

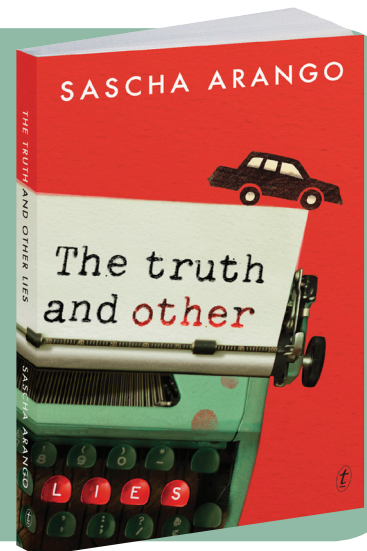
# The Truth and Other Lies

SASCHA ARANGO

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## Praise for The Truth and Other Lies

'One thing must be made absolutely clear: The Truth and Other Lies is, until further notice, this year's best achievement on the German crime book scene.' Die Welt

'A highly entertaining thriller...Wry humour punctuates this insightful look at a soulless man.' STARRED Review, Publishers Weekly

## About Sascha Arango

Sascha Arango was born in Berlin in 1959 and is one of Germany's most prominent screenplay writers. He has also authored audio plays and stage plays and has been awarded several prizes, including the Grimme Award. The Truth and Other Lies is his first novel.

## A reader's introduction to The Truth and Other Lies

Henry Hayden is a liar. He lies about his past and about the present, and even about the future. He is a fraud. He is not the author of the bestselling books he claims to write. And yet... he saves someone's life, even though it would be to his advantage to leave the man to die. He refuses to steal gold that he discovers was stolen from Auschwitz. He gives money to a friend in need.

Henry Hayden is a contradiction.

Undoubtedly, though, he is a murderer, just as he had 'foreseen'. He kills someone he thinks is his lover, but turns out to be his wife, and then, sometime later, he arranges for someone to kill his lover.

Several times during this novel, Henry resolves to tell someone the truth about 'what had really happened' on the night he nudged his lover's car over the cliff. Invariably he leads them to a different version of the truth to the one we have.

We might have been witnesses, but it can be hard for us to find the truth too. Unlike in a traditional crime novel, the culprit is identified immediately. But there are other mysteries to be solved. We know Henry's

actions, but how premeditated are they and what are his motivations? Is he genuinely remorseful about his wife's death—and did he genuinely love her? Does he have his own moral code? Is he wholly evil?

So this is a novel not just about the truth of a crime, but about other kinds of truths and lies too. The book asks us to think about the truth and lies of identity and how we construct it, and the possibility of truth in our memory of the past.

And it is about more than truth and lies. It also poses big questions about morality; about masculinity; about relationships between people, especially love and hate; and about the possibility—or impossibility—of people understanding and knowing.

## Questions for discussion

1. Fasch thinks Henry is a psychopath (42) while Obradin thinks he is a 'good person' (33). Fasch changes his mind—does Obradin? Henry himself says he is a 'thoroughly bad, insignificant person' (33) but he does good deeds as well as bad. Discuss Henry's character. Is Henry evil? Are his good deeds 'but brief interruptions to his innate wickedness' (121)? Is the guilt and shame he feels genuine? Do his good deeds and guilt make a difference to your opinion of him? Do you feel sympathy for Henry? Is he ever likeable? What does the narrator mean by saying, 'as we have seen, Henry could be great' (131)?

2. Does Henry's character and the little of his past that we know suggest that evil is born or made? Fasch, or perhaps the narrator, reflects that 'evil is born innocently' (42). What does this mean? Henry himself reads specialist literature that 'makes clear the futility of battling against human evil, for no science or punishment can contend with the bloodthirstiness innate in us all' (9). In a rewording of the earlier statement about good deeds, the narrator tells us that Henry sees good deeds as 'mere interruptions to human wickedness' (209), not just his own. Do you agree that evil is inherent in us? Does the novel support this statement? Is Henry, then, an everyman?

3. Does Henry love Martha? Why did he decide to stay with her when he read her manuscript? Is she just a means to an end for him, or does he love her for herself? When Henry imagines telling Martha about Betty, he thinks of himself saying to her that because she is not a stranger to him their love is only friendship. 'I never could despise you enough to desire you' (24). Does knowledge of someone else inevitably preclude romantic or sexual love? Does desire rely on hate?
4. Does Martha love Henry? If so, why? Is there ever a reason for love? What does Martha get from their marriage?
5. Why are other people taken in by Henry's act? Does Betty ever see through him? Who does she think he is?
6. Contemplating a life with Betty, Henry realises he 'would have to think up a new identity to be with Betty' (5)? Who is the real Henry? Is there a real Henry? Is Henry unique in constructing himself according to his needs and the people around him, or are we all like that?
7. There are many instances of misunderstanding in this novel. Who has the best understanding of other people? Does Martha's synaesthesia give her an advantage in understanding others? Does Henry's successful manipulation of other people result from an uncanny ability to read others personalities?
8. 'Does a murderer even have the right to grieve for his victim?' Henry asks himself (198). Does he?
9. Why is Henry's past 'a minefield' (70)? How does it threaten him?
10. 'The past is nothing but memory and thus pure fabrication' (9). Does the novel bear this statement out? Do you agree with it?
11. The narrator is given to making pronouncements such as the one quoted in the question above. Another example—'the liars among us will know that every lie must contain a certain amount of truth if it's to be convincing' (70). The narrator also gives opinions, about Freud's correctness (99), for example, and sometimes addresses the reader directly. Who is the narrator? Are we meant to accept such pronouncements and judgments unquestioningly? Is the narrator reliable?
12. Frank Ellis begins with the line 'Keeping silent goes against human nature' (9, 104). The narrator uses the line later (89). Do you agree? Does Henry manage to keep silent? What does this say about his nature? What about some of the other aphorisms from Martha's novels? For example, 'To keep a secret, you should never lose concentration; tell nobody and never forget' (69), or 'Better always alone than never' (117, 123, 233). How

do these 'truths' work in the novel? Are they different from the pronouncements and opinions of the narrator discussed in the question above?

13. What do you make of the marten as a symbol of the demon of Henry's conscience? Is it an effective symbol? Is the place he finds himself in when hunting the marten his roof-space or somewhere else? What about other symbols, like the yellow birds in a cage waiting for death in Martha's parents home?

14. What does the novel say about masculinity? With scenarios such as the Cro-Magnon killing the baby who is another man's progeny, and declarations such as the one that Henry's feelings for Betty are 'a cyclical urge, such as comes over every man' (23), does the novel suggest some inherent characteristics of men?

15. What do you think about Honor's final decision not to expose Henry as a fraud? And what do you make of Honor's character?

16. What about some of the other characters, like Fasch and Jenssen and Obradin? What do they tell us about human nature?

17. Why does Jenssen gain pleasure from detection? Do other characters share this pleasure? What about readers? Is this pleasure why crime fiction is so popular?

18. Is it significant that Arango has Henry pretending to be a bestselling author, rather than some other kind of artist or professional?

19. 'All novels tell you something about their authors, no matter how cleverly they try to conceal themselves,' thinks Fasch (104). Are we meant to be deciphering the author of *The Truth and Lies* as well as its characters?

20. Can the reader ever hope to find truth in Henry, who tells Jenssen 'there is no truth in me' (229). Can the reader ever hope to find truth in this novel?