

Fact or Fiction?

N.J. Campbell's *Found Audio* presents itself as a carefully assembled archive, a collection of transcribed recordings curated by audio archivist Dr. Amrapali Anna Singh. Rather than unfolding as a traditional, plot-driven novel, the text centers on a series of tapes that document an unnamed journalist's pursuit of an elusive "City of Dreams." The narrative offers just enough context to establish a sense of direction, but it resists providing full clarity, favoring redactions and ambiguity over resolution. As a result, the novel feels less concerned with what happens than with how the act of telling—and recording—shapes what can be known.

From the beginning, *Found Audio* takes on the formal qualities of nonfiction. Between the transcripts, editorial notes, and the layered narration, they suggest a level of authority that is typically associated with documentary material. However, this sense of authenticity is gradually blurred as the novel progresses. The recordings do not present a stable story, instead they introduce uncertainty. Details accumulate without necessarily clarifying the larger picture, and the structure itself begins to feel less like a straightforward archive. At times the journalist's narration becomes so long and dense that it is easy to forget that it is a transcript; he goes into such incredible detail about his journey that it starts to feel more like a written story rather than verbal observations and thoughts. This is one of the most frustrating points. Either Campbell is telling the truth—that this journalist actually went on this journey and the book needed to be marketed as fiction to protect peoples' identities—or he just does such a frustratingly amazing job in his execution of this fictional story that it simply feels real.

When one minor question is asked of the unnamed journalist: "are you the dreamer or are you the dream," it calls into question the genre of the book. While this question seems inconsequential, it actually brings attention to the blurred line of if the story is fact or fiction.

Despite being marketed as fiction, between the contradictory foreword and afterword, footnotes and redacted names, the story quickly begins to feel like nonfiction. So much of the narrative is focused on the journalist detailing his journey that it is easy to forget that you are reading a transcription until it is suddenly interrupted by Dr. Singh's commentary and footnotes. When the narrative does return to the journalist, he simultaneously gives an extreme amount of detail while not clarifying the journey at all. There are also moments when the journalist is interrupted by an unnamed person who appears to almost be interrogating him, which abruptly makes you question the reasoning for recording the cassettes in the first place. Some parts appear to simply be observations on his journey, but others sound as if he is being forced to tell his story, almost as if he is relaying top secret information that the interrogator plans to use and exploit. It is in these moments that the story begins to feel strangely real despite the fictional marketing. This then makes the format of the story feel real while the plot itself feels like fiction.

Because the foundation of the book is done through audio tapes, it means that the actual narration is more thoughts and recalling interviews that happened over several years, rather than a traditional forward moving plot. Often the journalist is describing conversations such as the people he spoke to in order to find an elusive Louisiana snake hunter and how unsettling, and interesting, he was when they finally met. Another point of interest—which is giving the book a lot of credit—is when the journalist describes his time in a mental hospital that he checked himself into after a conversation with a man called The Turk. What should feel like an adventure story about a decades long quest to find “The City of Dreams” actually ends up as a long, drawn-out recollection of his journey that is being retold to a few anonymous people. And even that information is only known because of the five brief interruptions that are spread throughout the tapes. All of that is to say, that despite having access to so much information, readers only really

learn about a few specific points of his journey without ever really learning about “The City of Dreams.”

The audiobook also contributes, heavily, to the genre confusion of the book. Reading provides an opportunity to become lost in the story, with sections so long that you can forget that you are reading a transcription of the cassettes. Listening, however, is a completely different experience. Considering that the entire premise of the story is that it is made up of the transcriptions of tapes, and the audiobook—obviously—negates that structure, it almost feels like a reversal of the story. As if we, as the reader, are taken back to the beginning and are listening to the tapes with Dr. Singh for the first time instead of reading the transcriptions after she has completed her work. The audiobook not only has different voices for each of the characters, but also includes the silenced audio breaks and background noises, which undermines the intentional choice of having the story be conveyed through transcriptions. This also leaves the redactions, and namely, the footnotes feeling like a pointless after thought.

With that said though, the contradictory nature of *Found Audio*, makes this both an intriguing and frustratingly interesting story. N.J. Campbell does an excellent job of blurring the line between fact and fiction in a way that draws you in, confuses your sense of understanding, and leaves you wondering what just happened. This uncertainty is not simply a byproduct of the narrative but a central feature of it, forcing the reader to engage more actively with the book rather than passively follow the plot. At times, that disorientation can feel overwhelming, but it is also what allows the book to linger in your mind after finishing it. Logically, I know that this is a fictional book, but parts of me still wonder if maybe some of it is real.

What ultimately stands out is how intentional that confusion feels. The book seems to rely on the reader’s discomfort as a way of emphasizing its larger point about interpretation and

belief. Instead of guiding the reader toward a single understanding, it opens up multiple possibilities that never fully settle. This creates a reading experience that feels unresolved, but not incomplete. The lack of clarity encourages readers to question not just the narrative itself, but their own expectations of what a story should provide. In this way, *Found Audio* becomes less about discovering answers and more about examining the process of searching for them. Which in itself is a frustrating task. It is a surprisingly mind-bending story that is entertaining in a way that will leave you thoroughly irritated.