retains control. As Roman Jakobson explained in his essay “ Linguistics and Poetics,” the emotive function of language allows an author to offer a “ direct expression of the speaker’s attitude toward what he is speaking about” (Leitch 1148); Laymon harnesses the power of this function with phrases like “ never be intimidated” and “ when I most wanted to die” (Laymon 9), which convey his personal strength and struggles. Rather than offering his memoir up to the reader for interpretation, Laymon is particular in his use of language to construct the exact image he desires.

Moreover, one must consider the consequences of removing an author from an incredibly personal text, such as Laymon’s. Barthes claims that “ the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture”

(1324), but Laymon's writing draws from the events of his life. Even if his writing is influenced by pre-existing ideas, its main source is his experiences. Therefore, by ignoring the author's intentions, as Barthes advises one to do, the reader defeats the purpose of the piece, which is to explain Laymon's perspective through the events that have shaped his life. Assenting to the death of the author may lead to the liberation of the reader, but in the case of Laymon's work, it also runs the risk misconstruing the whole piece. Barthes briefly acknowledges this possibility when he writes that "it is derisory to condemn the new writing in the name of a humanism hypocritically turned champion of the reader's rights" (Leitch 1326) but it is through the 'death of the author' in Laymon's work that one can see the true danger.

Roland Barthes "The Death of the Author" set a new precedent in terms of the analysis of written work. Rather than searching for the intentions of the author, Barthes proclaimed that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (1326). In some ways, his theory enables a reader to interact with a text in a revolutionary way. For example, with the introduction to Kiese Laymon's memoir *Heavy*, the reader can separate the text from Laymon as an individual and therefore understand it in an infinite number of different ways. However, this action cannot be performed indefinitely. Sections of Laymon's work are emotionally charged and precisely constructed in a way that demands the reader to examine the text through Laymon's perspective; at these points in his work, it is not possible to separate him from the writing. Finally, removing Laymon from a text that primarily comes from his personal experience risks neglecting the purpose of

the work, which is to understand Laymon's world view by examining his life. While 'the death of the author' allows for a reader to expand his or her understanding of a written text, it has dangerous consequences when employed as a permanent method of analysis.

## **Works Cited**

Laymon, Kiese. *Heavy: An American Memoir*. Scribner, 2018. Leitch, Vincent. Ed.

The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism. Second Edition. Norton, 2010.