

Who, What, Where, When, Why, How

I met American author John d'Agata in Marfa, Texas, towards the end of 2010, at a reading he was giving from his book *About a Mountain*, which had just been published.¹

While John was helping his mother move to Las Vegas one summer, he got to hear about the federal government's project to bury highly radioactive waste produced in the United States at a single site, Yucca Mountain, situated in the desert not far from Las Vegas.

John d'Agata brought to light the incoherence and absurdity of the project as well as the authorities' many attempts to manipulate public opinion. But his enquiry took a more personal turn with an event that appeared at first sight to have no direct link with his research: the death of a teenager who jumped to his death from the *Stratosphere Hotel* tower, a boy that d'Agata thought he had spoken to shortly before his suicide.

John d'Agata followed up lines of enquiry, arranging facts in constellations that might make their meaning clearer, to lay bare what the author Nick Flynn called the 'dark heart of America'.

But d'Agata soon realised that all he could draw from this was our inability to truly understand what things mean, an impossibility that confronts us with a sense of powerlessness. We are reduced to searching, knowing full well that this pursuit is ineluctably doomed to failure. Even when linked to each other, these facts make no sense.

I suggested to John d'Agata that I might produce an illustrated version of his book. We would keep the twenty-five pages of text used for his public readings and replace the book's remaining two hundred pages with images. We would also preserve the book's chapter structure: *Who, What, Where, When, Why, How, Why, Why, Why*.

For anyone pursuing an enquiry, the five W's and one H (*Who, What, Where, When, Why, How*) form a basic tool for gathering information but they are also a simple means of producing a complete story on any subject you like. Since none of these questions can be satisfactorily answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no', they call for a factual and detailed answer.

I produced just short of six hundred paintings on paper for this project, some of which will be displayed at the Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels as part of the Young Belgian Art Prize. These paintings are simple, direct, unassuming – straightforward records of studio life.

They are not illustrations of the text as such. And if the five W's and one H are used to name them, organise

them, they will only turn the questions back on themselves, rather than answer. These questions – general, yet precise – of who, what, where, when, why and how, allow us to think in real terms but they also continually bring us back to our more blurred, more uncertain relationship with fate.

These paintings are as abstract and indefinite as these five W's and one H. They are essays, in the literary sense of the term, in response to John d'Agata's essay. They constitute a non-linear, subjective story, in which every painted gesture carries its own story. They are not an answer; they do not represent a solution.

Notes:

1 John d'Agata, *About A Mountain* (W. W. Norton & Company, New York, February 2010).