

The Pleasure of Digression: Michael Griffith's *The Speaking Stone: Stories Cemeteries Tell*

Michael Griffith. *The Speaking Stone: Stories Cemeteries Tell*. Cincinnati, OH: University of Cincinnati Press, 2021. 325 pp. \$29.95. Softcover.

In “The Art of Digression,” Judith Kitchen writes, “[W]e read to digress—to argue and compare and extemporize—as much as we read to ‘get there.’” Michael Griffith’s new book of essays, *The Speaking Stone: Stories Cemeteries Tell* (University of Cincinnati Press, 2021) invites us to do just that: to digress, to wander, to explore. Weaving personal narrative with extensive research, Griffith writes about his year walking through Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati, Ohio, grounds that span over seven hundred acres, the third largest cemetery in the United States.

While writing a novel about an obituary writer, Griffith often found himself sitting at his desk in his attic at home and worrying about the book’s progress (or lack thereof) and questioning the stakes of the project. In an attempt to get out of his head and more fully into the project, Griffith started walking through the cemetery near his home each morning. “I was wandering the cemetery every day,” Griffith writes, “learning to read it, seeing what caught my eye (odd stones, epitaphs, frills or follies, genres of marker, plantings), jotting down names and locations, and then going home to explore in a different way the idiosyncrasies I’d noticed.”

Days after reading Griffith’s *The Speaking Stone*, I found myself still thinking about the connections he makes between storytelling and walking. Composing and wandering. Landscape and narrative. With references to Rebecca Solnit’s *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, Virginia Woolf’s “Street Haunting,” and Plato, Griffith explores how walking allows us “to think associatively, discursively, on the move.” He asks questions about narrative

structure, time, place, coincidence, and surprise. Griffith talks about how the connections between walking and storytelling are not new, but his daily walking “felt like a new mode of composition, one that’s about the conversation of one vector of motion to another.” As Kitchen emphasizes about the pleasure of digression in writing and reading, Griffith writes about his own shift in perspective about narrative structure and progress: “[D]igression wasn’t an avoidance of narrative but a subgenre of it.”

I was so pulled into the book’s sections about writing and writing practices, which offer interesting insights into a writer’s composing and research practices. Griffith discusses how a project can shift over time, how research can impact the structure of a piece, and how pieces of writing we think of as diversions from other writing projects might actually be books in themselves. Griffith writes about a novel he started twenty-five years ago about barbershops and the things he collected while working on that project, including a vintage barber chair from the 1950s. Each essay in *The Speaking Stone* focuses on one person buried in Spring Grove Cemetery, but, as all of our lives contain the stories of so many other people, each chapter reaches outward, exploring issues of gender, class, race, women’s rights, and the abolition of slavery. “A Great Awkward Bunglehood of Woman” tells the story of Fanny Wright, “the first American woman to wear pants in public” and “Death’s Taxicab” looks at the X-100, the limousine in which John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

One of Griffith’s greatest strengths is his ability to make associative leaps that both surprise and provoke the reader to think more deeply about something. In the essay “Bake Visibly!” he moves from the viaducts connecting the city of Cincinnati, to the invention of the glass door oven, to Charlene Mookken, the 1,050-pound cow who scaled a fence, escaped a slaughterhouse, and evaded capture for eleven days. The best nonfiction surprises us and teaches us things, and I found myself constantly learning while reading *The Speaking Stone*. While *The Speaking Stone* is a book about writing practices, people, and the stories under the surface, it’s also a book about place, a kind of love letter to Cincinnati and the history of the city that often goes untold, forgotten. Like Junker’s Tavern, the old bar that used to sell sample-sized detergent alongside their alcohol. And the Cincinnati School of Embalming, the first college of mortuary arts in the United States.

The essay is a form that encourages digression, associative leaps, and meandering, and the experience of reading *The Speaking Stone* felt like taking walks with someone who stops to look at things, who encourages you to stop and look, too. As Jane Alison says in *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative*, “Just as a river meanders around hills, through fields, lacing its way down a slope, a narrative can meander, too.” After reading *The Speaking Stone*, I took a walk. Like Griffith sitting at his desk in his attic, I have been working on a new writing project, and I’m trying to figure out exactly what it’s about, what the stakes of the project are. Up ahead, I saw a group of ibises standing

in someone's front yard. A black cat perched under a low-lying palm I didn't know the name of—I'm new to this city. I noticed the way my dogs' shadows on the street showed their age more accurately than their bodies do. Or maybe it's that their shadows force me to look at them from a different angle, the arthritis in their hips as prominent as the sun above this street we walk in Tampa. Alison notes, "[D]igressions mean to get us to pause and look around, to ponder," and that's exactly what *The Speaking Stone* got me to do: to meander, to slow down, to look at things anew.