

## CREATIVE NONFICTION

### THE RISE OF CREATIVE NONFICTION

The genre du jour in writing programs, creative nonfiction (or cnf, as initiates refer to it) in reality is as old as the hills, or at least the Romans. In *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate traces the genre's background from Seneca and Plutarch to Japanese and Chinese writers such as Kenko and Ou-Yang Hsiu through Michel de Montaigne—"the giant, the mountain of the form" (1994, xlvii)—to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British writers like Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Charles Lamb, and William Hazlitt. Among his model essayists in the twentieth century are Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, Natalia Ginzburg, H. L. Mencken, James Thurber, James Baldwin, Joan Didion, Annie Dillard, Scott Russell Sanders, and Richard Rodriguez. According to Lopate, what this diverse collection of writers has in common is the ability to succeed in a genre that can be overwhelming for lesser writers because its boundaries appear so limitless: "The essay is a notoriously flexible and adaptable form. It possesses the freedom to move anywhere, in all directions. It acts as if all

objects were equally near the center and as if ‘all subjects are linked to each other’ (Montaigne) by free association. This freedom can be daunting, not only for the novice essayist confronting such latitude but for the critic attempting to pin down its formal properties” (xxxvii).

Lopate calls Montaigne the “fountainhead” of the genre because the sixteenth-century French writer was able to move so dexterously from one idea to another, to quote from a Latin authority in one sentence and in the next to reflect on what happened to him the previous night at dinner. This elasticity of form and thought, frightening though it may be at times, is a central component of the personal essay, one particularly valued by contemporary writers. Nevertheless, in his introduction to the anthology, Lopate manages to isolate a number of qualities that most personal essays have in common:

- The personal essay is conversational—often ironic, humorous, even “cheeky”—in tone.
- It values honesty and confession—self-disclosure is a necessary component of the genre.
- It has “a taste for littleness,” dwelling on the often-ignored minutiae of daily life, while at the same time it expands the importance of the writer’s self.
- It goes against the grain of popular opinion.
- It wrestles with the “stench of ego,” trying to reveal the writer’s true self without seeming narcissistic and proud.
- It demonstrates the learning of its author while distancing itself from the scholarly treatise.
- Perhaps most importantly, it is a mode of thinking and being, an attempt “to test, to make a run at something without knowing whether you are going to succeed.”

However, for all its appeal, the personal essay does have its detractors. According to Harriet Malinowitz, “the personal essayist disclaims authority; she is not teaching a lesson so much as candidly revealing the process by which she has learned one. . . . Traditional argument musters and deploys the author’s strengths, breaking down the defense of the skeptical or hostile reader; the personal essay disarms the reader by laying bare the author’s defects, demonstrating that the writer poses no threat and subtly winning the reader’s sympathy” (2003, 319).

Written during the same period as Montaigne’s informal pieces, the work of Francis Bacon represents this second strand of essay writing:

“the traditional argument.” Bacon prizes clarity, order, conciseness: the qualities that, until very recently, have dominated our thinking about what a good college essay should be. From a postmodern (q.v.) point of view, Bacon looks hopelessly naive—he wants to condense the world into crystal-hard sentences, to say everything there is about a topic in a few pages—but he remains an ideal of succinct, argumentative writing.

These two essayists are often held up as conflicting models for creative nonfiction, with Montaigne recently having become the clear favorite among those making the comparison. Bacon is authoritative and final in his pronouncements, while Montaigne is open to changing his mind. Bacon has a clear thesis statement and follows it ruthlessly to its obvious conclusion; Montaigne meanders from thought to thought, like a child chasing a butterfly, who stops to examine the flowers each time the butterfly alights. Bacon dictates; Montaigne suggests. Bacon instructs; Montaigne delights.

A great deal can be said for this contrast, but even Lopate agrees that Montaigne and Bacon “should not be viewed as opposites; the distinction between formal and informal essay can be overdone, and most great essayists have crossed the line frequently” (1994, xlvii). Nevertheless, the two strands have persisted. For every Hazlitt and Lamb, there has been a Macaulay and Carlyle, essayists who work in a belletristic tradition yet see their primary purpose as informational and rhetorical, who are far more concerned with persuading their readers to *do* something differently than they are in revealing the charming, idiosyncratic details of their own lives.

Clearly, then, writers have been assaying some version of “creative nonfiction” for a very long time, but when did the term itself gain general currency? According to Caroline Abels, “in the 1970s the National Endowment for the Arts helped bring [the term ‘creative nonfiction’] into academic parlance. The agency needed a word to categorize grant submissions of nonfiction that appropriated fictional elements such as dramatic tension, dialogue, shifting points of view and attention to detail and rhythm” (1999). Lee Gutkind gave the name a permanent home when he founded the journal *Creative Nonfiction* in 1993, just as the term was gaining widespread currency.

#### WHAT IS IT?

What exactly *is* creative nonfiction? Because it covers such a broad swathe of writing, some scholars have felt “creative nonfiction” has become hopelessly confusing as a descriptor. Robert Root laments “[h]ow useless the

existing definitions of nonfiction are, particularly in light of the current popularity and prominence of certain of its forms. Given the breadth of achievement a term like ‘non-fiction’ (meaning really ‘non-everything-other-than-whatever-it-is’) is assumed to cover, we will either have to write a new definition that names what nonfiction is now or find an appropriate modifier to add to ‘non-fiction’ (unhyphenated), such as ‘literary’ or ‘creative,’ to distinguish it from ‘non-literary’ or ‘non-creative’ forms, whatever they might be” (2003, 243).

As this passage indicates, a number of different subgenres are often stuffed into a single bag with one name on it. However, since Gutkind has been given the moniker “the godfather of creative nonfiction,” we will let him have the first crack at defining it. In issue no. 6 of his journal he describes “the five Rs” of creative nonfiction (1995):

- Real Life: “the foundation of good writing emerges from personal experience”
- Reflection: “a writer’s feelings and responses about a subject”
- Research: “I want to make myself knowledgeable enough to ask intelligent questions. If I can’t display at least a minimal understanding of the subject about which I am writing, I will lose the confidence and the support of the people who must provide access to the experience”
- Reading: “almost all writers have read the best writers in their field and are able to converse in great detail about the stylistic approach and intellectual content”
- “Riting”: “This is what art of any form is all about—the passion of the moment and the magic of the muse.”

Most essayists would have trouble arguing with *most* of these characterizations, but the inclusion of research clearly places Gutkind’s definition closer to journalism than to memoir. Indeed, in the first issue of *Creative Nonfiction*, Gutkind claims that reportage is “the anchor and foundation of the highest quality of journalism and of creative nonfiction” (1993). In this respect, many of the essays published in *Creative Nonfiction* are in the camp of literary journalism, or New Journalism, which came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. Books like Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, about a gruesome murder in Kansas, and Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, which followed the exploits of Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters, found the authors imaginatively re-creating scenes they didn’t witness (Capote)

and participating directly in the lives of their subjects—Wolfe was “on the bus,” and even experimented with LSD to understand the lives of the Pranksters. While traditional reporting insists on the fiction of the invisible reporter “objectively” collecting facts and passing them on, without comment, to the reader, literary journalism acknowledges the reality that *which* facts reporters choose to write about and *how* they convey those facts makes an enormous difference in what particular version of the truth is being told. Consequently, literary journalists employ many of the tools of fiction. Descriptions of places and people are far more lavish than in conventional reporting. Dialogue is used extensively. The writer’s own point of view, her opinions about what she is witnessing, become part of the story. Style is foregrounded, a recognition that the piece is being written by an individual writer with personal tastes. Finally, though, journalists trade in facts, and readers must believe that what is on the page actually happened. Getting the story *and* writing it artfully can be, Norman Sims admits, “a difficult and tedious method of reporting”: “Tracy Kidder spent a year in a nursing home, day after day, taking notes, listening to conversations. ‘I just wanted to be there when something was happening,’ Kidder said. ‘I’ve done this enough to be patient. I can spend five hundred hours taking notes and use none of them, and then in ten minutes everything happens’” (1995, 18).

A less time-consuming but centuries-old version of creative nonfiction is cultural criticism, which includes writing about other writers and their work. This type of nonfiction can be found everywhere from first-year English classes to *Harpers* and the *New Yorker*. While an essayist working this territory may wander far and wide in his commentary, ultimately he must return to his subject. Cynthia Ozick explains: “With an essay you have your goal in your pocket: you know where you’re going. At least you know what it’s about. For instance, I’m in the process now of reading *The Awkward Age* by Henry James, which I’ve never read before, and I intend to write an essay on it. Well, I know what the essay is about. It’s about *The Awkward Age*. I don’t know yet what I’m going to say, what I’m going to discover, and I will surely make discoveries. Nevertheless, there’s a premise, there’s something to work with, there’s something already pre-existent. But in fiction the challenge is an abyss” (Watchel 1992, 15).

Nature and travel writing represent a similar bridge between reporting accurately on the world outside the writer while focusing on the writer’s own responses to that world. The nonfiction of John McPhee, Loren Eiseley, Rachel Carson, Barry Lopez, and Annie Dillard is carefully

researched and factually accurate, yet the writer's impressions of the natural world ultimately matter as much as what is being observed. Likewise, in the travel narratives of Pico Ayer, Paul Theroux, and V. S. Naipaul, style shapes the reading experience in an especially prominent way—how something is said is at least as important as what is said. In recognition of the quality of the nonfiction being written in these fields, there are now annual anthologies of both *The Best American Science and Nature Writing* and *The Best American Travel Writing*.

Another link between writing about the world and writing about the self is the autobiographical craft book. Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life*, Natalie Goldberg's *Wild Mind*, and Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* all purport to be volumes on how to write fiction, yet they are just as compelling (if not more so) as examples of autobiography. As Lamott, for instance, writes about plot, character, dialogue, writer's block, writing groups, and "shitty first drafts," she uses her own life experience to illustrate each point. The ultimate result is highly readable as memoir, and it's not surprising that the nonfiction books by Lamott and Goldberg have in fact sold better than any of their works of fiction.

Of course writers of "straight" autobiography and memoir need no subject other than their own lives, and undergraduate creative writing students—who may not feel they know much about anything *except* their own lives—are drawn to memoir. Indeed, "life writing" is popular among beginning creative writers from seventeen to seventy. Our lives are portable—we bring them with us wherever we go—so there is never a sense of being removed from the subject matter in the way a fiction writer may find herself separated from a character she wants to write about. Moreover, since our lives are infinitely fragmentable, we find occasions for autobiographical essays wherever we look. Perhaps the "purest" form of memoir is the journal or diary, with which many students will have extensive experience. Glorious examples of the form exist—from Sei Shonagon to Samuel Pepys to Gail Godwin—but the private nature of this type of writing makes it problematic as a subject for classroom teaching.

Those writing autobiographically for a reading *public* quickly face one of the central ethical questions of creative nonfiction: how much truth can you tell about your own life? "What can you decently write about other people?" Mary Clearman Blew wonders. "Whose permission do you have to ask? What can you decently reveal about yourself?" Her answer: "I own my past and present. Only I can decide whether or how to write about it" (1993, 62). This decision can be a vexing one, though, and

ethical (and artistic) issues abound. What liberties can one take with the past? Can you invent dialogue for a conversation that took place years ago? If the dialogue approximates what was actually said, is that close enough to the truth? Can you change the location of an event? Someone's hair color? Gender? Name? At what point does a story about one's life become "just" a story and no longer a factual recounting of what happened? What *did* happen anyway? How trustworthy is a writer's memory? What's to be gained by shading the truth? And on and on.

At the end of "Never Let the Truth Stand in the Way of a Good Story," Bronwyn Williams reveals that he never actually heard his father use the title phrase, although throughout his essay he has claimed that it was something his father often repeated. The truth is he simply thought the line did a neat job of summing up his father's character. Williams goes on to disclose that his father "suffered from devastating bouts of depression and unemployment" (2003, 303), then ruminates on whether he should have revealed this information—his mother is still alive and may be wounded by the public disclosure of her late husband's faults: "I think that in composition when we discuss teaching creative nonfiction, we spend too little time on the effects of our work on those we write about, on the ethics of reportage and observation and representation. It is easy to wrap ourselves in the comforting blankets of the social construction of truth and postmodern theories of subject and subjectivities and not feel the chilly breezes of pain and hurt that may come from those we write about" (304). Ironically, as Williams's own essay makes plain, revealing the awful secrets of others may be the best way to serve the narrative and rhetorical strategies of our writing.

Whatever the subgenre, the distinguishing feature of "the fourth genre" appears to be the "non" preceding "fiction." Creative nonfiction purports—in a way that poems and stories and plays do not—to be the "truth." "To be credible," Lynn Bloom maintains, "the writer of creative nonfiction has to play fair. This is a statement of both ethics and aesthetics. The presentation of the truth the writer tells, however partisan, cannot seem vindictive or polemical" (2003, 284). Bloom emphasizes the writer's responsibility to her audience, the need to be honest, to present oneself as someone the reader can trust.

#### **WHO OWNS IT, WHO TEACHES IT?**

Perhaps because it is both profitable and less clearly defined than other genres, creative nonfiction is currently the subject of a power struggle in

English departments. One reason for this conflict is the corporatization of American universities and the increasing rewards given to high-profile work: “Write a successful memoir like Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted* as an English department member in the 1980s and this seemingly ‘minor’ accomplishment would have been mentioned patronizingly, if at all, during tenure discussions. Do the same and be optioned for a film in the 2000s, and you’ll accrue praise, cash, envy, and a promotion” (Bishop 2003, 264).

So, does creative nonfiction belong in the creative writing camp, where it has exploded as a subject of practice and study? After all, this faction of the English department has long been the home of the most visible, the most media-friendly faculty members. Or should cnf be the responsibility of compositionists, who can make a much stronger claim to being experts in nonfiction prose, having taught that subject exclusively for many decades?

On the one hand, the swelling numbers of faculty teaching and students taking courses in creative nonfiction would argue for cataloging creative nonfiction courses next to fiction, poetry, and drama. Many graduate and undergraduate creative writing programs now offer emphases in creative nonfiction, and graduate students, especially, are required to write in a range of essayistic modes. At the University of Pittsburgh, for instance, the MFA with a concentration in creative nonfiction asks students to explore “autobiography, biography, history, speculative or personal essays, new journalism, investigative reporting/analysis, and quality feature writing” (University of Pittsburgh Department of English, 2005). Surely, students working in such a wide variety of styles could expect to receive a comprehensive education in the subject.

Yet creative nonfiction has, in the last century, taken a long excursion through the first-year writing curriculum in the form of the composition essay, and creative nonfiction as composition was (re)claimed by this wing of English studies in the January 2003 issue of *College English*. At first glance, it seems obvious that compositionists would welcome the opportunity to teach the essay in its expanded form. Too many teachers, and their students, share Douglas Atkins’s experience in the Baconian tradition of formal essay writing: “We wrote ‘essays’ as if they were ‘compositions,’ entities that smack of the artificial and the mechanical, whose parts might be simply *assembled*, like those of a small engine” (1994, 630). And most English teachers, whatever their current specialty, originally went into the field because they loved literature. Granted, many freshman English instructors *have* embraced creative nonfiction like a long-lost wealthy uncle.



There is a buzz in the air in faculty lounges across the country, and sessions on creative nonfiction at the Conference on College Composition and Communication are nearly always packed with enthusiastic audiences.

However, as Doug Hesse notes, until recently, “in light of compelling rhetorical and cultural theory produced during the 1980s and 1990s, to assert the literariness of the essay struck many in composition studies as quaint, or worse, complicitously conservative” (2003, 239). If being labeled “conservative” is one reason some compositionists have been wary to fully accept creative nonfiction, another is their lack of confidence in their students’ ability to write it well. “I see essayistic power and style all the time in the writing of students,” Chris Anderson says (1990, 88), but many more instructors will have shared the experience of Gordon Harvey, who claims student writers “haven’t defined (for themselves or for the reader) what they found interesting enough to pursue and why it should interest a real person (besides their instructor) . . . why an essay needs writing” (1994, 650). Moreover, as Robert Root points out, some compositionists worry about being placed in the dubious company of poets and fiction writers: “Tacking the adjective ‘creative’ in front of the noun ‘nonfiction’ may help link it to other forms of ‘creative writing’ as a literary genre but it also helps to marginalize it in the same way that creative writing is marginalized in most English departments—as something chiefly of interest to an artsy contingent of student and faculty writers rather than to the student and faculty *littérateurs*, scholars and critics, and readers who make up the majority of the department” (2003, 246).

These fears aside, creative nonfiction does seem to have injected composition with a new glow of enthusiasm, with teachers who haven’t themselves written for years suddenly joining their students in essay making. Ultimately, as Root says, “Maybe the question regarding nonfiction and composition isn’t how to infuse nonfiction into the comp course. Maybe the question is whether, when we name composition, we aren’t simultaneously naming nonfiction” (2003, 255).