

**2021 Grade 11 APLaC Summer Reading  
Assignment**  
*The Poisonwood Bible*

**Part I:** In a two-paragraph response, compare *The Poisonwood Bible* either to *Educated* or *Staying Put*. Thematically, how do these works relate? Linguistically, which structures and strategies do they share (or not share)?

**Part II:** Though it is a novel revolving around characterization, *The Poisonwood Bible* also examines language closely. In a 200-400 word essay, argue the significance and purpose of language according to the author. Quoted material is required.

**2021 Grade 11 APLaC Summer Reading**  
**Assignment**  
*Staying Put*

**Part I:** In his chapter “Settling Down,” Sanders argues, “The truth is, none of us can live by wits alone. For even the barest existence, we depend on other people...” Take a stance on this issue in a 200-400-word persuasive essay. Support your stance with evidence from the text AND external or personal knowledge you may have.

**Part II:** Tone Analysis: Choose one chapter of the book and analyze Sanders’ tone within that chapter. How is his tone established, and how does it shift for effect? Answer this question by charting the tone via a visual representation (graph, chart, or another artistic piece) that expresses these changes. For each tonal shift, note (a) the tone (adjective) (b) an analysis of what causes the shift, and (c) textual evidence to support your claim.

**Part III:** Read the excerpt from Salman Rushdie’s *The Wizard of Oz*. In 200-400 words, analyze the literary and rhetorical strategies the author uses to support his claim.

Selections from *The Wizard of Oz*  
by Salman Rushdie

Fast-forward. The Witch is gone. The Wizard has been unmasked, and in the moment after his unveiling has succeeded in a spot of true magic, giving Dorothy’s companions the gifts they did not believe they possessed until that instant. The Wizard has gone, too, and without Dorothy, their plans having been fouled up by (who else but) Toto. And here’s Glinda, telling Dorothy she has to learn the meaning of the ruby slippers for herself.

**Glinda:** What have you learned?

**Dorothy:** If I ever go looking for my heart’s desire again, I won’t look further than my own backyard. And if it isn’t there, I never really lost it to begin with. Is that right?

**Glinda:** That’s all it is. And now those magic slippers will take you home in two seconds. Close your eyes...click your heels together three times and think to yourself...there’s no place like

Hold it. Hold *it*.

How does it come about, at the close of this radical and enabling film, which teaches us in the least didactic way possible to build on what we have, to make the best of ourselves, that we are given this conservative little homily? Are we to believe that Dorothy has learned no more on her journey than that she didn’t need to make such a journey in the first place? Must we accept that she now accepts the limitations of her home life, and agrees that the things she doesn’t have there are no loss to her? *‘Is that right?’* Well, excuse *me*, Glinda, but it isn’t.

Home again in black-and-white, with Auntie Em and Uncle Henry and the rude mechanicals clustered round her bed, Dorothy begins her second revolt, fighting not only against the patronizing dismissals of her own folk but also against the scriptwriters, and the sentimental moralizing of the entire Hollywood studio system. *It wasn't a dream, it was a place*, she cries piteously. *A real, truly live place! Doesn't anyone believe me?*

Many, many people did believe here. Frank Baum's readers believed her, and their interest in Oz led him to write thirteen further Oz books, admittedly of diminishing quality; the series was continued, even more feebly, by other hands after his death. Dorothy, ignores the 'lessons' of the ruby slippers, went back to Oz, in spite of the efforts of the Kansas folk, including Auntie Em and Uncle Henry, to have her dreams brainwashed out of her (see the terrifying electroconvulsive therapy sequence in the Disney film *Return to Oz*); and, in the sixth book of the series, she took Auntie Em and Uncle Henry with her, and they all settled down in Oz, where Dorothy became a Princess.

So Oz finally *became* home; the imagined world became the actual world, as it does for us all, because the truth is that once we have left our childhood places and started out to make up our own lives, armed only with what we have and are, we understand that the real secret of the ruby slippers is not that 'there's no place like home' but rather that there is no longer any such place *as* home: except, of course, for the home we make, or the homes that are made for us, in Oz, which is anywhere, and everywhere, except the place from where we began.

**2021 Grade 11 APLaC Summer Reading  
Assignment  
*Educated***

**Part I:** *Educated* is a non-fiction text that reads like fiction, both due to the author’s compelling prose and her stranger-than-fiction adolescence. Because of these elements, the claims Westover makes in her memoir can be somewhat overshadowed, but they are still implied. In a 200-400-word essay, discuss a claim Westover implicitly makes in *Educated*, offering textual evidence to demonstrate how she supports the claim.

Example: In Chapter 1, Westover implicitly claims that false memories can be just as significant and revealing of character as memories of actual events. Her false memory of her home being invaded by federal agents exists because her father had told her a story “in such detail that [she] and her brothers and sisters had each conjured [their] own cinematic version” of a similar terror inflicted on their family (3). This fantasy reveals both her father’s religious fanaticism as well as his propensity towards aggression--a detail proven by her authentic memories of his “thick and leathery” hands that “grasped the Bible firmly,” as well as his continued obsession with stockpiling weapons (4).

**Part II:** Collect a set of 10 passages from the book that you deem particularly moving, poetic, or significant. In 1-2 sentences each, analyze the literary and rhetorical strategies at work in the passage (consider diction, syntax, metaphor, pathos, ethos, hyperbole, etc.). This work should be typed in an orderly fashion, using a table.

## Synthesis Packet

In response to our society's increasing demand for engaging, personalized, sensational media, podcasts, memoirs, and documentaries have thrived. Yet the creation of such content, which is often revealing of its subjects' complex and personal lives, has drawn criticism from those who believe America's craving for salacious details should not be satisfied for the creation of art.

Carefully read the following six sources, including the introductory information for each source. Then synthesize material from at least three of the sources and incorporate it into a coherent, well-written essay in which you develop your position on whether creative works that reveal the personal affairs of living humans, without their consent, should be formed for the sake of art.

Your argument should be the focus of your essay. Use the sources to develop your argument and explain the reasoning for it. Avoid merely summarizing the sources. Indicate clearly which sources you are drawing from, whether through direct quotation, paraphrase, or summary. You may cite the sources as Source A, Source B, etc., or by using the descriptions in parentheses.

Source A (Gates)  
Source B (Schutte)  
Source C (Cooke)  
Source D (Bell)  
Source E (Pastan)  
Source F (Ellis)

### Source A

*“Educated Is Even Better Than You’ve Heard”* by Bill Gates

I've always prided myself on my ability to teach myself things. Whenever I don't know a lot about something, I'll read a textbook or watch an online course until I do.

I thought I was pretty good at teaching myself—until I read Tara Westover's memoir *Educated*. Her ability to learn on her own blows mine right out of the water. I was thrilled to sit down with her recently to talk about the book.

Tara was raised in a Mormon survivalist home in rural Idaho. Her dad had very non-mainstream views about the government. He believed doomsday was coming, and that the family should interact with the health and education systems as little as possible. As a result, she didn't step foot in a classroom until she was 17, and major medical crises went untreated (her mother suffered a brain injury in a car accident and never fully recovered).

Because Tara and her six siblings worked at their father's junkyard from a young age, none of them received any kind of proper homeschooling. She had to teach herself algebra and trigonometry and self-studied for the ACT, which she did well enough on to gain admission to Brigham Young University. Eventually, she earned her doctorate in intellectual history from

Cambridge University. (Full disclosure: she was a Gates Scholar, which I didn't even know until I reached that part of the book.)

*Educated* is an amazing story, and I get why it's spent so much time on the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list. It reminded me in some ways of the Netflix documentary *Wild, Wild Country*, which I recently watched. Both explore people who remove themselves from society because they have these beliefs and knowledge that they think make them more enlightened. Their belief systems benefit from their separateness, and you're forced to be either in or out. But unlike *Wild, Wild Country*—which revels in the strangeness of its subjects—*Educated* doesn't feel voyeuristic. Tara is never cruel, even when she's writing about some of her father's most fringe beliefs. It's clear that her whole family, including her mom and dad, is energetic and talented. Whatever their ideas are, they pursue them.

Of the seven Westover siblings, three of them—including Tara—left home, and all three have earned Ph.D.s. Three doctorates in one family would be remarkable even for a more “conventional” household. I think there must've been something about their childhood that gave them a degree of toughness and helped them persevere. Her dad taught the kids that they could teach themselves anything, and Tara's success is a testament to that.

I found it fascinating how it took studying philosophy and history in school for Tara to trust her own perception of the world. Because she never went to school, her worldview was entirely shaped by her dad. He believed in conspiracy theories, and so she did, too. It wasn't until she went to BYU that she realized there were other perspectives on things her dad had presented as fact. For example, she had never heard of the Holocaust until her art history professor mentioned it. She had to research the subject to form her own opinion that was separate from her dad's. Her experience is an extreme version of something everyone goes through with their parents. At some point in your childhood, you go from thinking they know everything to seeing them as adults with limitations. I'm sad that Tara is estranged from a lot of her family because of this process, but the path she's taken and the life she's built for herself are truly inspiring.

When you meet her, you don't have any impression of all the turmoil she's gone through. She's so articulate about the traumas of her childhood, including the physical abuse she suffered at the hands of one brother. I was impressed by how she talks so candidly about how naïve she once was—most of us find it difficult to talk about our own ignorance.

I was especially interested to hear her take on polarization in America. Although it's not a political book, *Educated* touches on a number of the divides in our country: red states versus blue states, rural versus urban, college-educated versus not. Since she's spent her whole life moving between these worlds, I asked Tara what she thought. She told me she was disappointed in what she called the “breaking of charity”—an idea that comes from the Salem witch trials and refers to the moment when two members of the same group break apart and become different tribes.

“I worry that education is becoming a stick that some people use to beat other people into submission or becoming something that people feel arrogant about,” she said. “I think education is really just a process of self-discovery—of developing a sense of self and what you think. I think of [it] as this great mechanism of connecting and equalizing.”

Tara's process of self-discovery is beautifully captured in *Educated*. It's the kind of book that I think everyone will enjoy, no matter what genre you usually pick up. She's a talented writer, and I suspect this book isn't the last we'll hear from her. I can't wait to see what she does next.

## Source B

“When Memoirs Share Too Much Too Soon” by Sarah Schutte

Telling someone you were raised by survivalists in the middle of rural Idaho is an excellent conversation starter. Tara Westover needs to have a conversation about this, but perhaps not with the millions of people who read her bestselling book, *Educated*.

The memoir can be a problematic genre. When it is used to discuss a broad social issue, the individual perspective of the narrator can bring focus to the topic. However, many memoirs are overly self-focused, relating personal histories in excessive detail. Often, it seems that authors view the memoir as a means of either therapy or self-promotion. Behind the humor, the tangential histories, and the detailed descriptions hides a great deal of pain.

Compounding this tendency is today’s decidedly voyeuristic culture, fueled by tabloid magazines and reality television, in which we are quick to pounce on “juicy” details of other people’s lives, seeking shocking tidbits with which we can thrill listeners at our next cocktail party. The public adores memoir-style books, and they fly off the shelves and up the ranks of must-read lists.

There is much to be shocked by in *Educated*, Westover’s 2019 *New York Times* bestseller. Truth is often stranger than fiction, and Westover’s book proves it; much of her story is frighteningly brutal, featuring horrible accidents, unrelenting cycles of familial abuse, and religious fanaticism.

Westover, the youngest of seven children, was raised by Mormon survivalists and had no formal education in her childhood beyond learning to read. She spent her days helping her mother, a midwife, make herbal remedies and sorting scrap in her father’s junkyard. By teaching herself algebra, Westover was able to score high enough on the ACT to enter Brigham Young University and eventually make her way through Cambridge and Harvard, earning a Ph.D. in history.

*Educated* details Westover’s childhood and her unusual educational journey, but much of the story revolves around dramatic moments involving a violent older brother and painful accidents that filled her youth. It is a riveting book, drawing the reader in as Westover discovers the world outside Buck’s Peak, the rural valley where she grew up, and tries to reconcile her growing knowledge with her loyalty to family she still loves. It is raw, powerful, and moving.

While interviewing Westover at the Aspen Ideas Festival last June, *The Atlantic* editor Jeffery Goldberg said he had been worried, while reading the book, that she wouldn’t make it out alive at the end — even though, of course, he knew she did. I felt the same way, growing nervous each time Westover returned to Buck’s Peak, and I wished she’d stay away.

But she can’t.

The more I read, the more uncomfortable I became. I do not doubt the truth of her story or her personal experiences. She is careful to explain memories, footnoting them to point out which siblings she talked to in order to clarify details. She uses paraphrases of emails to emphasize moments in the story. Her portrayal of Mormonism, and religion in general, is evenhanded. But, in the end, the manner in which she wrote — focusing heavily on catastrophes and abuse — suggests a deeper and more unsettling point.

This is a woman dealing with a very traumatic upbringing, an upbringing that will take her many years to fully come to terms with. She’s been through more in 33 years than many have in a lifetime, has graduated from esteemed institutions, and continues her climb in the academic

world — all without ever gaining her high-school diploma. It's sensational, yes, and heartrending and painful.

But Westover's memoir never comes full circle. She never explains the purpose of sharing these deeply personal details, perhaps because she's still wrestling with the implications of her own conclusions and decisions, despite insisting in the end that she's made her peace with them. Her book is styled as a way of explaining her unconventional (oh, for a stronger word!) path, but was this the right time for her to tell her story? The book's jarring tone and lack of clarity in its end goal suggest perhaps it wasn't.

If not, then her agent and editors did her a disservice despite the book's runaway success. Readers can and should cheer her on as she overcomes obstacles in pursuing education and independence. But the book's intense focus on her upbringing and interactions with her family illustrates a different kind of education than the one she set out to tell readers she obtained. Her higher-education story is unique, but in the telling of her tale, it takes a backseat to the larger problem of her struggle to integrate her newfound knowledge with her upbringing, her family's lifestyle, and her desire to be accepted and loved by them.

Education is about experiences, but most important, it is about learning how to learn, how to wrestle with universal ideas and hone critical-thinking skills. Based on the story Westover tells, her primary education was less about learning facts and ideas than it was about coming to recognize the ugly cycles of abuse permitted and promoted by her family and her fight to escape them. This is far more of a reflection on the mental illness that seems to be behind some of her family members' actions and beliefs than on education. Educated in heavy manual labor, herbal healing, and a twisted view of womanhood, she seems to be caught in a personal struggle for survival as she tries to come to grips with her past.

Dredging up those deep feelings and traumatic experiences for a best-selling book likely isn't the best way to heal.



### Source C

“The Idea of ‘Ethical Art’ Is Nonsense” by Rachel Cooke

*Selections of Cooke’s article appear below.*

It's baffling to me, the belief that art must be "ethical," as if it were so much fair trade chocolate. It's so much more complicated than that. The laughable idea that it can pass or fail some kind of tick-box test! What was art in March must surely be art in April. You can't un-art art, though Hitler had a go, when he decided that what was modern was also degenerate and set about destroying it and, far worse, those who made it..

We have to give it up, this weird inability of ours to separate art and life. It makes fools of us. People were after Ted Hughes for years – the old misogynist, the monster, the wife killer – and then, in 1998, he published *Birthday Letters* and they had to eat their words. All that love and pain and regret. "Drawing calmed you," he wrote, and suddenly they had it from his side.

But it also robs us, if we give in to it, of so much that is good and beautiful. When Andrew Motion published his biography of Philip Larkin in 1993, and we learned of his casual racism, and the way he behaved with women, they all lined up to have a go at him: Lisa Jardine, Tom Paulin, Alan Bennett. Jardine said, somewhat gleefully: "We don't tend to teach Larkin much now in my department of English. The Little Englandism he celebrates sits uneasily within our revised curriculum." I remember feeling enraged by this. For one thing, Larkin doesn't celebrate anything terribly much – he's not that kind of poet (and when he does, it's mostly love). For another, I could not get over the idea that someone would deny their students the pleasure of discovering Larkin's poetry – so clear, so plangent, so intensely beautiful – because they didn't agree with his politics. It felt criminal to me.

Did Albert Goldman's sordid revelations about Elvis and John Lennon honestly change how we feel about their music? No, and nor should they have done. Did you go off Brighton Rock once you found out, courtesy of his biographer Michael Sheldon, that Graham Greene wanted to commit adultery? If you did, it's your loss, not his.

I could go on and on. With every new biography, there comes fresh outrage.

## Source D

“When Can Artists Bend Ethics for Art’s Sake?” by Natasha Bell

*Excerpts of Bell’s article appear below.*

What right does an artist have to use other people in their work—to invade their lives, violate their privacy, or cause them harm? What will we forgive in the name of art?

These are the questions I was asking a decade ago when, for a graduate performance art class taught by Tania Bruguera, I paid a classmate \$1 to befriend my best friend Laura and write reports on how she thought Laura was coping after a recent break-up. At our final class, I passed around a folder containing these reports and a photocopy of the \$1 check I’d written. The folder reached Laura last. I watched across the table as she read the document of my simultaneous care and betrayal.

I got an A for the class, but lost my friend. It was a horrible thing to do, but I was 21 and obsessed with Sophie Calle and the line between art and life. Since the 1970s, Calle has repeatedly invited us to question whether artists should be held to the same standards as other people. In viewing her work, we must ask whether invading someone’s privacy or betraying their trust is an acceptable emotional cost to art.

In 1979, Calle followed a man she’d met at an art opening in Paris to Venice, where she spent two weeks spying on and photographing him as he went about his business in the city. She presented the images alongside text detailing both her observations and emotions during the period, as *Suite Vénitienne*. This man, identified only as Henri B., was the first unwitting participant to Calle’s artistic game.

In 1983, she found a lost address book on the street and photocopied the contents before returning it. She then telephoned each of the contacts to question them on the identity of the owner, and published her findings as a series (“The Address Book”) in the French newspaper *Libération*. The owner, the documentary filmmaker Pierre Baudry, threatened to sue her [and] wrote open letters to *Libération*.

For *The Hotel* (1983), Calle worked as a chambermaid, exploring and documenting the private belongings and writings of hotel guests. Observing this piece, we experience both Calle’s curiosity and the unsettling thought that, at every hotel we have ever stayed in, our own possessions might have been subjected to similar scrutiny. What might someone like Calle have learned from our nightgowns and slippers, our diaries and postcards? How might she have misinterpreted us?

A crucial element of these early pieces is Calle’s involvement of the viewer in her transgressions. By inviting us to immerse ourselves in the narratives of her observations, she makes us complicit in her voyeurism—even as we question it. It is not just Calle invading these strangers’ privacy and observing their lives without consent, but us, too. We may not agree with her methods, but by engaging with the work, we find ourselves tacitly condoning it.

Decades later, though, the question that still hangs over these pieces is whether or not they were ethical. Did Henri B., Pierre Baudry, or those hotel guests have a right to privacy? Can any of us expect to be protected from the artist’s gaze?

In 2013, Arne Svenson caused a Calle-like controversy for using a telephoto lens to take photos of his Manhattan neighbors, later exhibiting the work in a local gallery. Svenson was sued, but won the case based on his First Amendment rights, and “The Neighbors” went on to be exhibited across the country. Though the discussion continues as to whether Svenson’s

photographs of families, children, pets, and intimate, private spaces is ethically acceptable, the judge's ruling makes clear that legally, at least artists have a right to invade aspects of our privacy.

Considered in conjunction with conversations about digital surveillance, data protection, and online privacy—not to mention random strangers who might be live-tweeting intimate exchanges—this ruling might seem rather scary. Belgian artist Dries Depoorter uses digital technology to explore this fear. For *Tinder In* (2015), Depoorter traced women (and some men) who appeared on his Tinder app to their LinkedIn profiles, then displayed and published their profile pictures from each side by side, pointing out both the ease with which individuals can be traced, and the split-personalities of online identities.

The interesting thing about all of these pieces is that, while their controversy lies in the question of an individual's right to privacy, the works themselves actually reveal very little about their subjects. In reading the texts accompanying Calle's work, we learn much more about the stalker than the stalked. It's easy to understand the sense of invasion felt by Henri B. and Pierre Baudry, as well as Svenson's neighbors and Depoorter's Tinder matches, but perhaps the true grievance is that the artists have used these strangers' images and identities to create works that have nothing to do with them.

[This] forces us to ask if it is okay for an artist to use people. Can the end justify the means?

Calle presents her subjects as simplified versions of themselves, and treats them like fictional characters in a narrative she remains in control of.

It is, I think, this relieving of complications that is most disturbing and, in the end, most painful. Should we find ourselves the subject of an artist's gaze, most of us would like them to see the whole of us, to render us fairly and try to understand our complexities. Unfortunately, the artist's motive is often more to do with projecting or reflecting a part of themselves rather than reaching an empathetic understanding of their subjects. What they were looking for, really, is a mirror.

In the play between the private and the public, artists have both the ability and the right to provoke, shock, and disturb. What we often fail to recognize, however, is that by giving them a platform, it is us as viewers who have bestowed this position of power upon them. By consuming and applauding Calle's early works, we effectively opened our own curtains to Svenson and gave our profile photos to Depoorter. Perhaps the question is not whether artists have the right to invade our privacy or cause us harm, but why we've allowed them to.

I'm not proud of what I did to Laura back in grad school. A decade later, I'm appalled by my callousness and can hardly remember my own justifications. But I do remember the surprise I felt at her anger. I remember expecting her to understand, wanting her to acknowledge my cleverness, to think about the nuances of privacy and trust, and sense as I did the precarious power wielded by the word "art." I wonder if it is this kind of optimistic thinking that drives Calle and other artists. For those who have devoted their lives to their work, perhaps it doesn't seem so extraordinary for them to imagine others should be willing to devote theirs, too.

**Source E**  
“Ethics” by Linda Pastan

Ethics

In ethics class so many years ago  
our teacher asked this question every fall:  
if there were a fire in a museum  
which would you save, a Rembrandt painting  
or an old woman who hadn't many  
years left anyhow? Restless on hard chairs  
caring little for pictures or old age  
we'd opt one year for life, the next for art  
and always half-heartedly. Sometimes  
the woman borrowed my grandmother's face  
leaving her usual kitchen to wander  
some drafty, half imagined museum.  
One year, feeling clever, I replied  
why not let the woman decide herself?  
Linda, the teacher would report, eschews  
the burdens of responsibility.  
This fall in a real museum I stand  
before a real Rembrandt, old woman,  
or nearly so, myself. The colors  
within this frame are darker than autumn,  
darker even than winter — the browns of earth,  
though earth's most radiant elements burn  
through the canvas. I know now that woman  
and painting and season are almost one  
and all beyond saving by children.

## Source F

“Missing Richard Simmons’: The Morally Suspect Podcast by Amanda Hess

For decades, the fitness guru Richard Simmons was Hollywood’s most accessible celebrity. He was a talk show fixture, a leader of weight loss cruises and an instructor of \$12 classes at his Beverly Hills workout studio, Slimmons. He greeted tour buses in front of his mansion and called fans to support their weight loss attempts. Then, three years ago, he abruptly retreated from public life. Dan Taberski, an acquaintance of Mr. Simmons (and a Slimmons regular), wants to know why.

Enter the latest prestige podcast obsession, “Missing Richard Simmons.” Thanks to Mr. Taberski’s blend of pop culture and pulp — think an aerobic “Behind the Music” but with a winking noir plot that proffers theories about Mr. Simmons’s mysterious disappearance — the show is instantly engaging. But soon, the podcast’s draw becomes disturbing. As Mr. Taberski digs deeper into Mr. Simmons’s personal life, the question becomes not “What happened to Richard Simmons?” but “Is it any of our business?”

The podcast has been compared to “Serial,” the real-time murder investigation (and podcasting’s breakout hit). But while “Serial” dug into a serious crime and possible miscarriage of justice, Mr. Taberski instead relentlessly pesters Mr. Simmons and friends for personal details pertaining to his mental and physical health. It’s not quite a public shaming; Mr. Taberski is careful to express respect for Mr. Simmons. Call it a public hounding.

Mr. Simmons, who has declined to participate in the podcast, is not missing. He is living at home, and as the podcast goes on, it’s revealed that he is in close contact with a small circle of family and friends. A while after Mr. Simmons “disappeared,” and tabloid reports alleged he was being held by a housekeeper against his will, Mr. Simmons called in to the “Today” show to insist that he was fine. TMZ reports that two visits from Los Angeles Police Department officers have confirmed as much. He was just leading a more private life.

But that isn’t good enough for Mr. Taberski. So he rifles through Mr. Simmons’s social network, interviewing people who crossed his path and publicizing their speculation about his mental state. He urges listeners to call in with “any theory you think we missed.” Various potential personal crises — like the suggestion that his physical decline has made Mr. Simmons depressed, or that he’s grieving the deaths of his dogs — are raised like clues, turned over by Mr. Taberski and pals, and often dismissed as unserious. Though Mr. Simmons has acknowledged suffering from depression before, that wouldn’t justify a “complete and total retreat,” Mr. Taberski decides, which conveniently excuses him to keep digging.

Most disquieting is a “clue” teased in the first episode, when a former Slimmons client says that “for the last two or three months, he was showing up in drag.” In a forthcoming episode, Mr. Taberski digs into a tabloid report that Mr. Simmons is transitioning to female. He takes a moment to note that Mr. Simmons’s gender identity is nobody’s business but his own, then forges right ahead.

Mr. Taberski ultimately decides that the report is false — Mr. Simmons himself rebutted the story on Facebook — but regardless of its veracity, it feels exploitative to spread it while simultaneously championing the podcast’s great respect for Mr. Simmons’s privacy. A serious journalistic transgression — outing a person — is played here as just another sensational twist to be picked apart for podcast fodder. Mr. Taberski ends the segment with a jokey shrug: “But if he is transitioning? Mazel tov. But he’s not. I don’t think?”

Mr. Taberski spends much of the podcast attempting to justify his invasions. Little details — like the fact that Mr. Simmons called in to “Today” instead of appearing on video — are used to rationalize the project. “Why wouldn’t he want to be seen?” Mr. Taberski asks, then conjures the image of “a kidnapper holding a gun to his head.” The implication: Mr. Taberski will rest only when Mr. Simmons is fully exposed.

Mr. Taberski told *The New York Times* that the podcast “was coming from a place of love and coming from a place of real concern.” In Episode 2, Mr. Taberski takes listeners on a drive up to Mr. Simmons’s gated home for what he half-seriously calls a “stakeout.” “I don’t want him to feel like I’m invading his privacy,” Mr. Taberski says. “On the other hand, I’m Richard’s friend.”

Is this what friends do? Turn their loved one’s personal crisis into a fun mystery investigation and record it for a hit podcast? (It has topped the iTunes podcast charts for four straight weeks.) Despite his claims, Mr. Taberski is not principally a “friend” to Mr. Simmons. In the podcast, he presents himself as a regular at Slimmons Studio who became friendly with the instructor, but really he was always a documentarian circling a sensational subject. (Talk of a film documentary dissolved when Mr. Simmons cut off contact with Mr. Taberski.)

The relationship between journalists and subjects shouldn’t be confused with friendship. Journalists have power over their subjects and a responsibility to try to minimize harm. But Mr. Taberski leverages his claim to friendship to reverse the equation, arguing instead that it’s Mr. Simmons who has the responsibility to speak to him, and to explain himself to his former acquaintances and fans. He compares Mr. Simmons’s relationship to them to the responsibilities of a licensed therapist. Mr. Taberski says he took care to ask Mr. Simmons’s manager “if there was something serious going on, like illness, so I could just let it be.” But is depression not an illness? Is a person’s gender identity not sufficiently serious to leave alone? Having decided that Mr. Simmons’s reasons for withdrawal are not “serious,” Mr. Taberski feels freer to pursue the guy.

“Missing Richard Simmons” speaks to both the possibilities and the limits of the emerging prestige podcast form. Many of the podcast’s tropes — the mystery framing, the crowdsourcing of clues from the audience and a format that focuses on the narrator as much as his subject — are borrowed directly from “Serial.” By turning a journalist into a friend and casting a man’s personal life as a mystery, “Missing Richard Simmons” has retooled the stale Hollywood documentary as an addictive media sensation. But it’s also turned it into a morally suspect exercise: An invasion of privacy masquerading as a love letter. Mr. Simmons is a public figure, and that gives journalists a lot of latitude to pry. But a friend who claims to want to help Mr. Simmons should probably just leave him alone.