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Dear Chuck,

An afterthought on the subject of the pictures in *The End of the Nineteenth Century*, which you asked me about.

Like *An American Memory* and *I Am Zoë Handke*, the novel has the theme of doubting the reality of things gone. And the pictures (whether more of them or fewer, smaller or not, or discarded entirely) have the effect of challenging further the notion of a reality that's already undergoing challenge by the book itself. Near the end of *An American Memory*, Malcolm Reiner (same guy as now) says "I have grown to understand with certainty that the past exists. The same, I understand also, cannot be said of the things in it." So the things in the pictures don't exist—yet are in the pictures.

A paradox, like Magritte's "*ceci, n'est pas une pipe.*" And *because* this situation is crazy—things, memory, the past, the self, all exist yet *don't* exist (in *Absalom! Absalom!*, along the same lines, there's Faulkner's "a shot heard only by its echo")—*because* the situation is crazy, the character himself becomes crazy (maybe) in trying to understand it (though understanding it is in fact impossible). Thus the crazy-not-crazy character turns to "crazy" though strangely logical methods of understanding, like learning that his great-aunts *are* history, cultivating the vertical and then the horizontal means of consciousness, following the tendrils, looking through his father's eyes, etc., all in a seeking for coherence where there isn't and can't be any.

Most of the book is the narrative of that doomed attempt to *know* the existence of the past (and therefore the existence of everything else), though in fact it *can't* be known. So the guy will fail, as symbolized in the book by the disappearance of everything. But the deepest irony is that, at the same time, that failure *does* succeed, since *the book itself has created the thing that's gone*. So that, in this character's world, *fiction* (symbolizing all art) is the only true, reliable reality.

The pictures, with their wistful and unanchored quotes from the text, are meant to (and can't help but) hint at absence as much as at presence. Influences on me—in all three books, and in the fourth, too, really—are from places like *To the Lighthouse*, Faulkner, Beckett (there's that line in *Molloy*, "All I know is what the words know"), and elsewhere. But the debts have to remain veiled or the book stops being original, and then the entire project fails.

Short question, long answer. I hope it's helpful.

My very best,



Eric Larsen